INTRODUCTION

A popular government without popular information
or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue
to a Farce or a Tragedy, or perhaps both.
Knowledge will forever govern ignorance.

*James Madison*

Journalism is essentially a state of
consciousness, a way of apprehending,
of experiencing the world.

*James W. Carey*

Something remarkable happened to Japan's commoners, or *minshū*,
during the Meiji era. In 1868, at the period's outset, the vast major-
ity of them were subjects and nothing more, as far removed from
the government, in journalist Tokutomî Sohô's words, "as heaven
is from hell." When his august majesty died forty-five years later,
in 1912, their grandchildren were displaying the characteristics of
modern citizens: writing letters to newspaper editors to discuss
debates in the legislature, marching in the streets by the tens of
thousands to demand lower streetcar fares and an aggressive foreign
policy, using phrases such as "constitutionalism" and "the people's
will" as if they were second nature. And when they shouted, the
governors usually responded—despite the fact that most of these
*minshū* had no vote, no legal means for expressing their will, until
the 1925 enactment of universal male suffrage.

Scholars have looked in a number of directions to explain this
rapid transformation. The steady spread of education and literacy
often has been cited, as have the creation of modern political insti-
tutions, the early extension of communications networks to remote
towns, the successful efforts of political activists to get citizens to
demand “popular” rights, even the expansion of capitalist economic structures. This study focuses its lenses elsewhere. Without denying the importance of education, political movements, or economic transformation, it contends that no single institution did more to create a modern citizenry than the Meiji newspaper press, a collection of highly diverse, private voices that provided increasing numbers of readers—many millions, in fact, by the end of Meiji—with both a fresh daily picture of the world and a changing sense of their own place in that world. The papers also offered a repertoire of the ideas and actions that would be needed if commoner protests were to take on public significance. An understanding of the press’ role in leading the “people” thus becomes a prerequisite to any full explanation of Meiji development. And, it seems safe to add, a study of the press’ behavior in nineteenth-century Japan also should tell us much about the role newspapers can be expected to play in the evolution of modern societies more generally.

This study’s second theme is the reverse impact the minshū had on the Meiji press. The change in the people’s political consciousness was matched, perhaps even exceeded, by the dramatic evolution in Japan’s daily newspaper world in these years. From beginning to end, the mainstream editors and publishers harbored elitist political values: a deep commitment to Confucian paternalism, a desire to strengthen Japan’s age old symbols and creeds, a determination to extend the nation’s influence to foreign shores. The way they gave voice to those values, however, changed dramatically from the 1870s to the 1910s. In the early years, the Confucian orientation produced small, erudite papers marked by endless gray columns of dense political discussion. By the turn of the century, those same Confucian-bred editors were turning out dailies full of sensational feature stories, exposés of corruption and officials’ sex lives, serialized novels, and daily family columns. The late-Meiji papers had more political influence than ever, but their impact now stemmed from huge readership bases and the power of exposure more than from editorials and political discussions.

Fueling this change were the growing communities of urban minshū, people who had migrated from the countryside by the hundreds of thousands, bringing with them different skill levels, new values, new desires, and new markets. By mid-Meiji, nearly all of the newspaper owners and editors had become capitalists, made aware by experience that they could not put out a successful paper without resources sufficient to buy modern presses, pay reporters, and cultivate extensive communication channels. And
since resources were available from just two places, advertising and circulation, even the most patrician editors had been forced to cater to plebeian reading tastes—which meant revising their approach to journalism. One of the prime driving forces of the Meiji press was thus the increasing symbiosis between the papers and the *minshū.* From the people flowed circulation fees and a definition of what kind of journalism was commercially acceptable; from the papers came a fresh view of the world and a new sense of what it meant to participate in the public life of the nation. The newspapers, in other words, turned the people into citizens; the people turned the papers into mass media.

