

Free Speech – Silenced Voices: The Japanese Media and the NHK Affair.

Tessa Morris-Suzuki

At the start of each week, the commuter trains and subways of Japan are adorned with a mass of multi-colored advertisements, enticing the passengers to buy the latest of issue of the country's many weekly magazines. The advertisements are an art form in themselves. All follow a similar format. A tightly packed mass of text, some of it almost too small to be readable, sets out the fare on offer. Amongst these smaller titles, a few select words, picked out in giant black or red characters, proclaim the catch-cries of this week's news. Crime, death, sex and scandal figure prominently in the advertisements' lexicons. Mixed in with the text are small photographs of the main protagonists in the magazine's stories, photographs (of course) carefully chosen to complement the accompanying text – radiant smiling images of this week's heroes; blurry, scowling shots of the current villains of the political or entertainment world.

The same process is repeated once a month when the leading monthly magazines hit the newsstands. Though the monthlies offer longer and more analytical articles, they commonly pick up themes first aired in the weeklies, and some, like the market leader *Bungei Shunjū* (commonly abbreviated to *Bunshun*) echo the heated rhetoric of their weekly counterparts.

In the last week of January and the first weeks of February 2005, the words which leapt out at commuters' eyes from the advertisements were "lies", "witch hunt", "political pressure" and everywhere, the names of two of Japan's largest and most influential media institutions: the national broadcasting company NHK and the daily newspaper *Asahi*. The two organizations were embroiled in an intense battle over problem of media ethics and freedom, and their rival media organizations were observing the struggle with considerable glee.

Unlike the entertainment world scandals that often fill the headlines of the weekly magazines, this struggle has profound political and social significance. Despite the image of a vibrant free press conveyed by the magazine advertisements,

deep and disturbing questions have emerged about the capacity of the Japanese media to maintain their political independence and provide a forum for unfettered political debate.¹ The NHK controversy also touches on long-standing but still unresolved problems of historical responsibility: problems which have a powerful bearing on the future of Japan's relations with its East Asian neighbors.

The Media and the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal

The origins of the controversy go back to December 2000, when the Women's War Crimes Tribunal opened in Tokyo. The Tribunal, organized by NGOs from Japan and six other countries, sought to gather and publicize testimony and reach judgments on a war crime not addressed by the postwar Tokyo trials – the subjection of women from colonized or occupied countries to institutionalized rape and sexual abuse in so-called “comfort stations” established by the Japanese military. Although the Tribunal had no official backing, and thus no power to impose punishments, its judges and legal team included a number of individuals with extensive experience of UN and other legal tribunals, among them Gabrielle Kirk Macdonald, the former president of the Yugoslavia War Crimes Tribunal. A major aim of the 2000 Tribunal was to provide a public hearing of the testimony of women, many of them now rapidly aging, who had experienced extreme sexual abuse in “comfort stations” during the war, and who had failed to receive recognition or compensation in other legal forums. It was hoped that the Tribunal's findings would provide a basis for further proceedings in more formal national or international judicial forums.²

Held in public, the Tribunal attracted audiences of some 1000 people each day, and involved the participation of 62 survivors from eight countries and as well as two former Japanese soldiers. It was widely reported by such international media as the *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Korea Times* and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. By contrast, only one Japanese national newspaper – the *Asahi* – covered the Tribunal in any detail, and Japan's television channels largely ignored the event.

The one exception to this media silence was a TV documentary entitled “Questioning Sexual Violence in War”, aired on the educational channel of the national broadcaster NHK on 30 January 2001. The program was the second in a four-part series on problems of war responsibility, with other programs in the series addressing issues such as the Algerian War of Independence and conflict in the former Yugoslavia. “Questioning Sexual Violence in War” focused largely on the Women’s War Crimes Tribunal, and was made with the cooperation of a number of the Tribunal’s participants.

Given the nature of its subject matter, it was probably inevitable that the NHK program would become a subject of controversy. In recent years, right wing commentators have denied the responsibility of the Japanese state and military for the institutionalized sexual abuse of women during the war. Though the weight of evidence clearly shows that a large number of women, particularly from the colonies, suffered severe abuse in so-called “comfort stations” run by the military, such commentators seek to discount testimony that these women were forcibly recruited, or insist that the recruitment was the responsibility of local brokers rather than of the Japanese state.³ Most controversial of all was the Women’s War Crimes Tribunal’s focus on the responsibility of those at the highest levels of power, including the late Emperor Hirohito. The Tribunal’s concluding session involved a statement by its panel of judges that the “comfort station” system was a crime against humanity, and that Hirohito shared in the responsibility for that crime. This was met by loud applause from participants and spectators. In a country where criticism of the emperor is surrounded by powerful media taboos, it is not surprising that few mainstream media outlets were prepared to report these scenes.

