

An earlier version of this paper appeared in the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 19:2 (2004).

Empowerment as a Universal Ethic in Global Journalism

Delivered to the United Nations University Global Seminar:
Globalization and Cultural Diversity
Kanazawa, Japan
November 24, 2007

By Tom Brislin, Ph.D.
Academy for Creative Media
University of Hawaii

Aloha.

It's a pleasure to speak before you today at the United Nations University's Seminar on Globalization and Cultural Diversity. As I look out at our distinguished gathering, I realize that we are a microcosm here in Kanazawa of globalization and cultural diversity. I have the privilege of living in one of the most culturally diverse places in our world – Hawai'i. And the cultural diversity that makes this island so beautiful is due to its very early entry into a globalized relationship with such nations as Japan, China, the Philippines, Korea, Puerto Rico, the Portuguese Azores, as well as the United States in the 1800's and early 1900's to bring agricultural workers for the once-great sugar and pineapple plantations.

These diverse groups formed their own culture – one of the first globalized cultures – that was marked by its own common language – Pidgin, or more formally called Hawaiian Creole; its own food that will combine sashimi, chow mein, kim chee, lumpia, and poi with lomi lomi salmon on the same plate; it's own humor – a necessary glue to hold together any culture; and its own set of social mores, myths and norms of behavior that also reflect its rich, intercultural mix that draws from all sectors of the globe.

Hawai'i and Japan have enjoyed a unique and historic relationship, with much of Hawai'i's ethnic Japanese population tracing its roots to Hiroshima and Fukuoka Province. Hiroshima and Honolulu are sister cities. I'm proud to have been part of linking the University of Hawai'i with Hiroshima City University's annual Global Peace Seminar. I have also been an active scholar in examining the structure, standards, and operations of the Japanese Press, which I hope will have bearing on my discussion with you today on some principles of global ethics in a medium – Journalism – of global importance in our lives.

Globalization today is a much different and much more complex process than Hawai'i's historic absorption and assimilation of diverse cultures. It is driven by economic forces of market economies, and by advances in communication technology that link us in ways that have made us become interdependent. Globalization has been good for the people of many countries that have been forced out of isolationism or extreme regionalization if they want to become a meaningful player in the world economy. It has meant these countries have had to make some improvements in human rights as the price of admission to this high-yield economic club.

But the discontents and critics of globalization have asked a key question: Have people been granted greater rights to be citizens, or merely consumers? Critics have also cautioned that Globalization is too often meant to be Westernization, with a resulting imposition of Western political and economic structures, values, and operational standards. Does the process of Globalization mean we are forced to give up our cultural and social values, traditions and meanings in exchange for a world model based on the commercial, but not always social, success of the West – particularly the U.S.

Western-style journalism has been acclaimed as a model for global journalism, but for the most part by Western-style journalists and scholars. Certainly the technology that has driven advances in journalism in North America and Western Europe has been adopted and adapted across the world. Even the smallest islands in the Pacific are capable of desktop-based publishing for both traditional and electronic web-based distribution.

With that production technology is an assumed template of a standardized form, content and approach to the production of news and the production of meaning in journalism as well. The dominance of a few American and Western European media corporations in providing international coverage also assumes they sever as a positive role model for newspaper, news magazine and broadcast journalism that local outlets will follow in the thought that consistency carries the cachet of credibility: “If I look like them and do news the way they do it, audiences are more likely to believe me.”

As an example, I recently completed a study with my colleague Dr. Yasuhiro Inoue comparing U.S. and Japanese journalism standards in the coverage of youth crime. Japanese media are strict in not naming any youthful offender, regardless of the severity of the crime, including multiple murder, under the age of 20. The U.S. standard is that there is no standard. Different newsrooms adopt different policies that are easily bypassed depending on the profile of the crime, the victim, or the youthful offender. As a result, while Japanese journalism may protect the identity of the youth, based on a national standard that is an outgrowth of national values toward youth, the name might easily be released by CNN, the BBC, STAR, the International Herald Tribune, or the international editions of the Wall Street Journal or USA Today.