The impact of the urban masses is a particularly timely concern in our own day, as increasing numbers of observers worry about the influence of ever more sensationalized media on the social and moral fabric of society. That issue stimulated endless debate in the late Meiji world, too, as paper after paper found itself forced either to “turn vulgar,” as purist journalists contemptuously put it,\(^4\) or to wither away. The results were mixed, some salutary, some troubling, but not always in the ways lofty standard bearers expected. The popularization brought new intellectual life to millions and fresh approaches to editing, even while it undermined the essay form of journalism and darkened the front pages with crime. It is not at all clear, however, that popular journalism had much to do with the *minshū*’s changing “morals,” which upset so many of the old elites. And it is quite certain that the thought control patterns that began to haunt the last Meiji years stemmed less from the popularization of the press than from the strident nationalist rhetoric of elite essayists and the paranoia of the officials. Undoubtedly, an examination of the late-Meiji relationship between press and people will provide both new questions and new perspectives on the press-people issues that bedevil our own time.

This study benefits from several earlier accounts of how political consciousness developed outside the governing circles. Irokawa Daikichi, for example, has provided rich and provocative insights into the spread of constitutional ideas in the villages west of Tokyo and beyond; Roger Bowen’s work on popular rights (*jiyū minken*) activities in regions such as Fukushima to the north shows that the movement had roots in the provincial commoner classes, and studies by Mikiso Hane and Patricia Tsurumi of the modern underclass show varying levels of political consciousness among miners, factory workers, and rebellious peasants. For the later Meiji and early Taishō years, Shumpei Okamoto, Tetsuo Najita, Andrew Gor-
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don, and Michael Lewis all have published vivid accounts of riotous
crowds extending political consciousness into the streets, with
Gordon and Lewis in particular providing important insights into
just how politically sophisticated these mass demonstrators often
were. And Carol Gluck’s masterful, meticulous study of late-Meiji
ideology shows powerful, complex links between an elite world
trying to integrate the country through a *tennōsei* (emperor-system)
ideology and an ever larger, increasingly literate populace.⁵

Most of these works make occasional references to the press
and include newspapers among their sources; several suggest in
passing that the press had an impact on the process of citizen build-
ing; but none of them seriously analyzes the press’ role as a political
or social force. The same is true of the few English-language studies
that have been produced on individual editors and specific institu-
tional features of the Meiji press: John Pierson’s and Sinh Vinh’s
studies of Tokutomi, Kenneth Pyle’s look at Kuga Katsunan and
Miyake Setsurei, my own account of Fukuchi Gen’ichirō, D. Eleanor
Westney’s examination of Western influences on the Meiji press’
institutional development. Albert Altman has taken the press’
socializing role more seriously than others have, but just for the
early-Meiji years. The only possible exceptions, indeed the only
substantial English-language studies to examine Meiji journalism
as a whole, are press histories by Kisaburō Kawabe and Harry Emer-
son Wildes—and they appeared nearly three-quarters of a century ago
and dealt very little with the press-*minshū* question.⁶

One of the reasons for this lacuna in the English-speaking
world probably lies in the structures of academia, where press his-
tory has been undertaken largely by scholars in the field of journal-
ism and communications rather than by mainstream historians. Al-
though this does not gainsay the value of their works, it clearly
affects the questions and perspectives that are raised. Histories of
the American press, of which there are many, tend toward an insti-
tutional or intellectual focus, and the Japanese press has been ig-
nored almost completely. Indeed, even in Japan, where press history
remains fairly vibrant, the focus has been largely institutional. I am
deeply indebted not only to the meticulous work of former histo-
rions of the Meiji press such as Ono Hideo, Yamamoto Fumio,
Midoro Masaichi, and Nishida Taketoshi, but to the fresh approaches
and penetrating insights of such contemporary press historians as
Uchikawa Yoshimi, Yamamoto Taketoshi, Ariyama Teruo, Haru-
hara Akihiko, and Sasaki Takashi. Even they, however, have not ad-
dressed the press’ role in creating a modern citizenry systematically
or thoroughly. Uchikawa wrote four decades ago that the most serious gap in the field of Japanese press history was a study of the papers’ role as a social medium. That study has yet to be done.