In the current controversy, however, the issue in question is not just the content of NHK’s documentary on the Tribunal but, more specifically, the events that took place in the days immediately before its broadcast. The story is a murky one; full of conflicting claims and counter-claims. Certain facts, though, are not in dispute. In the final days before the broadcast, there was considerable tension within NHK’s educational section, with some senior managers expressing serious

reservations about the scheduled program's content. On 27 January 2001, three days before the documentary went to air, NHK received a "visit" from a band of some thirty right-wingers associated with extreme right-wing groups such as the "Greater Japan Patriotic Party", who arrived in a convoy of trucks and dressed in paramilitary uniform to demand that the scheduled program be scrapped. Such contingents of trucks, equipped with loudspeakers blaring political messages and martial music, regularly descend on institutions whose political views are deemed "unpatriotic".

Although the right-wing groups involved have only a tiny handful of members and their advent generally has little more than a noisy nuisance value, such "visits" act as an unsubtle reminder of violent forces which remain at work in Japanese politics to the present day. In 1987, for example, a gunman belonging to a far right group entered the Osaka offices of the *Asahi* newspaper and fired on employees, killing a 30-year-old journalist, Kojiri Tomihiro. Those responsible were never arrested. In 1990, the then Mayor of Nagasaki, Motoshima Hitoshi, was shot and seriously injured by right-wingers after making public comments about Emperor Hirohito's war responsibility. More recently, in 2003, a group calling itself "the Brigade for Conquering North Korea" firebombed the home of a prominent Foreign Ministry bureaucrat whom it regarded as taking too "soft" an approach with to negotiations with the Kim Jong-Il regime.⁴ Despite the pantomime quality of their mock uniforms, therefore, a visit by a group like the Greater Japan Patriotic Party is an event to be taken rather seriously.

Even more significant, however, was a meeting that occurred two days later, on 29 January, between senior staff of NHK, including Matsuo Takeshi (then the company's Executive Director-General of Broadcasting), and the prominent ruling Liberal Democratic Party politician Abe Shinzô, who was at that time Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary. Abe, it should be noted, is a person whose opinion carries considerable weight within the political establishment. A grandson of former Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke and a son of former LDP Secretary-General Abe Shintarô, Abe is known for his hawkish foreign policy views and is now widely touted as the most likely successor to current Prime Minister

Koizumi.⁵ (Some reports claimed that a second senior politician, then Economics and Industry Minister Nakagawa Shōichi, was also present, but Nakagawa himself, as we shall see, has subsequently denied this) Abe, Matsuo and the other participants acknowledge that one of the subjects discussed at the 29 January meeting was the content of the forthcoming documentary on the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal. It is, however, the nature and consequences of their conversation that form the core of the current controversy. In the final stages before the documentary went to air, crucial alterations were made to its content. New material was added, in the form of an interview with Hata Ikuhiko, a historian well known for his denial of the Japanese military's responsibility for the "Comfort Station" system, and one of the Tribunal's most outspoken critics. Tribunal organizers who had taken part in the program were given no opportunity to debate with Hata or to respond to his criticisms. A decision was also taken to expunge all references to the Tribunal's condemnation of the late Emperor Hirohito. More importantly, after the meeting with Abe, and in the twenty-four hours before the airing of the program, senior NHK management demanded further last minute changes. The length of the broadcast was now to be cut from 44 to 40 minutes; testimony by Chinese victims of military sexual abuse was to be excised, as was the testimony of former Japanese soldiers who spoke of the military's responsibility for the "comfort station" system and of the violence inflicted on the women recruited to work there. As a result, the final version of the documentary included no visual footage of the Tribunal's proceedings at all and no mention of its findings. After the broadcast of the program, members of the leading Japanese NGO behind the Tribunal, VAWW-Net Japan (Violence Against Women in War - Network Japan), claimed that NHK had violated the terms under which they had agreed to cooperate with the making of the program, and sued the broadcaster and two production companies involved in making the documentary for damages. The case is still continuing.

Once again, there is no dispute about the fact that last minute changes were made to the content of the program. The issue at stake is whether these changes

were an independent editorial decision, or whether they were a result of political intervention in the editorial process of NHK.

The Whistleblower's Story

Over the past four years, the controversy surrounding the NHK documentary had faded from public consciousness, driven out by such events as 9/11, the Iraq War, the crisis in Japan's relations with North Korea, and accelerating moves to revise Japan's postwar peace Constitution. On 12 January 2005, however, the issue was placed firmly back in the headlines by two articles published in the *Asahi* newspaper, a national broadsheet generally regarded as taking a "small-l" liberal approach to political affairs. A whistleblower, later identified as the January 2001 program's Chief Producer Nagai Satoru, had come forward from within NHK to state that the changes made to the program had indeed been the direct result of pressure from Deputy Cabinet Secretary Abe Shinzô and Economics and Industry Minister Nakagawa Shôichi. These are serious claims. Like public broadcasters in other countries (Britain's BBC or Australia's ABC, for example) NHK is required by law to operate independently of outside political pressure.