How, then, are national journalism systems to maintain their own values and standards in the face of globalized and transnational satellite and internet news services for whom national boundaries – physical and cultural – are meaningless?

Like a giant ocean liner – or battleship - Globalization has steamed forward, full speed ahead, across national economies and communication systems. In the process, Globalization has churned up in its wake a re-evaluation of standards in numerous enterprises, including journalism. In some ways this is because of external forces, such as the European Union's dictates for free press systems in the nations of the former Soviet bloc that now seek to become members. In other ways, it is internal forces within the profession, and from the scholars of media, searching for a universal journalism ethic that will elevate the profession above being merely the providers of propaganda.

The search for a universal journalism ethic, however, has often ended with the attempt to import traditional and underlying Western libertarian “free press” values, such as objectivity and an adversarial platform between the journalist and government, forged in Enlightenment philosophy. This belief of the universal portability of Western values is often misplaced. Scholars admonish that universal does not mean uniformity, and that modernization through globalization is not equal to Westernization. They warn of the futility of attempting to fit indigenous and national cultural values into a Procrustean bed¹ of Western economic or political design.

The Procrustean Bed is one of my favorite analogies. It comes from Greek mythology where **Procrustes**, a bandit, had an iron bed in his hideaway on which he invited every

traveler to lie down. If the guest proved too tall, he would amputate the excess length; if the victim was found too short, he was then stretched out on this rack until he fit. Nobody would ever fit in the bed, so all were subject to death. If you're familiar with the myth, it was Theseus who finally put an end to Procrustes – by making him lie down in his own bed.

Today we use Procrustean Bed to mean an arbitrary standard to which exact conformity is forced, with the resultant loss of individuality, context and values. This is not what we want journalism to become.

We must first re-examine the fundamental purpose and priorities of journalism and recognize there are many roads – and many beds – in which they can be achieved. It seems fairly safe to say that there is agreement that a fundamental purpose of journalism is to inform. I'd also like to advance the idea that information is inherently truthful. Otherwise it becomes misinformation.

In most contemporary societies embracing the market economy, individual entrepreneurialship and increased education to build a more highly skilled workforce, there is a concomitant drive to create a more transparent government and an informed citizenry that is better capable of engaging in the processes of government. Journalism becomes the key to both maintaining that transparency and providing an information base to the citizenry to engage in both the government and the economy at higher levels.

We have certainly seen cases in history where the press, usually controlled by a government, has been used to misinform its own people. And we know that we have

¹ A **Procrustean bed**, from Greek mythology, is an arbitrary standard to which exact conformity is forced.

contemporary cases of governments making decisions of which information it wants its people to know, while keeping from them information it wants to maintain itself, and the press system is compliant in those government wishes.

In the first case we have a clear case of unethical conduct – intentional deception – carried out by a collusion between government and press to disempower the people. In the second case we have a press system that has not yet reached its full function and has not yet realized its fundamental purpose or potential. As a result, it has not reached its higher ethical state, as it is compliant in keeping its people perhaps not in the dark, but certainly in the shadows.

This is not to say that press and government have to be at completely at odds, like the traditional Western adversarial model. There are multiple models of citizen-press-government relationships that grow legitimately out of indigenous value systems and are sustainable and enduring within the forces of globalization. While the U.S. press has developed this completely arms length relationship with its government, other systems, such as South Korea, have developed a closer tie while still remaining independent – an outgrowth of a Confucian model of relationships rather than a Libertarian one.

This does not mean the search for a universal journalism ethic should be abandoned to the morass of cultural relativism, where we simply accept “what is” as “what should be” without any analysis or criticism. Rather we should look to where a new grounding should be established and new focal points enumerated for what we should reasonably expect from journalism in a globalized context.

The traditional grounding in this search for a globalized ethic in journalism is Truth. Honest gathering of facts, objective analysis, and a truthful dissemination. While I can't argue against Truth as a fundamental value, neither, it seems, does anyone else. All journalists, all press systems – even all governments stake their claim to the truth and their own telling of it. No one says they intentionally lie or misinform. All claim to be purveyors of truthful information. Truth, as we have discovered over the ages, is a slippery concept to define and measure.

