



# NO NEWS IS BAD NEWS

Using the Media in Teaching About

# Japan

By RICHARD MATTHEWS

**H**ow do people in one country learn about another land? Travel helps, but it provides limited exposure to the real life of a nation. Living in a particular foreign country is a possibility, but few of us have that opportunity. We learn a little about the rest of the world through education, although not much in the typical American secondary school; outward-looking teachers like those who are reading this journal may be the exception rather than the rule. Only those who focus on a particular region or country in college are likely to get much depth of knowledge and understanding about it in a classroom.

Most of us, in fact, learn whatever we know about the rest of the world the same way we learn about our own society: through the news media. The attitudes people have about other nations, and about their political and social characteristics, depend almost entirely on the information they read and hear from newspapers, television, radio and magazines.

If the media are a dominant source of information, then, could news and feature stories be a resource for teachers who want to give their students broader knowledge about the world outside our borders? It might seem so, but there are two serious problems facing the educator who would turn to newspapers, magazines and television for study materials: the coverage of

Scripps-Howard, and a few more. That gives me a solid feel for how much news on Japan is out there, and what its nature is.

What I've found is that, in the last few years, Japan came close to being an invisible country in most U.S. news media—and thus, I think, pretty much invisible in the consciousness of average Americans. Of course, people know that Japan exists, and are familiar with some aspects of its culture through things like sushi bars, automobiles, and consumer electronics products, but the news media have not prompted them to see events in Japan as relevant to their lives in any important ways.

The popular level of interest in things Japanese has never been as high as many people suppose. The media spotlight fell heavily in 1989 to the purchase of Rockefeller Center by a Japanese firm, but a survey by the *Times Mirror* Center for the People and the Press (now the Pew Research Center) found that only 10 percent of Americans had paid close attention to the issue. The next year, the U.S. government was deciding whether to impose draconian trade sanctions on Japan—an issue of immense bilateral importance. When the *Times Mirror* Center specifically asked about it, just 17 percent of the people said they were following that story closely; by comparison, 24 percent said they had been keenly interested in the launching of the Hubble Space telescope.<sup>1</sup>

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the rest of the world in most American news media isn't necessarily accurate or broad enough to serve as reliable classroom information; and, in recent times, there isn't very much coverage of international matters anyway.

In what follows, I explore these assertions using, as an example, a country that has played a dominant role in the world's economy during the past twenty years or more—Japan. Because I'm deeply interested in that country, I have for many years gone to extra efforts to find articles about it in major U.S. news media. Every day I read my newspaper, *The Atlanta Journal*, as well as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Then I read all the wire services that feed into the computer on my desk—The Associated Press, the *Washington Post-Los Angeles Times* wire, Knight-Ridder,

Still, public interest or not, there was no shortage of coverage of Japan (and the U.S.-Japan relationship) a few years ago. At the height of its economic success, Japan was a frequent presence in the pages of American newspapers and on the evening news shows. The nature of the coverage changed over time, from admiring to suspicious and even fearful, but there was plenty of it. Then, economic reality struck in Japan, the "bubble" burst, and the media's attention began to wander. Both the breadth and depth of interest in what was going on in Japan lessened noticeably.

Perhaps the most telling moment came on the day in June 1994 when Murayama Tomiichi became prime minister. The TV evening news shows and CNN all reported the development, but in every case near the middle of the program, nothing

like a major story. All the reports were very brief, and as I recall only one was reported by a correspondent in Tokyo, rather than simply read by the anchor. The shortest, and perhaps most remarkable, report came from Peter Jennings, one of the most respected television journalists in this country. He offered only the barest information, reporting that Japan had its fourth prime minister in eight months and that Murayama Tomiichi was elected as the head of a coalition government. What is amazing is that Jennings did not even mention that Murayama was a Socialist, or what that meant in terms of Japanese politics.

Two other events further changed the way American newspapers and TV covered Japan. The shattering Hanshin earthquake in January 1995 also shattered (fairly or unfairly) the common belief that Japan had mastered all technological issues. Then in March of that year, the horrifying sarin gas attack on a Tokyo subway challenged the conventional wisdom that Japan's society was stable, secure and superior, in many ways, to most others.

After that, I began to find fewer and fewer stories of substance about Japan in the various papers and wire services I read. There were some, of course—when the first election was held under a new single-member district system, when various scandals were uncovered, and when one or another economic reform plan was announced—but most of the time they seemed perfunctory at best.

Far more prevalent was another type of story, one that presented a wholly different image of Japan: as a small, faraway country of slightly exotic little people with quaint and peculiar customs—especially customs that put a somewhat negative light on the nation and its citizens.