The one societal question that has attracted considerable scholarly work, both in Japan and in the West, is the issue of freedom. English-language works by Lawrence Beer, Gregory Kasza, Richard Mitchell, and Jay Rubin illustrate the high degree of interest in the freedom question, an interest that has been present among Japanese scholars since the beginning of the modern era. Kasza in particular shows not only the continuous growth of government regulation across the prewar years but the comparability of Japan's case to increasing statism during that period in advanced countries everywhere. Beginning with the voluminous writings about hikka (press-law infractions) by Miyatake Gaikotsu, a host of Japanese historians and students of the press, including especially Midoro, Uchikawa, Okano Takeo, and Okudaira Yasuhiro, also have done detailed studies of press laws and the struggle for freedom. Many of them have taken a polemical approach, arguing vigorously for the removal of shackles on expression. Okano, for example, uses Fukuzawa Yukichi to argue that the first requisite of civilized government is “free will” (jishū nin'i), and Ono declares unabashedly that “those who would snatch away freedom and popular rights first take away the freedom to publish.” One of the most forceful polemicists is Midoro, who opens his history of the Meiji and Taishō press with the declaration:

In a constitutional government, freedom of discussion and assembly is the people's most important right. Without freedom of expression there can be no constitutional government. Freedom of expression brings constitutional government to perfection. . . . We must demand this freedom. A study of the history of the world's presses (genron) reveals clearly that people do not win freedom overnight.

No one should belittle the importance of these press freedom studies; to be a scholar is, almost by definition, to care about such matters and to abhor restraints on expression. But one wonders how much this preoccupation with the question of freedom springs from an Anglo-American, or at least a Western, scholarly bias, a tendency to evaluate the Japanese experience by the rubrics of Western intellectual discourse. That those rubrics speak to universal concerns is emphasized by the fact that so many Japanese press historians have come to employ them too. But they are inadequate for anyone wanting to see Japan’s historical development in its own
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terms. They prompt us too often to evaluate the Meiji press simplistically, as tamed and cowering (as it sometimes seems in Mitchell’s telling) or as courageous and cantankerous (as Midoro would have it). And even more seriously, they prompt us to stop short of a full-bodied analysis of the role the press has played in the broader unfolding of modern Japanese history. To ignore free press issues is to present an incomplete story; to talk only about those issues is to tell very little of the story at all.

One of the ironies of this focus on institutional history and freedom is that scholars in more contemporary fields—social scientists and communications analysts, for example—have been discussing for decades the multifaceted nature of the press’ role in a modern society. Newspapers, they have shown us, are first of all organizers and disseminators of information, shapers of public reality by the very news package that they put together each day. Journalists, says James Carey, “determine what the audience can think—the range of what is taken to be real on a given day. If something happens that cannot be packaged . . . in a fundamental sense, it has not happened.”14 Douglass Cater, studying the press in Washington, D.C., several decades ago, put it this way: “Each day hundreds of thousands of words are spoken, tens of dozens of events occur. The press and other media perform the arduous task of sorting out and assigning priorities to these words and events. This . . . constitutes a power far more formidable than the purely editorial preferences of the press.”15 The press, in other words, is a narrator, a storyteller whose decisions about what to ignore and what to include do far more to shape our vision of public reality than most of us realize, even as its tendency to marginalize “alternative, radical perspectives” leaves us with “the belief that the social and political structure is ‘natural’—the way things are.”16

Other communications students focus on the newspapers’ role as educators; they are what Paul Hirsch calls the “gate-keepers” of a society’s “ideas and symbols,” the teachers who acquaint their readers with the events, facts, people and concepts needed to make life meaningful.17 It was this role that so many of the early Meiji editors had in mind when they wrote editorials encouraging “civilized” people to eat meat and abstain from public nudity, this function the late Meiji writers were performing when they called the city’s first labor rallies, described the invention of airplanes, and talked about themselves as “shakai no bokutaku” [teachers of society].18