According to the *Asahi's* articles, a senior NHK executive in ordering the program's producers to make revisions specifically mentioned the fact that NHK's budget was about to be debated in parliament. Another executive who attended the meeting with Abe (and who was later identified as Executive Director-General of Broadcasting Matsuo Takeshi) was quoted as having told the *Asahi* that he had "felt pressured" by politicians. The implication was clearly that financial penalties might follow if the program were not altered in accordance with the politician's demands. The *Asahi's* reporter also spoke to LDP politicians Abe and Nakazawa. Abe admitted discussing the program's content at the meeting with NHK staff, but denied that this constituted "political pressure". Nakagawa, who at the time was not only a cabinet minister but also the leading figure in a group of younger parliamentarian demanding more nationalist content in Japanese history teaching, is quoted as telling the *Asahi*, "I only said what was natural. While

anyone is free to hold a mock trial, it is not fair for a public broadcaster to show such an event".⁶

The significance of the story is heightened by several background factors. One is the meteoric political rise of Abe Shinzô. Abe now occupies the key position of Acting Secretary-General of the Liberal Democratic Party, and enjoys great public and media popularity in Japan. However, his hawkish stance on issues such as North Korea, military expansion and changes to the peace Constitution cause concern to some domestic and international observers. A second factor was the impending retirement of NHK's high profile and controversial Chief Director, Ebisawa Katsuji, which seemed likely to herald major changes within the broadcasting organization. (Since the affair broke, Ebisawa has resigned from the Chief Directorship, although he retains a powerful position within the organization). A third and broader background issue is the major technological and organizational transformation underway in the media in Japan (as elsewhere). Amongst the issues raised in this transformation are possible moves towards the privatization of NHK. Meanwhile, the high stakes involved in media ownership have been highlighted by a very public and bitter hostile takeover bid by new media entrepreneur Horie Takafumi for the Fuji Television Channel.

The response from NHK came three days after the original *Asahi* articles, and was issued by Chief Director Ebisawa himself. In its statement, NHK flatly denied the *Asahi's* claims that its staff had responded to political pressure. Meanwhile, LDP politician Nakagawa published a statement explaining that his memory of the events had been unclear. He now insisted that he not been present at the meeting on 29 January, and had spoken to NHK staff only after the program had been aired. NHK executive Matsuo Takeshi, meanwhile, appeared at a press conference to claim that the *Asahi* had completely inverted the meaning of his comments to them. His reply to the *Asahi's* questions, he insisted, had actually been that he had "*not* felt pressured" by politicians.⁷

Elaborating denials of the *Asahi* story at a press conference on 19 January, however, NHK's current Director-General of Broadcasting made a further statement, which set new alarm bells ringing. It was, the executive informed his

startled audience, “normal practice” for the broadcaster to “explain” its future schedules and the content of particular programs to key politicians before the programs went to air.⁸

Media, Independence and Power

Japan is certainly not the only country where the independence of the public broadcaster has been called into question. The current controversy in Tokyo recalls events such as the 2004 Hutton Inquiry into the BBC’s reporting of the British government’s approach to Iraq’s “weapons of mass destruction” and the 2001 resignation of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Managing Director Jonathan Shier, following allegations that he was unduly influenced by the views of his personal friend, Prime Minister John Howard.⁹

In the Japanese case, however, it is the response to the controversy by the press and politicians, which is raising particularly serious questions about the quality of media freedom. In a democracy, the question of political pressure on the media is a crucial issue. It is, of course, an issue of particular concern to journalists, but is also, more widely, central to the public’s “right to know”. The matters raised in the *Asahi* articles, and the revelation that NHK has regularly been discussing the content of programs with selected politicians in advance of the programs’ screening, suggest possible breaches, not just of media ethics, but also of the law.

In a well functioning democratic system, one would expect the response to such serious allegations to be vigorous demands from opposition politicians and the media for a thorough investigation of the problem by an independent body such as a parliamentary or judicial committee. In Japan, this response has not eventuated, for reasons that say much about the country’s current political system. Except for a brief hiatus in the 1990s, the Liberal Democratic Party has been in power (either on its own or as the leading partner in a coalition) non-stop for the past fifty years. Over the past decade, the smaller but relatively vocal Democratic Socialist Party (formerly the Socialist Party) has been decimated,

and a new force, the Democratic Party, has emerged as Japan's main opposition. The Democratic Party is a recently created merger of a motley group of politicians, its leadership consisting largely of former members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party who departed from the LDP in the 1990s. On the NHK Affair as on other key social, political and diplomatic issues the Democratic Party is riven by deep internal disagreements, and the Party's leaders appear to have taken the view that there is no political advantage to be gained from involving itself too deeply in the surrounding controversy. Though Party leaders solemnly pronounced the Affair "an important issue for media freedom"¹⁰, they have signally failed to follow up this statement with an effective push for an independent inquiry. Meanwhile, the rest of the Japanese media has, by and large, chosen to present the story, not as a contest between journalistic independence and political intervention, but rather as a contest between two corporate rivals, NHK and the *Asahi* – a spectator sport in which the audience is invited to hurl invective at both protagonists. (The monthly *Bungei Shunjû*, for example, headlines its story "NHK versus *Asahi*: The Suicide of the Media", while the weekly *Yomiuri* entitled its offering "NHK and *Asahi*'s Mudslinging: Which is Telling 'Whoppers'?")

