

The Asahi Shimbun’s Foiled Foray into Watchdog Journalism

Martin Fackler

In Japan’s public disillusionment following the triple meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, the Asahi Shimbun, the nation’s second-largest daily and the “quality paper” favored by intellectuals, launched a bold experiment to regain readers’ trust.

On the sixth floor of its hulking headquarters overlooking Tokyo’s celebrated fish market, the newspaper gathered 30 hand-picked journalists to create a desk dedicated to investigative reporting, something relatively rare in a country whose big national media favor cozy ties with officials via the so-called press clubs. The choice to head the new section was also unusual: Yorimitsu Takaaki was a gruff, gravely voiced outsider who was not a career employee of the elitist Asahi but had been head-hunted from a smaller regional newspaper for his investigative prowess.



Yorimitsu Takaaki

Yorimitsu set an iconoclastic tone by taping a sign to the newsroom door declaring Datsu Pochi Sengen, or “No More Pooches Proclamation” — a vow that his reporters would no longer be kept pets of the press clubs, but true journalistic watchdogs.

The prosaically named Investigative Reporting Section proved an instant success, winning Japan’s top journalism award two years in a row for its exposure of official coverups and shoddy decontamination work around the Fukushima nuclear plant, which was crippled on March 11, 2011 when a huge earthquake and tsunami knocked out vital cooling systems.

The new section’s feistier journalism also offered hope of attracting younger readers at a time when the then 7 million-reader Asahi and Japan’s other national dailies, the world’s largest newspapers by circulation, were starting to feel the pinch from declining sales.

“The Asahi Shimbun believes such investigative reporting is indispensable,” the newspaper’s president at the time, Kimura Tadakazu, declared in an annual report in 2012. The new investigative section “does not rely on information obtained from press clubs, but rather conducts its own steadfast investigations that require real determination.”¹

This made it seem all the more jarring when, just two years later, the Asahi abruptly retreated from this foray into watchdog reporting. In September 2014, the newspaper retracted a major investigative story that it had published in May about workers fleeing the Fukushima plant against orders. A newspaper-appointed committee of outside experts later declared that the article, which the Asahi had initially trumpeted as a historic scoop, was flawed because journalists had demonstrated “an excessive sense of mission that they ‘must monitor authority.’”² The newspaper punished reporters and editors responsible for the story, while slashing the size of the new section’s staff and forcing the resignation of President Kimura himself, who had supported the investigative push.



Reporters touring the Fukushima plant, February 2016

While the section was not closed down altogether, its output of articles dropped sharply as remaining journalists were barred from writing about Fukushima, arguably the most important news event that the nation has faced since World War II.

Thus marked the demise of one of the most serious efforts in recent memory by a major Japanese news organization to embrace a more independent approach to journalism. The Asahi failure points to the difficulty of investigative reporting, an inherently risky enterprise in any nation because it seeks to expose malfeasance and challenge the narratives of the powerful. However, the hastiness of the Asahi’s retreat also raises fresh doubts about whether such contentious journalism is even possible at one of Japan’s big national newspapers, which are so deeply embedded in the nation’s political establishment.

The abrupt about-face by the Asahi, a 137-year-old newspaper with 2,400 journalists that has been postwar Japan’s liberal media flagship, was an important victory for the administration of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, which has shown little tolerance for critical voices as it moves to roll back Japan’s postwar pacifism, and restart its nuclear industry. Abe and his supporters on the nationalistic right seized on missteps by the Asahi in its coverage of Fukushima and also sensitive issues of wartime history to launch a withering barrage of criticism that the newspaper appeared unable to withstand. The taming of the Asahi set off a domino-like series of preemptive capitulations by other major newspapers and television networks, which toned down coverage and removed outspoken commentators and newscasters.

Political interference in the media was one reason cited by Reporters Without Borders in lowering Japan from 11th in 2010 to 72nd out of 180 nations in this year’s annual ranking of global press freedoms, released on April 20, 2016. Within Japan, critics of the Abe

administration took a similar view, saying the administration had heavy-handedly silenced critical journalists. However, while these criticisms carry weight, brute intimidation alone fails to fully explain the Asahi's retreat. The Abe administration has not arrested Asahi journalists, or even pursued them in court to reveal sources, as the Bush and Obama administrations did by subpoenaing investigative reporter James Risen of The New York Times. What public pressure the Abe administration has applied seems downright tame compared to the much more violent attacks that the Asahi itself has faced in the recent past, including the shooting death of a reporter by an ultra-nationalist in 1987.

