



Young Audiences Abandoning Traditional Media in the Age of Takaichi

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Abstract: Democratic societies face an institutional credibility crisis where young people cannot distinguish manufactured outrage from legitimate concern. Japan's 2025 election exemplifies this: despite media criticism characterizing Sanae Takaichi as "anti-woman," 92.4% of young people supported her. Documented manipulation—including a photographer admitting intent to "tank her approval rating" and fabricated reports—poisoned even valid criticisms of her conservative gender positions. Cross-national research reveals similar trust infrastructure breakdown, with young people relying on family rather than institutions for information filtering. When media loses credibility through bias, it cannot sound alarm bells even when warranted.

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Democratic societies face a crisis that transcends any individual politician or election. According to Bennett and Livingston, there has been a collapse of institutional credibility (122). It has progressed to the point where young people can no longer distinguish between manufactured outrage and legitimate concern (News Literacy Project 3). When the media demonstrates documented bias, it loses the capacity to sound alarm bells even when alarms should ring.

Japan's October 2025 election crystallizes this dynamic. Sanae Takaichi became the nation's first female prime minister amid overwhelming criticism from liberal media and academic commentators who characterized her as "anti-woman," "hawkish," and a setback for gender equality. NPR declared she had "shattered a glass ceiling, but she's no feminist" (Kuhn). Yet the Sankei News/FNN survey in December 2025 revealed 92.4% support among 18-29

year olds ("Takaichi naikaku").

The disconnect isn't about whether the criticisms have merit. Many do. Takaichi opposes selective separate surnames and same-sex marriage, representing traditional rather than progressive positions on family structure ("Bessei soshi"; "Takaichi shusho"). She appointed Satsuki Katayama, as Japan's first female Finance Minister, and Miyuki Onoda to her cabinet—historic achievements, though fewer women than her campaign promise of "Nordic levels" suggested. This reflects both the LDP's limited pool of experienced women (a structural problem decades in the making) (Takao 91) and perhaps her prioritization of experience over representation quotas. These represent legitimate debates about paths to women's advancement, not simple pro-woman versus anti-woman positions.

The question isn't whether these criticisms are valid. It's whether young people can hear and then interpret them correctly through the noise of documented manipulation.

As a researcher who works at the Youth Research Institute in Budapest and has observed similar patterns across Asia, Europe, and North America, I've concluded that this paradox reveals something more fundamental than disagreement over one politician. When 92.4% of young people support a leader experts criticize, this suggests a trust infrastructure collapse (Xiao et al. 2) that makes young people dismiss all institutional narratives, including valid ones. (While the figure seems improbably high and warrants scrutiny regarding survey methodology

and what “support” means, multiple polls confirmed strong youth support across demographics (“Takaichi naikaku no shijiritsu”).)

What happened to Takaichi illustrates how documented media bias can poison even legitimate criticism. On October 9, 2025, Jiji Press acknowledged that one of its male photojournalists made shocking remarks while waiting to photograph Takaichi: “Let’s tank her approval rating” and “We’ll only publish unflattering photos” (“Honsha kameraman”).

This wasn’t interpretation or perception—it was a journalist openly admitting intent to manipulate coverage for professional or private purposes.

Subsequent coverage of Takaichi’s diplomacy compounded the problem. When images emerged of President Trump assisting Takaichi downstairs, prominent journalists (Vaillancourt) and feminists (“Wakariyasuku daisuki”) characterized it as inappropriately intimate evidence of her “selling her womanness” to Trump. The hashtag #geishatakaichi was created, with liberal journalists and influencers framing her diplomatic efforts as demeaning to women.

The “geisha diplomacy” narrative traced to outright disinformation. X account @naoto_h0804 claimed Bloomberg reported on her “geisha diplomacy”—reports that never existed. Russian state outlet Sputnik manipulated images and quotes to imply patriarchal dynamics (Hall). Saori Ikeuchi from the Japanese Communist Party called Takaichi “Local wife (for Trump)” in her X post and then later apologized after it drew criticism (Ikeuchi). These manufactured narratives were then amplified by Western progressive media, Japanese liberal politicians, journalists, and influencers creating a feedback loop of falsehood.