At this point, it is worth saying a little more about the structure of the mainstream Japanese media. Japan has five national daily newspapers – the *Asahi* and *Mainichi*, which are generally regarded as being on the "liberal" end of the political spectrum; the business-oriented *Nikkei*; and the *Yomiuri* and *Sankei*, which are generally regarded as being on the "conservative" end of the spectrum. Each of the main commercial TV channels, which compete with NHK, is affiliated to one the various newspaper groups.

As we have seen, there are also a large number of weekly and monthly magazines, some affiliated to the major national newspapers, and others produced by leading book-publishing firms. The best-selling magazines have a circulation of over half a million copies. In the weeklies, feature articles are generally unsigned, and by convention it is accepted that their standards of accuracy are less rigorous than those of the national newspapers. The weeklies

tend to hunt in packs, each trying to outdo its rivals in unearthing lurid revelations on the current topic of interest. In the past year or so, falling magazine sales have intensified the ferocity of this competition. On the positive side, the weeklies have sometimes played an important role in unearthing political scandals that the very cautious national broadsheets are unwilling to touch. On the negative side, their journalistic style encourages rumor, innuendo and hysteria, and has the power to ruin the life of anyone unfortunate enough to become the target of this week's feeding-frenzy.

In the week when the controversy broke, the *Asahi's* own weekly magazine chose to remain silent on the topic (though the *Asahi* group's monthly journal *Ronza* subsequently published a series of analytical articles supporting the paper's position). The *Mainichi's* weekly magazine ran an account of the affair that focused strongly on the problem of NHK's relationship with the ruling LDP. But such voices were largely drowned by the clamor of other mainstream magazines, which concentrated more on attacking the *Asahi* for reporting the whistleblower's revelations than on addressing the question of the NHK's independence from political interference.

The widely sold *Shûkan Shinchô*, for example, emblazoned its report on the issue with the words "witch hunt" (referring to the aspersions cast by the *Asahi* at politicians Abe and Nakagawa) and "journalistic lies" (referring to the *Asahi's* reporting).¹¹ Other magazines adopted a slightly subtler stance. *Shûkan Bunshun*, for example, published a leading story that offered the reader an exposé of the "shameful features" of both NHK and the *Asahi*. At first sight, this might seem to promise a balanced assessment of the controversy. In fact, however, the article's central argument turned out to be above all a heated attack on the *Asahi* for its reporting of the whistleblowers revelations. A number of unflattering comments are made about NHK staff, but the main criticism directed against that organization is that it acted irresponsibly in ever attempting to broadcast its documentary on the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal. It was, *Bunshun's* article concludes, the "puerile nature" of this television program that triggered the whole problem in the first place.¹²

A particularly disturbing feature of the sensationalized magazine coverage of the issue were the very personal attacks on some of the journalists involved, most notably on reporter Honda Masakazu, who broke the whistleblower's story in the pages of the *Asahi*. Honda has had a long career with the *Asahi*, and is known for his investigative reporting of issues including environmental pollution, the war in Iraq and, more recently, the Southeast Asian tsunami. The weekly *Bunshun's* article sought to undermine Honda's credibility by (amongst other things) a series of innuendos about his relationship to North Korea. At a time when loathing of North Korea is widespread in Japan, following revelations about the kidnappings of Japanese citizens by North Korean agents in the 1970s and 1980s, such innuendo carries particular political punch. The rhetoric involved is worth looking at closely, because it provides just one vivid example of the weekly magazine's journalistic style.

Amongst the international prosecution teams at the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal was a twelve-member joint team from the two Koreas and led by a prominent South Korean lawyer. One member of the team was Hwang Ho-Nam, a North Korean official who is a Japan analyst and fluent Japanese speaker, and has participated in a number of official and unofficial meetings between Japan and North Korea. Quoting an unidentified "person connected to the [Japanese] government", the *Bunshun* article described Hwang as a North Korean "special agent [*kôsakuin*] in the broad definition of the word".¹³ Though *Bunshun's* government source was not named, it is worth noting that politician Abe Shinzô in his reponse repeatedly made the same claim to the NHK Affair.¹⁴

The term "North Korean special agent" is one that has been very widely used in the Japanese media in the past two years, and is generally associated in the public mind with the secret agents who were responsible for the crime of secretly entering the country and kidnapping Japanese citizens during the 1970s and 1980s. What is meant by a "North Korean special agent in the broad definition of the word" is anybody's guess. The *Bunshun* article (and Abe) failed to provide evidence that Hwang was guilty of anything other than being a North Korean bureaucrat and, in that capacity, expressing some unappealing political views.

The phrase does, however, serve to evoke the desired frisson of ill-defined fear that sinister forces are at work.