Rather, interviews with Asahi reporters and other journalists suggest the government compelled the Asahi and other media to silence themselves by exploiting weaknesses within Japanese journalism itself. Two of the biggest pressure points, they say, were a lack of professional solidarity and an extreme emphasis on access-driven reporting. Indeed, they say the most forceful pressure came not from politicians or officials, but fellow journalists. At the Asahi's most vulnerable moment, other big national newspapers lined up to bash the Asahi, essentially policing each other on the administration's behalf, while also making blatant efforts to poach readers to shore up their own declining circulations.

But the knock out blow came from within the Asahi, as reporters in other, more established sections turned against the upstart investigative journalists. The new section's more adversarial approach to journalism had won it wide resentment for threatening the exclusive access enjoyed by the Asahi, as one of Japan's national dailies, to politicians and the central ministries. At a deeper level, the investigative reporters' refusal to act as propagandists for the powerful also seemed to jeopardize the Asahi journalists' cherished position as establishment insiders, sharing the

same educational background and elite worldview as the central ministry bureaucrats who run the country. Under pressure, enough Asahi journalists proved willing to defend this insider status by discarding the investigative project and the reporters in it.

"They were making proclamations about the high ideals of journalism, but when push came to shove they tossed those ideals away," said Yorimitsu, who after the Fukushima article's retraction was reassigned to a Saturday supplement where he now writes entertainment features. "When the chips were down, they saw themselves as elite company employees, not journalists."

The result was a bitter reversal for a new investigative section that had been launched with high expectations just three years before, in October 2011. Former reporters from the section described a heady atmosphere in its early days, as Yorimitsu and his successor, a highly regarded senior editor named Ichikawa Seiichi, invited ace reporters from around the newspaper to join. Reporters recalled that the section drew what they described as loners and *henjin*, or "oddballs," who had trouble fitting into the team-based reporting of the Asahi's mainline Political, Economic and Social sections. They said the new investigative section gave them the freedom to range across the Asahi's rigid internal silos in search of topics while also holding them to higher journalistic standards, such as requiring use of the actual names of people quoted in stories instead of the pseudonyms common in Japanese journalism.

"In Japanese journalism, scoops usually just mean learning from the ministry officials today what they intend to do tomorrow," said Watanabe Makoto, a former reporter in the section who quit the Asahi in March 2016 because he felt blocked from doing investigative reporting. "We came up with different scoops that were unwelcome in the

Prime Minister’s Office.” (A half dozen other journalists at the paper, including current and former members of the investigative section, spoke on condition that they not be named, for fear of losing their jobs at the Asahi.)

Yorimitsu said the new section was the newspaper’s first venture into what he called true investigative journalism. He said that while the Asahi had assembled teams in the past that it called “investigative,” this had usually just meant being freed from the demands of daily reporting to dig more deeply for details about scandals and social issues. He said the new section was different because he had his journalists not only gather facts, but also use them to build counter narratives that challenged the versions of events put forward by authorities.

“Until 2014, the newspaper was very enthusiastic about giving us the time and freedom to expose the misdeeds in Fukushima, and tell our own stories about what had happened,” recalled Yorimitsu, whom the Asahi had hired away from the smaller Kochi Shimbun in 2008 at age 51. “We were telling the stories that the authorities didn’t want us to tell.”

Yorimitsu was brought in to take charge of a smaller investigative team that the Asahi had created two years before, in 2006, when it was first starting to feel the pinch from the Internet. From a peak of 8.4 million copies sold daily in 1997, the Asahi’s circulation had slipped below 8.0 million by 2006, according to the Japan Audit Bureau of Circulations. (By late 2015, it had dropped to 6.6 million.) The team of ten reporters was an experimental effort to win readers by differentiating the Asahi’s coverage.

Until 2006, investigative journalism had been an irregular function of the Social Section, or Shakaibu, which was mainly responsible for crime and local coverage, much like the Metro Desk at a large U.S. newspaper. The Social

Section’s last truly significant investigative accomplishment had been in 1988, when its reporters exposed insider stock trading by politicians in what became known as the Recruit Scandal.



Sotooka Hidetoshi

To lead the new push into investigative reporting, the newspaper tapped Sotooka Hidetoshi, a mild-mannered, charismatic former New York and London correspondent who had risen to become the Asahi’s managing editor. In April 2006, Sotooka created an independent Investigative Team comprised of about ten journalists who reported directly to him. The Team’s first big story was an uncovering of accounting fraud by major electronics companies.