Here’s where the coverage became genuinely problematic in ways that had nothing to do with whether Takaichi deserved criticism.

Critics intentionally or unintentionally ignored that she suffers from rheumatoid arthritis and has an artificial joint. Trump was likely being courteous. More significantly, when Shinzo Abe used flattery and gift-giving with Trump, it was praised as strategic. When South Korean President Lee gifted Trump golden crowns, it received acclaim. The double standard was stark.



Photo of Takaichi’s first cabinet meeting, assembled on the stairs in Kantei, the prime minister’s office, 21 October 2025.

Source: Photo by 首相官邸 (Cabinet Public Affairs Office).

This matters because legitimate criticisms of Takaichi became impossible to hear. When media demonstrate documented bias (fake Bloomberg report, Jiji photographer admitting manipulation, ignoring her medical condition, Orientalist stereotyping), young people rationally conclude that they can’t trust anything from these sources—including substantive debates about whether her traditional approach to gender issues serves women’s interests or whether her cabinet appointments reflected genuine constraints versus insufficient prioritization of representation.

This is the real crisis: documenting bias doesn’t just protect the target from unfair attacks. It protects them from fair ones too.

Similar dynamics appear across contexts. Recent Stanford University research reveals Americans dramatically overestimate harmful content online. They believe 43% of Reddit users post toxic comments when the actual figure is 3%. They think 47% of Facebook users share false news when it’s 8.5%. They estimated 36.5% of users are “super-sharers” of false news when the reality is under 0.5%—a 100-fold overestimation (Lee et al.).

When researchers corrected these misperceptions, people felt more positive, perceived less moral decline, and better understood that others don’t want harmful content. Simply learning the truth improved outlook and reduced polarization.

The media could provide these corrections but typically doesn’t. Instead, journalists treat algorithmic amplification of extreme voices as if it represents genuine public sentiment. Young people who understand that social media distorts reality increasingly notice when the media amplifies this distortion rather than correcting it.

The pattern transcends media trust environments. In South Korea and Taiwan—where news media trust stands at 31% (Reuters Institute, “South Korea”) and 33% respectively (“Survey Finds 33%”)—youth increasingly turn to social media amid institutional skepticism. During South Korea’s December 2024 martial law crisis, misinformation spread rapidly on social media while traditional outlets worked to restore credibility through fact-checking. In Taiwan, where 95% report exposure to disinformation, youth navigate between unreliable social platforms and institutional sources they view with suspicion (Global Taiwan Institute).

Yet Japan, with 68.7% trust in traditional media (“Survey Finds Nearly 70%”), shows an identical disconnect. Despite this relatively high institutional

trust—and despite only 10.9% of Japanese trusting social media for news—the same pattern emerges: liberal journalism overwhelmingly criticized Takaichi as “anti-woman,” yet 92.4% of youth and 72% of women supported her. Japanese young people aren’t rejecting institutional journalism due to distrust; they’re actively disagreeing with its framing on grounds they consider more substantive—policy achievements on women’s safety, economic empowerment, and what they perceive as reality versus idealism.

This cross-national pattern reveals something more fundamental than media distrust: elite discourse on gender equality has diverged from how many young people—including young women—evaluate women’s advancement. In Hungary, our 2023 survey of 1,000 young people (ages 15-39) found that 59% believe social media platforms carry ideological bias (with 15% finding it fully biased and 44% rather biased), with 79% supporting some level of regulation (Youth Research Institute 21& 25). The issue isn’t that young people want censorship—they want balanced information environments where institutions acknowledge their own filtering mechanisms rather than presenting contested interpretations as objective truth.

Cross-national research across eight countries (United States, China, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam) reveals an unsettling pattern in online political discourse. Individuals high in psychopathy consistently engage more in online political activity across all contexts. Conversely, those with higher cognitive ability are less likely to participate (Ahmed and Masood 1). In five countries, the effect is most pronounced among individuals with both high psychopathy and low cognitive ability (Ahmed and Masood 6). This suggests the most vocal online political participants may be systematically unrepresentative—not just numerically but psychologically. When the media treats these voices as representative of broader movements, young people notice the distortion.