There were quite a number of stories, for instance, about *enjō kousai*, the fad of paid “dating” between older men and schoolgirls, and the prevalence of child pornography in the country. There were rehashes of older topics, like bullying in schools and the terrible pressures of an education system that doesn't breed creativity. Americans could read about the new crime of stealing Nike shoes among youngsters in Ōsaka, and of course about the national fascination with “Tamagochi,” the little electronic baby chick that mesmerized children and adults across Japan for months.

Articles of that sort appear from time to time regarding any country, of course, but it seemed that they had come to dominate the general coverage of Japan, at the expense of stories that treated Japan as a real country with a real government and real issues.



PHOTOS TOP TO BOTTOM:  
 Mother and baby shopping in grocery in Shibuya, Tokyo.  
 Crowds of Sunday shoppers in downtown Tokyo.  
 Buying a *bentō* (box lunch) on the train platform in Utsunomiya.

Photos courtesy of Richard Matthews



According to the Vanderbilt archives, in the first twenty-seven days of April, there were a grand total of just four reports concerning Japan on the three major networks' evening broadcasts, and they were not necessarily edifying accounts.

Their topics: The Clinton-Hashimoto meeting in Washington;  
the growing popularity of Japanese sport utility vehicles in America;  
the number of Japanese businessmen who retire and become  
Buddhist monks; and the death of the producer of the "Godzilla" movies.

In 1997 I was asked to give a talk at a conference in Atlanta and at several universities in Japan on the topic of media coverage of Japan. In preparation, I decided to take a closer, more rigorous look at the coverage to see how accurate my impressions were. Using the Internet, I checked the amount and type of coverage of Japan in major U.S. media every day for the entire month of April. Since many newspapers and magazines now have online editions, I could use various methods to find out what they were saying.

First, I used a search tool that looks at the web sites of 300 newspapers and magazines to locate substantive articles about Japan. (I eliminated routine daily financial reports on things like yen exchange rates and Nikkei stock exchange levels.) Since this method couldn't guarantee that I found everything, I also checked directly the web sites of the following major newspapers, scattered around the country: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Seattle Times*, *The Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The San Francisco Herald and Examiner*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. Of course I read my own paper in "hard copy." To keep up with the level of awareness of the profoundly information-challenged, I also checked *USA Today*, and because it is a major source for many people, I surveyed CNN's web site as well. Finally, using the Television News Archive at Vanderbilt University, I searched abstracts of every nightly newscast by the three major networks up through April 27, the latest date available at the time of my talk.

To make the findings more than a raw count of articles, I classified the ones I found into three rough categories: coverage of Japan itself, coverage of U.S. interests in Japan, and stories about the "quaint, exotic" culture or behavior of the Japanese (a few overlapped more than one category). I did not count articles about the hostage rescue in Peru, seeing that as news about Peru, not Japan; I did count, however, any articles that examined reaction to the rescue among the Japanese people.

The results were mostly consistent with my earlier impressions. In a couple of cases, I found more than I had expected—but still nowhere near what I would consider sufficient to be well-informed about what's happening in Japan, and certainly not enough to provide a rich source of materials for educating students, at any level, about the country.

*The Washington Post* had the most stories—twenty-two. However, only eleven of those were about Japan itself; ten were really about U.S. interests in Japan. What's interesting is that the

*Post* had only a single article in the "quaint, exotic country" category. *The New York Times* was second, with eighteen articles. However, only ten reported on substantive topics purely about Japan. Three others were about U.S. interests, and five were "quaint, exotic" stories, perhaps surprising for a paper thought by many to be the nation's most serious newspaper of record.

After that, however, interest fell off pretty quickly. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* had thirteen articles, seven of which were U.S.-centered; the *Los Angeles Times* had twelve, seven of which were in fact about important developments within Japan. Other papers had far fewer. In fact, Minneapolis and Dallas did not have a single story on Japan on their web sites during the month. The theory that West Coast papers have a greater interest in Japan was not really borne out. *The Seattle Times* had only two articles, although both were really about Japan, and the San Francisco papers had only three, all looking from the U.S. interest side.

CNN was fairly active. It had eighteen reports that mentioned Japan, seven of which could be called "real news" from the country itself. Five, however, were "cute, exotic" stories, including one about baby sumo wrestlers—good for a chuckle, but hardly helpful in informing viewers about real life and real change in Japan.

In fairness, some very substantive information about developments in Japan could be found in publications that focus on business: *The Wall Street Journal*, *Barron's*, and magazines like *Business Week*. They did touch occasionally on political developments, but for them Japan is still principally an economic and business story. Still, they were far more consistent and deep in their coverage than the general press. Also, not long after my 1997 study, *Time* magazine published a special issue with a package of articles about modern-day Japan, focusing on its economic and social progress and problems. Readers—and teachers—cannot, however, count on such one-time specials as adequate replacements for steady, continuing coverage.