The next step is to make a connection between these sinister forces and *Asahi* journalist Honda. Here *Bunshun* was obliged to be creative with very slim pickings. It revealed to readers that, not long before the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal was held, Honda traveled on the Peace Boat, an educational cruise vessel run by a well-known Japanese NGO, on a voyage whose itinerary included a stop in North Korea. In the course of this voyage Honda also filed an article that reported that North Korean participants had agreed to participate in the Tribunal. "The person who came to Japan as a result," concludes *Bunshun's* anonymous journalist, "was Hwang Ho-Nam."

The fact that Honda visited North Korea and reported on the impending participation of North Koreans in the International Women's War Crimes Tribunal is, of course, neither politically nor journalistically reprehensible. Nor does this information add anything at all to our understanding of the *Bunshun* article's purported subject: the question of political interference in the editorial decisions of NHK. Through its deft choice of language, however, the *Bunshun* article succeeded in implying that Honda's journalism was in some way responsible for bringing into Japan a person officially identified as a menacing "North Korean agent in the broad sense of the word". In the current climate of Japanese public opinion, this served to implant in readers' minds the inchoate notion that Honda and his writings are at best dubious and duplicitous, and at worst treacherous and criminal. Similar innuendo was repeated in several other magazines, including the right-wing monthly *Shokun!* which devoted a whole article to a long and hostile analysis of Honda's career and personal beliefs.¹⁵

The combination of scurrilous personal attacks with sententious pronouncements by *Bunshun* and other magazines about the *Asahi's* poor journalistic standards seems, at first sight, quite amusing. However, repeated reporting of this kind carries a serious and un-amusing message which may be decoded as follows: Journalists who write articles which seriously embarrass the political establishment will be punished by their peers, and if possible silenced altogether.

The response to the NHK affair, therefore, goes to the heart of the problem of mass media and democracy. In conventional media theory, a free press is supposed to operate as a “watchdog”, observing the activities of government and barking when politicians overstepped the limits of their power. Recent media critiques, however, have questioned whether today’s corporate mass media have either the capacity or the will to fill the “watchdog” role. The 2004 US documentary *Outfoxed*, for example, highlighted the close complicity between the Murdoch media empire and the George W. Bush administration.

Some observers of the Japanese media also suggest that it operates less as a “watchdog” than as a “guard dog”, protecting the interests of the political elite.¹⁶ The NHK affair illustrates several aspects of such structural collusion between media and political power. The overt statement by NHK management that it is “normal practice” for the content of potentially controversial programs to be discussed in advance with selected politicians clearly puts the whole notion of that organization’s broadcasting independence in doubt.

Meanwhile, as the example of the *Shûkan Bunshun* article shows, the commercial magazines’ ceaseless search for scoops relies heavily on unattributed comments from “people connected to the government”, that is, senior bureaucrats and politicians who are willing to offer off-the-record briefings to trusted media outlets. Indeed, a central problem highlighted by the NHK Affair is the very close personal links that develop between individual journalists (from newspapers and television as well as weekly magazines) and prominent politicians. Journalists in Japan are regularly assigned to follow a specific politician, attending informal briefings and social functions as well as the politician’s more formal public appearances. Over time, these assignments often turn into close personal relationships, in which the journalist may all too easily become a channel for publicizing information that the politician wishes to disseminate. The quid pro quo, of course, is that the journalist can be expected to obtain occasional “scoops” from the relationship. Keeping such channels of information open is therefore seen as essential to the commercial success of the newspaper or magazine.

The mainstream magazines may be willing to run exposés on individual politicians who have earned enough enmity or jealousy within the establishment to make them relatively safe targets. But they are reluctant to tackle structural problems likely to embarrass the establishment as a whole. In the NHK case, many of the weekly magazines evidently took the decision that it would serve their political advantage to shift critical scrutiny away from the relationship between the government and the NHK, and towards an attack on the *Asahi*, thus boosting sales while simultaneously earning further credit with their confidential sources of information within political and bureaucratic elite. The resulting journalism acts out the “guard dog” role with the enthusiasm of an underfed Rottweiler.

“Fair and Balanced Journalism”

The Japanese media, unlike the media in some other countries of our region, operate in an environment where free speech is guaranteed by the law and the Constitution, and where there is no overt government censorship. The NHK Affair, however, has acted like a litmus test, exposing the extent to which formal media freedoms are being hollowed out a combination of corrosive forces. These forces include, first, the lack of a vigorous political opposition; second, entrenched, behind-the-scenes links between media organizations and leading ruling party politicians; third, a tiny terrorist far right whose occasional acts of violence and very frequent threats of violence the Japanese police have never been able or willing to constrain; and fourth, a mainstream commercial press whose competitive strategies include regular and well-choreographed verbal assaults on individuals or organizations seen as hostile to the political establishment. It is unlikely that any of these four forces on its own would be enough to seriously imperil free speech. But working together, they are creating an environment which stifles effective critical debate on an expanding range of important topics, from the imperial system (the most long-standing of taboos), to war crimes such as the Nanjing Massacre and the running of the “comfort

stations”, to many aspects of Japan’s contemporary relationship with North Korea. These taboos assume increasing importance in the context of ongoing conflict between Japan and its Asian neighbours over questions of historical memory and responsibility.