The Japanese case reveals complexities. The 2024 Hakuhodo Institute of Life and Living Youth Survey found that when asked about factors facilitating smooth communication, “not denying the other person” ranked second at 50.7%, up from 21.1% thirty years ago—a doubling of emphasis on avoiding confrontation (Hakuhodo 83). In an era where inappropriate statements trigger immediate online criticism, young people prioritize avoiding friction.

Yet they simultaneously observe politicians, experts, influencers, and journalists on social media engaging in exactly these behaviors: taking opponents’ words out of context, calling out, provoking, denouncing, attempting to “cancel” those with different views.

The criticism of Takaichi demonstrates this pattern while also containing legitimate concerns. Consider how complex positions get reduced to binary labels: “Opposes selective separate surnames → therefore anti-woman.”

This is reductive. But it’s also true that opposing separate surnames does limit women’s choices and reflects traditional patriarchal values. The criticism isn’t wrong; the framing is oversimplified.

Another example: “Wants to increase defense spending to GDP 2% → therefore militaristic and against Pacifism (Article 9 of the Constitution).”

This ignores that NATO members plan to increase defense spending to 5% by 2035. But it’s also true that Japan’s pacifist constitution makes any military expansion legitimately controversial. Again, the concern isn’t invalid; the framing lacks nuance.

Further: “Appointed only two women to cabinet despite campaign promises → therefore betrayed women.”

This criticism also requires context. The LDP has a limited pool of experienced women with the political capital and expertise for cabinet positions—a structural problem that decades of male-dominated

politics created, which cannot be solved overnight. Moreover, the quota debate itself divides feminists. Female business leaders I’ve interviewed oppose quotas, arguing that when women are promoted primarily because they are women, it undermines all women’s achievements by suggesting they couldn’t succeed on merit. This represents a genuine feminist debate between equality-of-opportunity and equality-of-outcome approaches, not a clear-cut “pro-woman” versus “anti-woman” position.

Takaichi’s actual record is genuinely mixed. In 2009, she introduced legislation strengthening protections against child sexual exploitation (passed in 2014) (Takaichi, “Kaisei jidō”; “Jidō poruno kinshihō”). In November 2025, she instructed the Justice Minister to examine criminalizing the purchase of sexual services—adopting the Nordic model many feminists advocate (“Japan Weighs Plan”). Her platform commits to ensuring women don’t sacrifice careers due to caregiving, and she’s discussed her experiences with menopause and elder care (Takaichi, “Seisaku”).

These are substantive achievements on women’s safety and economic security. But she represents a conservative feminist approach—prioritizing economic empowerment and family-centered policies within traditional structures rather than structural reforms that challenge those frameworks. Her cabinet appointments, including Satsuki Katayama as Japan’s first female Finance Minister, reflect both historic achievement and ongoing debates about whether experience or representation should take priority when both cannot be fully achieved simultaneously.

This represents a legitimate feminist tradition, not anti-feminism. Conservative feminism emphasizes women’s material advancement, safety, and economic security while maintaining traditional family structures. It differs from progressive feminism’s focus on dismantling patriarchal structures through reforms like dual surnames, marriage equality, and quotas (Posner 191; Cock 2). Media coverage that

frames Takaichi as simply “anti-woman” because she prioritizes one feminist approach over another is precisely the kind of binary reduction that alienates young people who recognize ideological diversity within women’s movements.

Both things are true. Young people feel that the media is emphasizing only one side of issues while engaging in documented manipulation on the other. The result: they dismiss everything, including legitimate criticisms.

