

Kisha clubs in Japan: an impregnable fortress of information

Kimiko Kuga examines the institution of the kisha club and their role in controlling information in Japan.



Kisha clubs – associations of newspaper companies and television stations ? are one of the most unique and mysterious institutions in Japan. Although the constitution guarantees freedom of the press, almost all public authorities use the press club system to restrict access to information. As the public are vaguely aware, all members of the institution enjoy a privileged status that they are eager to maintain. The club system is convenient for official sources to control the information they have provided to journalists, whilst journalists working with the affiliated media companies benefit from easy access to news sources.

Studies of kisha clubs are, however, very limited. This is presumably because each local authority, police office, government authority and even the prime minister's office has its own club, which makes it difficult to overview the basic principles. However, through interviews, we have seen that they share some basic features.

Free Speech Debate

Thirteen languages. Ten principles. One conversation.
<https://freespeechdebate.com>

First, journalists belonging to a kisha club must work at one of the major newspaper companies or one of the key television stations. Official sources are always accessible to these journalists as they can wait at the club members' room based in the associated authorities buildings. Journalists working for magazine publishers, the foreign press and freelancers however are not allowed to take part in this institution.

Second, all three journalists spoken to have experienced *youchiasagake* (??????), which means that they visit their news sources' house day and night to get new information. The first interviewee, who was a member of the kisha club at the Ministry of Finance, revealed that he visited the house belonging to the section manager at the ministry almost every evening. To get such access, journalists competitively develop good relationships with official sources. Due to such customs, all of my interviewees admitted that it was difficult for them to criticise their sources and that they mostly tried to find something congenial to say based on the information they were provided.

Third, most kisha clubs seem to have sanctions controlling the journalists. For instance, the second interviewee, who was associated with the kisha club at the Metropolitan Police Department, leaked a video of a murder suspect, although the department had asked him not to do so. As punishment, he was prohibited from attending regular meetings for a month. In this case, it might be reasonable for the police authority to restrict press freedom if this freedom interfered with the performance of their public duties. However, as you can imagine, such punishment, so-called *dekin* (??), prevents journalists from gaining information on current events related to their affiliated authorities. For journalists, the worst scenario is that their company is the only one not provided with the information that all others print in the newspapers or broadcast on air. Journalists at kisha clubs therefore mostly tend to follow their news source's requests even though some of them would constitute a restriction of press freedom.

These sanctions from authorities and pressure from their own companies make journalists cooperate with each other, even though they work at rival companies. This encourages the final feature, *dango* (??). After home visits, journalists from different companies sometimes have a brief meeting to check the information together and come to a common understanding of the data provided. These horizontal relationships between journalists have created a situation where nearly all newspapers take the same line on any particular matter.

Aside from these features, the interviewees' opinions of this institution are slightly different depending on whether they are from TV stations or newspaper companies. Since the institution of kisha clubs started in the Meiji era (late 19th to early 20th century) when only newspaper firms existed, the privileged norms for newspaper journalists remain. In the traditional type of kisha club, such as the one in the Metropolitan Police Department, there are facilities that are accessible only to newspaper journalists. This shows that there is a hierarchical structure among journalists depending on which companies they work for.

Free Speech Debate

Thirteen languages. Ten principles. One conversation.
<https://freespeechdebate.com>

Since 2009, press conferences are now open to all journalists, including the foreign press, regardless of whether they are kisha club members or not. However, questions for the conference normally need to be submitted to the authority in advance. Questions from journalists outside the club(s) are often put at the end of the list so that the official sources, mostly politicians, cannot answer their questions in the limited time. However, on 24 September 2015 Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was caught on the wrong foot – he could not answer an unexpected question from Reuters on the migration crisis. Just after he announced a vast increase in aid to refugees in the Middle East at the UN General Assembly, the prime minister revealed that he prioritised the domestic challenges of an aging society and a declining birthrate, but would not accept refugees. To avoid such situations, maintaining the club system is considerably easier for politicians, who can then just follow the script that their speechwriters prepare.

In this sense, freelancers as well as international journalists might be able to play a crucial role in challenging the impregnable fortress of information. In 2005, Yu Terasawa, a freelance journalist and one of the 100 information heroes elected by Reporters Without Borders, filed a lawsuit against the Ministry of Justice. He criticised the conservative nature of Japan's judicial system, claiming that providing copies of the court's verdict only to the club members would restrict freelancers' press freedom and promote inequalities between the two groups of journalists.

Martin Fackler, former Tokyo bureau chief of the New York Times, has also harshly criticised the role of kisha club journalists in the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster. Fackler revealed that kisha club members in the local authorities in Fukushima prefecture had disappeared after the earthquake. For Fackler, it was understandable that journalists had freedom to escape from the disaster, but it was unfair to local people near the exploded nuclear plant, who had no idea about their own security due to concealment of information by the Japanese media under pressure from the government. Fackler accused the government and Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) of concealing the System for Prediction of Environmental Emergency Dose Information (SPEEDI), and as a result, the great extent of the spread of radiation. However, articles written by freelancers and journalists from abroad do not appear in the major newspapers that most Japanese read on a regular basis.

Interviews with journalists have provided a glimpse of the practice of distinguishing between two groups of journalists under the banner of press freedom. A cosy relationship between authorities and affiliated journalists encouraged by the institution of kisha clubs has created a structure in which journalists must take the side of the authorities and share similar values and norms with them. This has also produced a huge gap in the accessibility of information between insider and outsider journalists.

Nobody could provide a reasonable excuse to provide information only to club members while restricting it to outsiders who genuinely seek free speech, which is surely a benefit for any kind of journalist. Interviews have shown clearly that the media in Japan is only a device for providing favoured information and concealing inconvenient data for authorities, and the journalists at kisha

Free Speech Debate

Thirteen languages. Ten principles. One conversation.

<https://freespeechdebate.com>

clubs do not play the role of “watch dogs” against those in power. This requires us to reconsider what journalism really means in Japan.

In November 2015 the Japanese government canceled an official visit of David Kaye, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression. Despite the fact that some of the affiliated journalists themselves are strongly against the kisha clubs institution, we are still far from the disruption of this information oligopoly.

Kimiko Kuga is undertaking the DPhil in Politics, the Department of Politics and International Relations at University of Oxford.

Published on: April 8, 2016