This evaluation of the print media may seem disillusioning, but the worst news was yet to come. I focused on newspapers and magazines to evaluate coverage because that's where one would expect serious, or at least lengthy, treatment of foreign policy issues. However, the fact is that most Americans these days get their news—if they get any at all—from television. But if anyone imagined these viewers would get a satisfying diet of substance concerning Japan, they would be even more sorely disappointed.



According to the Vanderbilt archives, in the first twenty-seven days of April, there were a grand total of just four reports concerning Japan on the three major networks' evening broadcasts, and they were not necessarily edifying accounts. Their topics: The Clinton-Hashimoto meeting in Washington; the growing popularity of Japanese sport utility vehicles in America; the number of Japanese businessmen who retire and become Buddhist monks; and the death of the producer of the "Godzilla" movies.

One might ask whether April 1997 was a representative month for coverage. It's difficult to assess, but a cursory check of articles I had found in March 1997 showed them to be about the same in number and character. The April findings also matched fairly well my subjective impression gained by continuing research over the years; to the extent they differed, it was in a slightly greater number of substantive articles, rather than fewer.

It's also important to ask whether there really was much news in Japan that needed covering that month. Everyone is entitled to his own news judgment, of course, but all through that April the Associated Press, UPI, and Reuters were churning out six to ten stories a day related to Japan on their general wires and more on their business wires. (I checked them every day, too, but I didn't count their stories unless they were actually carried in a newspaper or on a news web site—and they rarely were.)

One could also question whether U.S. media specifically ignore Japan or whether they fall short in coverage of most countries. In fact, many people complain—rightly—that American newspapers and networks don't cover the world nearly enough, but I found quite a few stories about many other countries, including some that didn't seem to be earth-shattering news. For instance, there was one headlined, "Italian government may fall," something that happens with some regularity and may have far less relevance to Americans than the workings of Japan's government.

In the beginning of this article, it was noted that most people learn about other countries from the news media. If that's true, then the average American could know, based on articles published or broadcast during April 1997, that Italy, India, Britain, France, Pakistan, Turkey and Zaire have a legislative branch of government. That same average American wouldn't necessarily know, however, that Japan does—because nothing related to the Diet or parliamentary politics was reported during that period by most media.

It should be noted that, to this point, I have discussed only the number and subject matter of these articles, not their quality or accuracy. The mere existence of articles does not necessarily mean that understanding is increased. On the same day, *The Washington Post* ran a long analysis entitled "Signs of revival in 'failed' Japan," and the Associated Press had a long piece



PHOTOS TOP TO BOTTOM:  
 A group o *hanami* picnic near the Budoukan forest in cherry blossom season.  
 Morning exercises at the Akabanedai Nishi Elementary School in Kita Ward, Tokyo.  
 A typical *nomiya* near Shinjuku-gyoen, with the "mama" at the rear.

Photos courtesy of Richard Matthews



PHOTOS TOP TO BOTTOM:

A visitor strolls among massive trees in the huge, impressive cemetery at Kouyasan in Wakayama Prefecture.

Tourists visiting Nikkō on a rainy day.

Doing experiments in science class at Asuka Middle School in Kita Ward, Tokyo.

Photos courtesy of Richard Matthews

entitled, “Japan in throes of doubt.” One—or both—may have been wrong. Any educator hoping to use news articles to help students comprehend the political and economic conditions in Japan would be hard-pressed to reconcile them, unless he or she is quite expert on the country.

As has always been the case with U.S. media coverage of Japan and the U.S.-Japan relationship, there was much in this particular month’s coverage that was misguided, misinterpreted, or misleading. For many years, there have been serious flaws in reporting by American journalists (just as there have been major faults in Japanese media coverage of the United States).

In U.S. newspaper and TV portrayals of Japan, there has long been a curious dichotomy. The media alternate between portraying it as a rapacious monster, bent on taking over the planet, and a timid mouse, unable to do anything significant on the world stage. In the 1980s there were many scare stories about Japanese industries outstripping their U.S. counterparts.

On the other hand, during the Gulf War, most articles included criticism of Japan for contributing only money, and ridicule of its government for being unable to pass a bill to dispatch manpower to United Nations peacekeeping operations.

There’s a tendency, too, for American news stories to attribute any action, decision or behavior to “the Japanese.” If a British company buys a U.S. firm, reporters generally speak of it as something done by that company, acting independently. If the German government issues some policy statement, the article reports, “Chancellor Kohl said so and so.” But no matter whether an action is by the Japanese government, an official of the Liberal Democratic Party, the Keidanren, or just a single company, news articles almost always say, “the Japanese” did it—as if there were a monolithic mind that decided every

move by any part of Japanese society.