As we have discussed, Globalization has produced several major paradigm shifts in world societies, not the least of which is increasing degrees of autonomy of both the individual and the citizenry to encourage a wider participation in both the governing and economic process. This suggests that a new focal point of journalism ethics should be **Empowerment** – the degree to which a society's journalism is designed to empower the citizenry to increase its control of its own destiny for its own betterment, rather than the degree to which journalism creates a passive audience of consumerism.

An ethic of Empowerment would suggest a more usable, a more practical, a more measurable, and therefore a more definable universal standard in global journalism. It is universal in its appeal, without the necessity of it being uniform in its application. An ethic of Empowerment can both reflect the changes of globalization and respect indigenous value systems. A principal structural measurement of this global ethic should be the degree of autonomy the journalist enjoys, within legal, cultural and professional limits.

Autonomy is a critical defining difference between a propagandist and a journalist. Although truth telling is certainly regarded as the prime imperative of Western journalists

and even heralded as a university imperative by international journalist organizations, it is autonomy that in direct proportion makes the reporting and disclosure of truths possible.

Although truth is an admirable imperative, it is also a spongy one – difficult to measure and subject to multiple claims and self-justifying interpretations. Autonomy, on the other hand, is equally admirable and somewhat easier to measure. An argument can be reasonably made that the autonomy of journalists is reflective of the autonomy of the citizenry in any given nation. Autonomy empowers journalists to practice their professionalism, which in turn offers the potential to empower the citizenry.

Professionalism itself is, of course, empowering, as it allows the journalist to hold to values that are not subsumed by the prevailing system – whether rampant capitalism or state-directed authoritarianism.

Journalists, within their professional roles, make scores of micro-decisions that whittle the core of truth, that select the frame through, and angle from, which it will be seen, the amount that will be revealed, the tone in which it will be presented, and how it will be summarized, punctuated, edited, packaged, and delivered. Journalists deal in truth as a raw material in the production of meaning through storytelling. The degree to which they put truth through these journalistic processes for the purpose of empowering their constituents is a measurable ethic. Even in the most open of democratic societies, news media can inform with truthful dispatches without empowering. The U.S. news media's fascination with Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears – the modern equivalent of Shakespeare's three witches casting their spell of "Double, double, toil and trouble" – is a tribute to informing without empowering. To entertainment without insight.

This is an information function that does not measure up to the fundamental purpose of journalism to enlighten the citizenry so that they can better control their own relationship with their government and society to better enjoy its benefits. We all want to live the better life. Watching the misfortunes of the rich and famous doesn't make our fortunes any better.

Many critics of the U.S. press system are dismayed not only by this infatuation with celebrity gossip masquerading as news, but also by changes in the essential structure that have resulted in the loss of overseas bureaus; the reduction of journalists in the newsroom; a cynicism that emphasizes problems rather than solutions, that treats politics and governance as a spectator sport rather than a participant sport. Despite its rich tradition in free press and an adversarial posture to government, the U.S. press is becoming suspect in shifting its emphasis of treating its audience as active citizens to treating them as passive consumers; and shifting its allegiance to Wall Street, where investors play, rather than Main Street, where the real people live.

Can the adoption of Empowerment as an ethical imperative, as a fundamental duty, refocus U.S. journalism to its historic primary goal? We can hope.

Let us turn our attention, as we conclude, from the U.S. to the Japanese press system and examine whether our dual principles of Empowerment and Journalist Autonomy have application.

The Japanese Constitution, including Article 21 guaranteeing freedom of expression, including the press, was a template designed by the U.S. General Headquarters, or GHQ. It was the model of an imposed Westernization. Like many of the GHQ directives, it imposed a value system based on individualism onto a culture with a rich tradition of collectivism. It

also imposed a value system based in libertarian democracy onto a society that had put ultimate faith in a hierarchical leadership. The clash of these particular two cultural value bases resulted in an operating compromise that placed considerable power in a mid-point: the Nihon Shinbun Kyokai – NSK, established in 1946 – the year of my birth.