Despite the fact that a majority of Japanese people oppose Japan’s military participation in the occupation of Iraq, this subject too has become perilous terrain for public criticism, as demonstrated in 2004 by the ferocious media anger directed at three hapless Japanese kidnapped by Iraqi insurgents. Even before their release and return to Japan, the victims and their families were being pilloried by the press back home for having dared to question their government’s support for the US strategy in Iraq. This incident also highlighted the growing power of a fifth force which is now (somewhat paradoxically) further stifling of free debate in the Japanese mass media: the emergence of large and influential Internet chat groups. Though they have potential to be an alternative unfettered forum for public discussion of political issues, groups such as “Channel 2” (said to be the largest Internet chat group in the world) have so far tended instead to become a forum in which the current obsessions of the weekly magazines are repeated and magnified, often (as in the Iraq kidnapping case) generating avalanches of anonymous hate-mail directed at the latest target of the mainstream media’s fear and loathing.

Ironically, the NHK Affair demonstrates how the very concepts designed to protect media freedoms can be used to further stifle public debate. The main response to the Affair from the ruling party – most eloquently articulated by LDP Acting Secretary General Abe Shinzô – was to shift the focus of debate from the question of political intervention in NHK to the question of the “fairness and balance” of the documentary “Questioning Sexual Violence in War”.

The argument (faithfully echoed by much of Japan’s mainstream media) runs as follows. The Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal was an event organized by a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) with a specific political agenda. While it was acceptable for NHK to make a program about the Tribunal, it was unacceptable for the national broadcaster to become closely associated with the

point of view of one particular NGO, or uncritically to present its agenda to the public. The fundamental principles of fair and balanced reporting required NHK to include the voices of critics of the NGO in the documentary. Abe's representations to NHK management on the eve of the documentary's broadcast were simply a helpful reminder to the broadcaster to abide by these principles of "fairness and balance".

This seemingly reasonable demand for "fair and balanced journalism", however, raises major problems when it is applied, not across the board to all programs or media organizations, but only to those programs, articles or media organizations which take politically critical positions. By way of example, let us look a little more closely at the relationship between NHK and NGOs.

In the very week when many magazines were echoing Abe's concerns about "fair and balanced journalism", NHK's main news broadcasts were giving headline coverage to the activities of the Association of the Families of Victims Kidnapped by North Korea (AFVKN, generally known in Japan by the organization *Kazokukai*), an NGO which had collected a large number of signatures on a petition calling for sanctions against North Korea. This was no exceptional event. Since 2002, demonstrations, public meetings and press conferences organized by AFVKN and its sister NGO the National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea (NARKN, generally known as *Sukuukai*) have received very frequent and detailed coverage on NHK's news broadcasts.

The two NGOs take the view that a substantial number of kidnapped Japanese citizens are still being held by North Korea, and demand sanctions and other punitive measures against the Kim Jong-Il regime to ensure their return.¹⁷ AFVKN and NARKN have also succeeded in developing strong links to leading politicians including LDP Acting Secretary General Abe Shinzô. NHK's very frequent news coverage of the activities of the two NGOs is not balanced by the inclusion of comment from anyone questioning their political stance. Nor has the national broadcaster's repeated uncritical broadcasting of these NGO activities and statements ever attracted negative comment from Japan's political leaders or mainstream media. On the contrary, while public supporters of VAWW-NET

are the targets of fierce mass media criticism, public criticism of the views of AFVKN and NARKN has now joined the growing list of Japanese media taboos. Similarly, the current upsurge of media hostility towards the *Asahi* newspaper and its journalist Honda Masakazu is just the latest wave in an ongoing campaign of criticism against the newspaper by other media organizations. The main target of the attack is the *Asahi's* allegedly “unbalanced” criticism of the Japanese government. Its journalists (including Honda) are too said to be close to NGOs and social movements which have an anti-government agenda. This campaign of criticism, gathering momentum not long after the assassination of *Asahi* journalist Kojiri in 1987, appears to have had some effect on the newspaper’s editorial policy. The *Asahi* now regularly “balances” critical or left of center political articles with comment by relatively conservative academics and public figures. All of this might be admirable if there had been a similar shift by the conservative *Sankei* and *Yomiuri* newspapers to give greater space on their pages to critical or left of center commentators. But needless to say, no such shift has occurred. Instead, one-sided and selective demands for “fairness and balance” are in practice pushing the overall balance of the spectrum of Japanese media reporting further to the right, in the process increasingly marginalizing critical voices or silencing those who do not wish to endanger their own and their family’s safety and peace of mind by taking the risk of making public comment on controversial topics.

Reclaiming Free Debate

“But don’t you feel threatened?”

“Don’t you fear for your own (or your family’s) safety?”