There are several reasons underlying the weakness of American coverage of Japan. For one thing, few American reporters have very much preparation for their assignment to cover Japan (or any other country, for that matter). Usually, they get a few weeks, or perhaps a few months, of “crash” tutoring in Japanese language, culture, and politics. Some reporters in Japan speak Japanese well, but many do not. More important, few can read Japanese with full comprehension. Thus, they can interview people to find out what Japanese want to say to Americans, but they don’t always know what Japanese are saying to each other in magazines and newspapers.

There is also a tendency to go to the same small number of sources, such as professors or economists or political analysts, over and over, because they speak English well and know how to give good quotes. As a result, if you read any fifty articles about Japan in U.S. media, you’ll find the same ten or twelve names appearing again and again. This doesn’t necessarily mean the views reported are incorrect, but since they come from such a narrow slice of society, there’s no way to know whether they represent the true range of Japanese public opinion.

With newspapers growing thinner and television newscasts remaining brief, there is not enough room for all the news of the world, and Japan usually isn't considered important enough by editors.

One problem U.S. journalists seem unable to shake is assessing developments in Japan by the standards of American cultural, political or social practices. This seems to be the case even when U.S. journalists know, at least in the abstract, that there are important differences. After the 1989 Upper House election, many U.S. newspapers and magazines ran articles speculating that Japan was turning socialist, even though the election results meant nothing of the kind. (In fairness, it should be said that Japanese journalists have almost the same problem grasping the essence of American political and cultural flows, leading their readers and viewers—and often their government—to misunderstand developments in this country.)

As is evident from the number of “quaint, exotic” articles found in the survey of April 1997 coverage, American journalists are incredibly susceptible to cliché stories. Nearly every reporter assigned to Tokyo will immediately write an article about the melons that cost \$50, to “prove” that living costs in Japan are astronomical. Of course, food and other prices are high, but many times reporters’ impressions of such things are skewed by their own lifestyles—living in luxury “foreigner” apartments and shopping at import grocery stores.

Even if reporters in Japan do a good job of covering some event or trend in Japan, their findings may not reach readers and viewers back home. With newspapers growing thinner and television newscasts remaining brief, there is not enough room for all the news of the world, and Japan usually isn't considered important enough by editors. Except for “trade wars” and “Japan-bashing” stories, that has always been so, and as can be seen from the figures above, it has been even more the case in recent years.

There has, of course, been more coverage of Asia in 1998 because of the economic crises facing many countries there, including Japan. Most of these stories have focused quite heavily on fiscal and regulatory policy and the efforts of international institutions to help stabilize and reform the economic systems of those nations. This is appropriate, as far as it goes, but it offers little to anyone seeking to teach students about the overall life and culture of another country. It's very likely, too, that when the crisis passes, so will the coverage.

The media could be of some limited use, as supplements to other material that is more dependably obtainable and perhaps more reliably thorough and accurate. As is evident from the survey described above, the average newspaper around the country isn't going to have very much coverage. If the library at a school subscribes to a major paper such as *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times*, however, there will be a few more substantive articles. In addition, infrequent “packages” such as the one mentioned above in *Time* magazine can be of help if they happen to appear when the class is researching the subject. (Otherwise the material, which by the nature of the

news media tends to be a “snapshot in time,” may well be outdated.) An enterprising educator could also look outside the range of media that might normally be found in an American school, to publications such as the British magazine *The Economist* or the Hong Kong-based, English-language publication, *The Far Eastern Economic Review*.

One tool that can help, in part, to overcome a shortage of stories is the one I used in my April 1997 survey—the Internet. Almost all major U.S. news media now have web sites, so judicious use of search engines could uncover a larger number of articles than would be available in any single newspaper or other source. Even this won't always produce information on a wide range of topics, however. Based on my research, if there are stories in four or five newspapers on a given day, they are likely to be on the same news development, with only subtle differences between them.

Most major Japanese newspapers now have English-language web sites, which could be sources of “home-grown” information about Japan. In some cases it may be a bit too esoteric for most classrooms, and Japanese media often lack a sense of perspective that can come with distance, but there is usually a great deal of raw data that can go into teachers' lesson plans.

It should be noted once again, though, that even if Internet searches turn up more articles, they may not all be relevant, important or even accurate. A teacher really needs a certain amount of knowledge and expertise about Japan, or other nations being studied, in order to judge the usefulness of material culled from the mass media.

As a journalist, I would be happy to boast that my profession produces information in sufficient quantity and quality to serve as a reliable resource for the nation's educators who want American young people to understand the world. The reality, however, falls far short of that ideal. ▢

#### NOTE

1. These statistics are available at The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press website: [www.people-press.org/database.htm](http://www.people-press.org/database.htm).

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