When those companies threatened to pull advertising if the story ran, Sotooka said the Asahi's top management stood behind him and his team.

"We realized that in the Net era, independent, investigative journalism was the only way for a newspaper to survive," Sotooka said.

However, it was not until Fukushima, Japan's biggest national trauma since defeat in 1945, that the newspaper wholeheartedly embraced the effort, increasing the number of journalists and elevating it to a full-fledged section, putting it on a par organizationally with other, more established parts of the paper.

Under Yorimitsu, the section's crowning achievement was an investigative series called Purometeusu no Wana, or "The Promethean Trap," a play on the atomic industry's early promise of becoming a second fire from heaven like the one stolen by Prometheus in Greek mythology. The series, which appeared daily starting in October 2011, won The Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association Prize, Japan's equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize, in 2012 for its reporting on provocative topics like a gag-order placed on scientists after the nuclear accident, and the government's failure to release information about radiation to evacuating residents. The series also spawned some larger investigative spin-offs, including an exposé of corner-cutting in Japan's multi-billion dollar radiation cleanup that won the prize for a second time in 2013.



"Promethean Trap" column, 6 September 2012

These were promising accomplishments for a new section that had been created to regain readers' trust after the Fukushima disaster, when the Asahi and other media were criticized for initially repeating the official line that the government had everything safely under control. As later revelations showed the government had been understating the size of the accident, and covering up potentially damning information like the fact that the reactors had actually melted down, the Japanese public turned on the press for failing to challenge these claims. The result was widespread distrust in media similar to that in the United States following the 2003 Iraq War, when the press was criticized for blindly accepting the Bush administration's misinformation about the existence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

(Distrust in Japanese media was heightened by the fact that foreign journalists were often ahead in challenging officials and exposing their coverups. My colleague Norimitsu Onishi and I were the first to give a full account of the government's failure to release SPEEDI radiation forecasts to evacuating residents, a story that helped win our team of New York Times journalists covering the Fukushima disaster recognition as finalists for the 2012

Pulitzer Prize in international reporting.³⁾

In the handwringing that followed Fukushima, many Japanese journalists and journalism scholars blamed the local media's failure on a couple of factors. One is the press clubs. These are exclusive groups of journalists, usually restricted to those from major newspapers and broadcasters, who are stationed within government ministries and agencies, ostensibly to keep a close eye on authority. In reality, the clubs end up doing the opposite, turning the journalists into uncritical conduits for information and narratives put forth by government officials, whose mindset the journalists end up sharing. This leads to a brand of access journalism that can seem extreme even by the standards of the Washington press corps.

Japan has had flashes of effective investigative reporting, such as Tachibana Takashi's exposure in the 1970s of construction industry profiteering that led to the resignation of Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei. However, these efforts, including Tachibana's, tend to be found in less prestigious regional papers and magazines. In fact, when the big national dailies do offer impactful investigative journalism, they often seem to do so in spite of themselves. The Asahi articles that led to the 1988 Recruit Scandal over political payoffs, for instance, were the work of junior reporters in two regional bureaus, Kawasaki and Yokohama, not the mainline Political Section journalists based at the Diet and Prime Minister's Office.⁴

This points to another weak point in the journalism of Japan's elite national newspapers: a lack of shared professional identity. Most reporters join the newspapers straight out of university, and spend their entire careers within the same company. Few are graduates of journalism departments, much less of a graduate journalism school, learning their trade entirely inside their newspaper. As a result, the reporters' first loyalty lies with their

company and its interests, not their profession or some set of shared journalistic standards.

This creates a salaryman mindset that leaves many Japanese journalists unable to resist the pressures that officials can put on them via the press clubs. Journalists deemed overly critical, or who write about unapproved topics, can find themselves barred from briefings or leaks given to other club members. This is a potent sanction when careers can be broken for missing a scoop that appeared in rival newspapers. On the other hand, refraining from independent or critical reporting is the safest way to ensure inclusion when officials start handing out information.

Yorimitsu's journalists said they faced intensifying criticism from within the Asahi, and particularly reporters stationed at one of the press clubs, who blamed them for angering officials and endangering access to information. They said the press club-based reporters grew irate with them not just for printing critical articles, but even just for asking a tough question at a press conference. They said some fellow Asahi reporters were reluctant to even be seen with them in public, for fear of reprisal by officials or other press club reporters. "Don't tell anyone that we met," Watanabe recalled one press club reporter telling him after lunch.