My interviews with young Japanese reveal varied perspectives, though most are supporters of Takaichi:

“Unlike elderly male prime ministers who attend expensive hostess clubs, she stays home studying.” (26-year-old male beautician, Tokyo—supporter)

“I like that she’s serious about policy, but I’m disappointed she opposed dual surnames. That affects my life directly.” (24-year-old female office worker, Osaka—conflicted)

“Her explanations are clear and direct.” (19-year-old female nail technician, Yokosuka—supporter)

“As a man, I want to support a female PM to prove Japan can change.” (38-year-old male teacher, Tokushima—supporter)

“The geisha thing was racist and sexist, but I also wish she supported dual surnames. That’s important for my generation.” (24-year-old female graduate school student, Tokyo—critical of both media and some of Takaichi’s positions)

The 92.4% figure doesn’t capture this complexity. Support likely reflects multiple factors including weariness with alternatives (the Ishiba administration had 15% youth support), appreciation for representation (first female PM who earned it through merit, not dynasty), and concrete economic proposals (addressing the “income wall,” refundable

tax credits). It probably doesn’t mean young people agree with all her positions or are unaware of problematic aspects. I certainly diverge with her on some issues and converge on others.

The Hakuhodo data revealed that despite getting information primarily from digital sources, young Japanese people are most influenced by their parents—particularly mothers, whose influence rose from 21.6% to 41.2% over thirty years (Hakuhodo 83). This represents a fundamental reorientation during an era of institutional collapse.

Parents offer something the media increasingly cannot: transparent motivation. When a parent evaluates a politician, the child knows the parent isn’t trying to drive engagement metrics, advance a career through provocative takes, or protect institutional prestige. Parents’ biases are known quantities; media’s biases claim not to exist while demonstrably operating. This creates what Hakuhodo researcher Aoi Kato calls a “parent filter”—young people absorb digital information but process it through parental conversations before forming opinions (Hakuhodo 258). It’s a rational adaptation to an environment where everyone has agendas but only some acknowledge them.

The problem is that this undermines democracy’s need for shared information infrastructure. When young people trust family over institutions, how do societies form consensus across different family backgrounds? How do legitimate expert voices—public health officials, climate scientists, economists—reach audiences when institutional trust has collapsed?

The “oshi-katsu”¹ phenomenon around Takaichi illustrates both democratic promise and peril. On X, “#サナ活” / #sanakatsu spread rapidly, with young people identifying products she uses. Hamano Leather bags now have 9-month waiting lists. Mitsubishi Jetstream pink pen sales roughly doubled.

¹ Oshi-katsu (推し活): Japanese fan culture practice of actively supporting one’s favorite public figure through purchases, social media promotion, and dedicated activities. Originally from idol fandom, now applied to politicians.

This increases political engagement—young people watch Diet proceedings and feel invested in outcomes. But when politics becomes fandom, it can bypass critical analysis. A 2025 October Yomiuri survey found 41% of young supporters cited “can expect results from policies,” suggesting some substantive evaluation (“Takaichi naikaku de”). But the balance between emotional connection and analytical assessment matters.

Oshi-katsu makes it harder for young people to acknowledge when their preferred politician has genuine limitations. Just as fans defend celebrities against all criticism (valid or not), political fans may dismiss legitimate concerns as “hating.” This is particularly problematic when—as in Takaichi’s case—there are substantive debates about whether her conservative feminist approach (emphasizing economic empowerment within traditional structures) serves women’s interests as effectively as progressive reforms (dual surnames, marriage equality) would.

The media bias makes this worse by validating the “they’re just hating” narrative. When documented manipulation exists, it’s easy for supporters to dismiss all criticism as more of the same.

Here’s the core problem: democracies need institutions that can credibly criticize leaders when criticism is warranted. When the media loses credibility through documented bias and manufactured outrage, it loses the ability to sound alarm bells even when alarms should ring.

Imagine a scenario where Takaichi’s government pursues genuinely harmful policies—further restricting immigration in ways that damage the economy, appointing unqualified loyalists to key positions, or restricting press freedom. The media that has already demonstrated bias against her will lack credibility to sound these alarms. Young people who have witnessed false Bloomberg reports and Jiji photographer manipulation will dismiss legitimate warnings as more of the same.

This is the real crisis. Not whether Takaichi is good or bad—reasonable people can disagree about her mixed record. The crisis is that institutional credibility has collapsed to the point where young people can’t distinguish between manufactured outrage and legitimate concern.

The Stanford research showed that correcting misperceptions about online toxicity improved people’s outlook (Lee et al.). But who will provide these corrections when the institutions responsible for correction have lost credibility? The Hakuhodo finding that parental influence has doubled over thirty years should alarm anyone concerned about democratic infrastructure (Hakuhodo 83).