Papers are opinion shapers, too, not so much through their editorials as through their news columns—through an Asahi Shim-
bun account of subway sabotage by Aum Shinrikyō [Supreme Truth] leaders, for example, which makes readers clamor for increased police surveillance, or through an Associated Press picture of a naked girl fleeing a soldier in Vietnam, which turns weary Americans against the war. While research by scholars such as Paul Lazarsfeld and Wilbur Schramm suggests that editorial opinion columns have only limited impact in changing people’s well-entrenched ideas, other studies make it clear that the press plays a powerful role in shaping perceptions about new matters and issues, particularly in large urban areas. Often the press’ influence results in the reinforcement of existing values; at other times it nudges readers toward new values and options. But it never stops shaping our ways of looking at the world, whether we are conscious of that fact or not.

Scholars love to point out that the media also serve as guardians of the public interest. The nineteenth-century Irish parliamentarian Richard Brinsley Sheridan was grandstanding when he declared: “Armed with liberty of the press, I will go forth to meet [the minister] undismayed. . . . I will shake down from its heights corruption and bury it beneath the ruins of the abuses it was meant to shelter.” But his point was not a vacant one. The fundamental premise behind free press ideals is that public institutions need scrutiny from outsiders to evaluate their policies and to search out secret arrangements that violate public trust. It was this function that led to some of the Meiji press’ brightest moments: exposing corruption in the sale of government lands in Hokkaido, detailing the effects of copper pollution in the mines at Ashio. And it was this function that created the most heated tensions between nervous officials and the private scribes.

Wilbur Schramm, one of this century’s most thoughtful analysts of the press’ social role, says that the newspaper in a healthy society has three fundamental functions. It is a watchman [guarding the public interest by disseminating news], a policy shaper [introducing ideas and channeling debates], and a teacher [providing information and opinions]. In other words, the press is one of society’s more powerful social, political agents—not just a medium but an actor, a shaper, a mover—the kind of institution that caused 93 percent of Japanese households in the mid-1990s to subscribe to more than fifty-two million copies of newspapers daily. To look at its institutional growth or to focus on issues of freedom and control, while crucial, is simply not enough; for those topics fail to explain the press’ function in helping a modern society such as Japan to
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develop. It is with that fact in mind that this study sets out to examine the role the press played in creating a modern public as well as the way the new citizens changed the papers themselves.

Central to my argument is the contention that the Meiji press was, at its core, a popular medium—a tool of Confucian and capitalist elitists, perhaps; a mouthpiece for intellectuals and cabinet factions, certainly; what scholars have called an “equilibrium-sustaining, even conservative” legitimizer of conventional values much of the time—but the only public channel available for timely, ongoing intercourse between the minshū and the national establishment. Before the advent of electronic communication, no private institution had more immediacy or greater range than the newspaper; no voice could reach so many people so quickly. Thus, it was understood that people out of power, in Japan as elsewhere, would use the press to voice their concerns and to maneuver for influence. Those who wanted to publish newspapers may themselves have come from the elite strata, but more often than not, being private citizens, they regarded the “people” as their base. As the influential journalist Baba Tsunego wrote in the 1920s, “A newspaper reporter’s fundamental view of life (jinseikan) inculcates worship of the public and reverence for the people. Reporters dare not regard the people as fools.”

Thus, from the launching of the very first quasi-modern news sheets by diehard former Tokugawa supporters in 1868, editors talked about the need to write for commoners—or, as one put it, to publish materials, including illustrations, that would catch the attention of the “rustic public,” even of women and children. The first daily newspapers of the Meiji era were started as tools to speed the people along the path of “civilization and enlightenment” (bunmei kaika). By the seventh year of Meiji, most dailies were in the hands of vocal proponents of “representative” government who lambasted the government for dallying in the creation of a popular assembly. And as the era progressed, it was newspaper essays that ignited and heralded nearly every popular movement and rebellion. All of the popular rights chapters in the 1870s and 1880s, for example, used newspapers to spread their messages; Tanaka Shōzō began the antipollution crusade in Ashio as a reporter; the earliest socialist and labor crusades were promoted by reporters and editors; and in 1905 the press fueled the infamous rioting at Hibiya Park. In other words, leaders of all stripes—national and local, opposition and establishment—saw the press as a channel for reaching the people. And while the definition of “people” changed over time,
coming to include ever wider segments of the populace, from the very first it was the nongoverning groups whose voice the press pioneers wanted to amplify.