I have lost count of the number of times I have heard these questions posed to colleagues who write media commentary critical of the position of the Japanese government, or of certain trends in contemporary Japanese society. The answer to the question depends on the individual. But the very fact that these questions have become part of normal dinner-time conversation between Japanese scholars, journalists and others is alarming. The nature of the threat is

amorphous, but that makes it none the less real. Though some people within Japan have the capacity to ignore or resist its influence, there are undoubtedly numerous academics and other who have ceased to express their views in the mass media in response to this atmosphere of amorphous fear: fear of hate mail or death threats; fear of becoming the target of personal attacks in the weekly magazines; fear of being branded by the media as “extreme” or “unpatriotic”; fear that touching taboo subjects in public may damage their careers.

The NHK Affair, with all its complex ramifications, can be seen as a touchstone. Will an independent commission ever be established to probe claims of political interference in NHK? Will the truth of the story be explored in a court of law (since NHK executives and others have muttered threats of libel suits against the *Asahi*)? Will NHK executives and politicians successfully avoid detailed outside scrutiny of the case, allowing it simply to fade into the recesses of public memory as an “unsolved mystery”? Will the attacks by rival media on the *Asahi* and its journalists prompt further shifts of editorial approach from that newspaper? Will journalists be willing to report equally controversial stories in future? Whose careers will be enhanced, and whose destroyed, by the incident?

The affair has highlighted the structural problems of Japan’s mainstream media. But it has also cast light on some of the features of Japanese society which could serve as basis for resistance to the stifling forces within the existing nexus of politics and media. In the absence of strong demands from the Democratic Party and the mainstream national media for a thorough inquiry into the relationship between the government and NHK, it has largely been left to the Japanese public to take up the issue. In the weeks since the affair broke, numerous civil society networks (often using the Internet to disseminate their views) have emerged to voice criticism of political interference in the media.¹⁸ The statement by NHK executives that it was “normal practice” to share the content of planned programs with politicians has prompted an “NHK viewers’ strike”, with members of the public pledging to withhold television license fees (an important part of the national broadcaster’s revenue) until the company re-establishes its independence from political influence.¹⁹

It is interesting to observe how these campaigns themselves have been reported in the Japanese media. The *Asahi*, *Mainichi* and *Nikkei* ran small reports on them, but predictably they were ignored by most of the national media. They did, however, receive rather widespread coverage in Japan's many regional and local newspapers, with paper like the *Hokkaidô Shimbun* and *Kôchi Shimbun* running editorials supporting citizens' action to ensure that NHK maintains its independence from political pressure.²⁰ Inevitably, perhaps, regional media often have close financial and personal links to prominent local families, and these may influence the approach which they take to the reporting of issues in their area. At the same time, however, they are more distanced from central government than the (largely Tokyo-based) national media, and rely much less on personal links to politicians and government officials. They are therefore sometimes more willing to report national news in a critical and independent way, or to take up social issues which the mainstream national media ignore.

Despite recent cases of the use of Internet chat groups as a vehicle for nationwide bullying campaigns, the Internet also provides an important potential forum for freer public debate. All NGOs do not have equal access to the mainstream media. But all have almost equal access to the Internet as a means to convey their views to the public. Internet newspapers of the sort that flourish in South Korea have been slower to take root in Japan, but experiments in online journalism are beginning to attract growing interest. These include sites like the Internet TV service Videonews.com, which broadcast important material on the NHK Affair (including an uncut version of whistleblower Nagai's press conference, and an appeal for an enquiry into the affair by a group of Japanese journalists and media experts).²¹ Internet media open spaces for voices not heard in the mainstream press, and also create possibilities for cross-border linkages, allowing those involved with media problems in Japan to share their concerns and learn from the experience of people with similar concerns in other countries.

Working in conjunction, civil society, regional media and new online networks may perhaps yet provide a countervailing force to the miasma of self-censorship and conformity increasingly enveloping Japan's mainstream journalism.