The section was also the target of growing resentment within the paper. Yorimitsu's "no more pooches" proclamation galled other reporters, who viewed it as an arrogant dismissal of their work. As they roamed freely in search of stories, the investigative journalists frequently nettled other sections' reporters by trespassing on their "beats," or established areas of coverage. The new section came to be regarded as a bunch of self-important prima donnas pampered by top management like President Kimura.

At the same time, the Investigative Section was also making powerful enemies outside the

newspaper by exposing problems at Fukushima. This became particularly true after the pro-nuclear Abe administration took office in December 2012. While other media began to obediently cut back on articles about the accident, the Asahi stuck to its guns, making the newspaper increasingly stick out.

“We were being told that the Prime Minister’s Office disliked our stories and wanted them stopped,” Watanabe recalled, “but we thought we could weather the storm.”

They may have been able to do so if the Asahi had not given its opponents not just one but two openings to strike.



The first came on May 20, 2014, when the Asahi published what was supposed to be the new section’s biggest scoop yet. Running on the front page under the banner headline “Violating Plant Manager Orders, 90 Percent of Workers Evacuated Fukushima Daiichi,” the article made the explosive claim that at the peak of the crisis, workers had evacuated the Fukushima Daiichi plant in violation of orders to remain by the plant’s manager, Yoshida Masao. By portraying Yoshida as having lost control, and workers as fleeing out of fear for their lives, the article challenged the dominant narrative of the manager leading a heroic battle to contain the meltdowns and save Japan.

Much of the article’s impact came from its source: Yoshida himself. More precisely, the reporters behind the story, Kimura Hideaki and Miyazaki Tomomi, had obtained a transcript of testimony that Yoshida gave to government investigators before his death from cancer in 2013. The 400-plus-page document, drawn from 28 hours of spoken testimony by Yoshida about the disaster, had been kept secret in the Prime Minister’s Office. Unearthing the testimony was an investigative coup, a fact that the Asahi unabashedly played up in subsequent ad campaigns. Some purveyors of heroic-Yoshida narrative objected that plant workers were being misrepresented as cowards. But these complaints may have remained the grumblings of a few if the Asahi had not, just a few months later, set off a completely unrelated controversy about its past coverage of one of East Asia’s most emotional history issues, the so-called comfort women.

That uproar began on Aug. 5, when the Asahi suddenly announced in a front-page article that it was retracting more than a dozen stories published in the 1980s and early 1990s about Korean women forced to work in wartime Japanese military brothels. The newspaper was belatedly admitting what historians already knew: that a Japanese war veteran quoted in those articles, Yoshida Seiji, had apparently fabricated his claims of having forcibly rounded up more than a thousand women in Korea, then a Japanese colony. (Confusingly, the men at the center of both of these controversies were surnamed Yoshida, even though they were not related.)

Journalists in the Asahi say the comfort women retractions were an attempt to preempt critics in the rightwing Abe administration by coming clean about a decades-old problem. (Abe’s supporters include many revisionists who claim the women were not coerced, but simply camp-following prostitutes.) The paper hoped the admission would put to rest a long-festering problem, allowing it to clear the decks for more

critical coverage of the administration. However, the move proved a huge miscalculation. Rather than strengthen the Asahi's hand, the revisionist right seized on the admission to challenge the newspaper's credibility, and its liberal editorial stance of calling for greater remorse for the war. The public pillorying, led by the prime minister himself, grew so intense that the internal magazine of the Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan ran a cover story entitled: "Sink the Asahi!"

"It is a fact that its misreporting has caused numerous people to feel hurt, sorrow, suffering and outrage," Abe told a Lower House budget committee on Oct. 3. "It has caused great damage to Japan's image."

It was at the peak of this maelstrom, when the Asahi was on the ropes, that the criticism of its Fukushima-Yoshida scoop suddenly became national news. In late August, the Sankei Shimbun and the Yomiuri Shimbun, both pro-Abe newspapers on the political right, obtained copies of Yoshida's secret testimony, which they used to make reports challenging the version of events put forth by the Asahi. "Asahi Report of 'Evacuating Against Orders' At Odds With Yoshida Testimony," the Yomiuri, the world's largest newspaper with 9 million readers, declared in a front-page headline on Aug. 30. The wire service Kyodo News also got a copy. In addition, the normally liberal Mainichi Shimbun also used the testimony to try to discredit the Asahi.