Media institutions must acknowledge their role in this crisis. This means focusing on five areas: 1) Transparency about bias; 2) Correcting algorithmic distortion; 3) Zero tolerance for manufactured narratives; 4) Proportional coverage; and 5) Acknowledging complexity.

First, when covering politicians they oppose, the media should acknowledge transparency about bias openly. “This outlet has consistently criticized Takaichi’s positions on X, Y, and Z. Here’s why we believe these criticisms are valid despite our institutional position.” Pretending subjectivity doesn’t exist undermines credibility more than acknowledging perspective.

Second, there is a need to correct algorithmic distortion. When reporting “online reaction,” acknowledge that 3% of users produce most content, that extreme voices are algorithmically amplified, and that platform activity doesn’t represent general opinion.

Third, false reports and manufactured narratives should be immediately and loudly debunked by every major outlet. Instead, many amplified the narrative before quietly correcting. This confirms young people’s suspicion that the media cares more about damaging opponents than about truth.

Fourth, proportional coverage should be prioritized. Takaichi’s opposition to dual surnames deserves coverage—it’s a real issue affecting women’s legal identity and professional continuity. So does her work on child protection laws and prostitution reform. When coverage focuses overwhelmingly on family structure debates while giving minimal attention to policies addressing women’s economic security and safety, audiences notice the selection bias.

Fifth, we need to acknowledge complexity. The Takaichi case could have been framed as: “Japan’s first female PM embodies conservative feminism—she’s achieved representation through merit in a male-dominated system, proposes policies addressing women’s economic security and safety, and appointed Japan’s first female Finance Minister in Satsuki Katayama. She also prioritizes traditional family structures over progressive reforms like dual surnames and marriage equality. This represents genuine ideological diversity within feminism about paths to women’s advancement—conservative feminism emphasizing economic empowerment within existing structures versus progressive feminism seeking structural transformation. Neither approach is obviously ‘anti-woman’; they reflect different values about how to achieve equality.”

That’s accurate. It doesn’t reduce complexity to serve institutional narratives. It trusts audiences to think.

When 92% of young Japanese support a leader that experts criticize, when Hungarian youth overwhelmingly want to regulate platforms, when American young people dramatically overestimate online toxicity—these patterns reveal trust infrastructure collapse that transcends individual politicians or countries.

The Takaichi case crystallizes the dynamics: young people witness documented manipulation (Jiji photographer, fake reports, double standards, ignored medical conditions), and rationally conclude that

they can’t trust institutional narratives. Unfortunately, this extends to legitimate criticisms. When everything looks like bias, nothing does.

Takaichi may well fail as prime minister. Her conservative approach to gender issues may alienate progressive voters, or it may resonate with women who prioritize economic empowerment over structural reform. Her economic policies may succeed, improving conditions for young people struggling with the “income wall” and caregiving burdens, or they may fall short of promises. Time will tell.

But regardless of whether she succeeds or fails, the crisis of trust will remain. Young people have learned that institutions claiming objectivity demonstrate bias. They’ve learned that fact-checking systems fail when fake reports circulate widely before correction. They’ve learned that double standards exist—male leaders are praised for tactics that female leaders are attacked for using.

These lessons won’t be unlearned when Takaichi leaves office. They’ll shape how the next generation engages with democracy, evaluates leaders, and determines whom to trust. The Hakuhodo finding that young people increasingly turn to parents rather than institutions for guidance represents a fundamental change in how democratic societies process information (Hakuhodo 83).

This isn’t young people’s fault for being difficult or skeptical. It’s institutions’ responsibility for demonstrating through documented behavior that skepticism is warranted. Until the media acknowledges how credibility was lost and commits to transparent, proportional coverage that distinguishes legitimate criticism from manufactured outrage, the disconnect will deepen.

Media may need to also alter their business models to strive for a better balance between ethical journalism and profitability.

Takaichi may succeed or fail on her own merits, but

the credibility collapse that shielded her from effective criticism will outlast her tenure, shaping how an entire generation decides whom to trust when the next genuine democratic emergency arrives.

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