Through NSK the press club, or Kisha Kurabu, system was reintroduced and reinforced. The Kisha system has numerous critics both inside and outside of Japan. It has positive functions of maintaining government transparency by its placement of clubs in every level and office of government. It has positive functions as well of making information widely available, without giving undue privilege to the elite press while marginalizing or ignoring the regional and local press.

It is also criticized for negative functions of discouraging individual initiative, thus reducing the benefits that competition can bring to the marketplace of ideas and information. Membership in a Kisha club requires a loyalty to the club similar to what we see in movies about joining the Mafia. If you violate the club rules, you and your news agency suffer bitter sanctions and perhaps expulsion.

Because of the rigid structure of the Kisha clubs, true journalistic enterprise and investigative reporting often happens outside of the mainstream member newspapers and television outlets. It is the news magazines, and online news sources as well, that break important, and sometimes-scandalous stories.

Using our measuring stick of Journalistic Autonomy and Citizen Empowerment, how do we rate the Kisha Kurabu system of Japanese journalism? Does the journalist abdicate, or give up, too much autonomy to become a member of a Kisha club? Does the collective action

of the Kisha clubs and the government in denying information to non-members constitute a breach in the responsibility to Empower. Do the Kisha clubs exist to maintain the power sharing of the government and the press, rather than transferring that power to the citizenry to affect the direction of, and sometimes changes in, government?

These are arguments you can perhaps address in your discussion groups.

The increased pace of Globalization, the growing economic competition from its Asian neighbors, and its desire to claim a larger place in the determination of both its own and world affairs, has inspired Japanese leaders to re-examine whether the Kisha system is an asset or liability in making some of the fundamental structural changes needed to face a more dominant social, economic and global future. I would heartily endorse that re-examination and suggest that a system that allows for more Journalistic Autonomy will result in greater Citizen Empowerment, while retaining a respect for social and cultural values.

I thank you for this opportunity to discuss my theories and observations. My good friend and noted futurist, Jim Dator of the University of Hawai'i is fond of saying the only thing we know for sure about predicting the future is that we'll be wrong. I embrace that notion. Rather than trying to second-guess the future, I'd prefer to build a foundation of values that will embrace our global connections and preserve our cultural diversity, wherever the future might take us.

Mahalo and Domo Arigato.

Selected References

Brislin, T. (2007). “Kids and crime: A comparative study of youth coverage in Japan and the U.S.,” with Yasuhiro Inoue, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 24:1. 3-17. And “*Nichi-bei janarisuto no shonen hanzai houdou ni taisuru ishikisa to sono youinno kousatsu*” (Difference in Japanese and American journalists’ opinions about juvenile crime) with Yasuhiro Inoue, *Hiroshima Journal of International Studies*, 11 (2005), pp 179-194.

_____ (2005). “Globalization brings opportunities to re-evaluate the press club system of journalism in Japan,” *Doshisha Journal of Media & Communication Research*. No. 2 . 260-268.

_____ (2004). “Empowerment as a Universal Ethic in Global Journalism,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*. 19:2. 130-137.

_____ (2003). “Anti-Semitic articles and books not uncommon in Japan,” *Japan Media Review*, 9/26/2003. <www.ojr.org/japan/media/1064022502.php>.

_____ (1997). *An update on journalism ethics in Asia: Values and practice as context for meaning in Japan, China, and Korea*. Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, Washington, D.C.

Cooper, T., Christians, C., et al. (1989) *Communication ethics & global change*. New York: Longman.

Gamble, A. & Watanabe, T. *A public betrayed: An inside look at Japanese media atrocities and their warnings to the west*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery.

Huntington, S. (1996). *The clash of civilizations: Remaking of world order*. New York: Touchstone.

Merrill, J. (1991). *Global journalism: Survey of international communications* (2nd ed.). New York: Longman.

Tsukamoto, S. (2006). *Social Responsibility Theory and the Study of Journalism Ethics in Japan*, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 21:1. 54-68.