NOTES

- ¹ For wider discussion of the role of the Japanese media in public debate, see Yoshimi Shunya, *Media Bunka Ron*, Tokyo, Yuhikaku, 2004; Yamaguchi Masanori, *Media ga Shimin no Teki ni naru: Sayonara Yomiuri Shimbun*, Tokyo, Gendai Jinbunsha, 2004; Asano Ken'ichi and Yamaguchi Masanori (eds), *Musekinin na Masumedia: Kenryoku Kainyû no Kiki to Hôdô Higai*, Tokyo, Gendai Jinbunsha, 2001; S. J. Pharr and E. S. Krauss eds., *Media and Politics in Japan*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1996; Duncan McCargo, *Media and Politics in Pacific Asia*, London, Routledge, 2002, chapter 3.
- ² For further information on the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, see the VAWW-Net Website <http://www1.jca.apc.org/vaww-net-japan/english/womenstribunal2000/whatstribunal.html>; also Gavan McCormack, "How the History Wars in Japan Left a Black Mark on NHK TV (Their BBC)", *History News Network*, 7 February 2005, <http://hnn.us/articles/printfriendly/9954.html>
- ³ For an archive of material on the "comfort women" issue see Chunghee Sarah Soh, "The Comfort Women Project". <http://userwww.sfsu.edu/~soh/comfortwomen.html>
- ⁴ See Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "When is a Terrorist not a Terrorist?" *Znet Japan*, 24 September 2003, <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=17&ItemID=4246>
- ⁵ For an outline of Abe's career, see "Profile: Shinzo Abe", http://tokyo.s-abe.or.jp/profile_in_english.html
- ⁶ See "Kanbu, 'Atsuryoku to Kanjita': NHK-gawa ni 2 Giin Iken de Bangumi Kaihen (Kaisetsu)", and "Nakagawa Shô, Abe Shi 'Naiyô Katayori' Shiteki: NHK 'Ianfu' Bangumi Kaihen", *Asahi Shimbun*, 12 January 2005; also Honda Masakazu and Takada Makoto, "LDP Pressure Led to Cuts to NHK Show", *Asahi Shimbun*, 12 January 2005, English article available online at <http://www.asahi.com/english/politics/TKY200501120160.html>
- ⁷ "NHK, LDP Lawmakers Deny any 'Political Pressure' to Alter Show", *Asahi Shimbun*, 15 January 2005, see <http://www.asahi.com/english/nation/TKY200501150180.html>; "Japan: NHK Closes Ranks against Asahi, Whistle-Blower", *Japan Times*, 15 January 2005, see <http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=19831>
- ⁸ "Seijika, Bangumi Naiyô no Jizen Setsumei 'Tôzen' – NHK Gen-Sôkyokuchô Ninchiki Shimesu", *Asahi Shimbun*, 20 January 2005.
- ⁹ On the Hutton Inquiry, see the official Inquiry website <http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/> also the *Guardian* newspaper's special report on the Inquiry, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/hutton/0,13822,1021216,00.html>; and Shier Affair see report by Fiona Reynolds, "ABC Managing Director Resigns", "AM" Program, ABC Radio, 1 Nov 2001, <http://www.abc.net.au/am/stories/s405594.htm>; also Hugh Mackay's "Dossier on Jonathan Shier" on the website of the NSW branch of Friends of the ABC, http://www.fabcsw.org.au/periodicals/update_2001/update_2001_04/Update2001-04_6.pdf
- ¹⁰ "Yatô 'Kokkai de Tsuikyû': Akushitsu na Seiji Kainyû to Hihan – NHK Bangumi Kaihen", *Asahi Shimbun*, 13 January 2005.
- ¹¹ "Majogari' Daikyohô", *Shûkan Shinchô*, 27 January 2005, pp. 32-35.
- ¹² "NHK mo Asahi mo Zettai ni Hôjinai sorezore no 'Chibu'", *Shûkan Bunshun*, 3 February 2005, pp. 26-30.
- ¹³ Ibid p. 28.
- ¹⁴ For example, Abe Shinzô and Nakanishi Terumasa, "Ianfu mo Yasukuni mo 'Asahi Mondai' da", *Shokun!*, March 2005, pp. 22-33, see particularly p. 29.
- ¹⁵ Nishimura Yukihiko, "Tenka no Asahi ni 'Honda Masakazu' Kisha Ari", *Shokun!* March 2005, pp. 48-55.

¹⁶ For example, Maggie Farley, “Japan’s Press and the Politics of Scandal” in S. J. Pharr and E. S. Krauss eds., *Media and Politics in Japan*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1996, pp. 19-43; for further discussion of the “guard dog” thesis, see also Chalinee Hirano, *Political Information Contests and the Media’s Role in Politics: A Comparative Analysis of the Thai and Japanese Media*, unpublished PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2001.

¹⁷ See the NGOs’ joint website, <http://sukuukai.jp/narkn/>

¹⁸ See for example Mekiki-Net, <http://www.jca.apc.org/mekiki/nhk/index.html>

¹⁹ See “NHK Bangumi Mondai: Jizen Setsumei no Kinshi o Mōshiire: ‘Jushinryō Shiharai Teishi no Kai’ Hassoku”, *Mainichi Shimbun*, 9 Feb 2005; also “Jushinryō Harai Tōketsu Undō: NHK Mondai de Tōdai Kyōjura ‘Jizen Setsumei’ Kinshi Motome”, *Asahi Shimbun*, 6 Feb 2005.

²⁰ “(Shasetsu) NHK Mondai: ‘Jinshin Ishhin’ de Katazuku ka”, *Hokkaidō Shimbun*, 26 Jan 2005;

“(Shasetsu) NHK Kaikaiku: Hyōka wa Shichōsha ga aru”, *Kōchi Shimbun*, 9 Feb 2005;

²¹ “NHK o Naibu Kokuhatsu shita Nagai Satoru Chifu Prodyūsā Kisha Kaiken”, (13 Jan 2005) and “Jānarisuto to Media Kankeisha ni yoru NHK Mondai ni kansuru Kisha Kaiken to Apīru” (18 Jan 2005), *Videonews.com*, <http://www.videonews.com/>