According to these stories, the Asahi's epic scoop had gotten it wrong. While the Asahi seemed to imply that the plant workers had knowingly ignored Yoshida's orders, the newly obtained copies of his testimony showed that in fact he had said that his orders had simply failed to reach the workers in the confusion. The other newspapers used this revelation to link the Asahi's Fukushima coverage to its comfort women coverage, accusing the paper

of once again sully Japan's reputation, this time by inaccurately portraying the brave Fukushima workers as cowards. (Whether the Asahi actually got the story wrong is debatable, since its original article never actually stated that the withdrawing workers knowingly violated Yoshida's orders; however, it did fail to include the manager's statement that his orders had not been properly relayed, an omission that could lead readers to draw the wrong conclusion.)

The fact that two pro-Abe newspapers and Kyodo had suddenly and in quick succession obtained copies of Yoshida transcript has led to widespread suspicions — never proven — that the Prime Minister's Office leaked the documents for them to use against the Asahi. True or not, the news outlets seemed eager to serve the purposes of the administration, perhaps to improve their own access to information, or to avoid suffering a similar fate as the Asahi.

At least one newspaper also saw the Asahi's woes as a chance to steal its readers. The Yomiuri stuffed glossy brochures in the mailboxes of Asahi subscribers blasting it for tarnishing Japan's honor, while puffing up the Yomiuri's own coverage of the comfort women. This attempt to poach readers, dubbed "Project A" within the Yomiuri, ultimately backfired as both newspapers lost circulation.

Despite the growing pressure, Asahi journalists say the newspaper initially intended to defend its Fukushima-Yoshida scoop, going so far as to draw up a lengthy rebuttal to its critics that was to have run on page one in early September. As late as Sept. 1, Ichikawa, who headed the Investigative Section at that time, was still telling his reporters that the newspaper was ready to fight back.

"The government is coming after the Special Investigative Section," he said in a pep talk, according to Watanabe and others who were present. "The Asahi will not give in."

However, that rebuttal was never published. Instead, President Kimura surprised many of this own reporters with a sudden about face, announcing at a snap press conference on Sept. 11 that he was retracting the Fukushima-Yoshida article. Reporters say the newspaper's resolve to defend the scoop had crumbled when resentful journalists within the newspaper began an internal revolt against the article and the section that produced it.

The newspaper was also starting to exude the whiff of panic, as sales staff warned of steep declines in readership and advertising after the scandals. This was happening as media peers were ganging up on the Asahi, making the newspaper feel isolated and vulnerable. One Asahi reporter, Kitano Ryuichi, said this had a bigger psychological effect on the newspaper's decision making than any pressure from the prime minister.

"We found ourselves standing all alone," said Kitano, one of the reporters who had investigated Yoshida Seiji's claims for the 2014 retraction. "The administration didn't even have to criticize us because the media did it for them."

The Asahi's official line is that the Fukushima-Yoshida story was just too flawed to defend. The new president, Watanabe Masataka, continues to talk about the importance of investigative journalism, and some current and former Asahi journalists say investigative reporting will make a come back.

However, scholars and former section reporters say the setback was just too severe. Investigative Section reporters like Yorimitsu say they were sacrificed to mollify detractors. They say the Asahi's decision to punish its own journalists will discourage others in the future from taking the same risks inherent in investigative reporting. At the same time, they said that the Asahi seemed to lapse back into the old, access-driven ways of Japan's mainstream journalism at a time when steepening falls in subscription rates at all national newspapers show that the public actually desires something different.

"The Asahi retreated from its experiment in risky, high-quality journalism, back into the safety of the press clubs," said Hanada Tatsuro, a professor of journalism at Waseda University in Tokyo. Hanada was so dismayed by the Asahi's retreat that he founded Japan's first university-based center for investigative journalism at Waseda in 2016. "It makes me think that the days of Japan's huge national newspapers may be numbered."



Retraction of Fukushima-Yoshida article by Asahi 12 September 2014

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Notes

- ¹ [The Asahi Shimbun Corporate Report](#) 2012, p. 4.
- ² The Committee for Restoration of Trust and Resuscitation, Jan. 5, 2015. See [here](#).
- ³ Onishi and Fackler, "[Japan Held Nuclear Data, Leaving Evacuees in Peril](#)," Aug. 8, 2011.
- ⁴ The Asahi Shimbun Company, "Media, Propaganda and Politics in 20th-Century Japan," London: Bloomsbury, 2015, pp. 273-274.