Yet the Meiji press also was an establishment institution. If the Meiji editors clasped hands with the people on one side, they welcomed the support of powerful officials and tycoons on the other. Leaders of the profession in the early Meiji years were ambitious, politically oriented intellectuals [at least three of them eventually became prime ministers]; at era’s end, the press’ best-known names were wealthy members of the business elite, and throughout the era all of the profession’s leading lights were state-oriented, emperor-loving nationalists. The very fact that they had the wherewithal and connections to publish newspapers and write editorials indicated that they were highly placed in society. But, unlike other members of the elite, their livelihoods depended on the outsiders who bought and read their papers. They were not satisfied merely to argue their ideas within the councils of state; they sought a wider voice. That was why many of the early writers forsook safe positions in the bureaucracy for the tempestuous world of journalism. And by mid-Meiji, when city masses had become the major source of circulation and revenue, they articulated the issues of the outsiders or their papers folded.

Before I turn to the body of the study, a few words are needed about this work’s particular emphases, limits, and contours. The study will concentrate, first, on the political role of the press. It will be necessary to include a good deal of discussion about the newspaper world’s institutional and intellectual evolution: the impact of personalities and ideas, the influence of technology and organization patterns, the rise of commercialism. But these will be examined in terms of their effect on journalism’s changing relationship with the minshū. Such discussions will serve, in other words, as a backdrop to the creation of a citizenry, not as the end of the story in themselves.

This focus on the press’ leadership of the masses also requires an emphasis on the national press, rather than the provincial papers that sprang up across the archipelago after the mid-1870s. “National” will be defined broadly, to include the presses of both Tokyo to the east and Osaka to the west, since the western giants, Asahi and Mainichi, broke ground for so many of the important Meiji press developments, particularly in the last half of the era. But I will sketch journalistic developments in other regions only in the broadest of strokes. I must admit to a certain sense of regret in taking this
approach, since provincial journalism played a significant role in the Meiji era. However, the central urban papers dominated early Japanese journalism both numerically and in terms of impact, more even than in other developing countries. Already in 1873, Japan had a “national” press, in the sense that the leading Tokyo and Yokohama newspapers were sent to every prefecture, where they shaped the political debate. The regions outside Kantō and Kansai, by contrast, developed their own newspapers more slowly.27 And when the provincial papers did begin to grow, the urban giants held sway over most of them, defining what constituted news, competing for readers even in the provincial papers’ own backyards, eventually swallowing up many of the smaller local newspapers. While serious study of strong regional and local papers such as the Fukuoka Nichi Nichi in Kyushu and Otaru Shimbun in Hokkaido is needed, space limitations and the dominance of the Tokyo-Osaka press preclude it here.

This study also focuses on the mainstream newspaper press. While using the word “press” for convenience, I concentrate on those publications generally categorized by Japanese scholars as “shimbun.” This classification includes some publications that came out irregularly in the early Meiji years, when terminology had not become fixed, but once technology had made movable type accessible, the capital’s “shimbun” nearly all became dailies.28 The effect of this delineation generally is to exclude magazines (zasshi), the more occasional periodicals that tended toward specialization of audience and content. My reason, again, is both theoretical and practical. In the early years of Meiji, most political discussion was carried on in the newspapers, and, even later in the era when the numbers of zasshi soared, the newspapers remained the primary vessels for communicating ideas and news with the general populace. There were exceptions, popular journals such as Kokumin no Tomo, Taiyō, and Nihonjin, but the magazines as a whole focused on more specialized groups (religious sects, politically conscious women’s groups, literary circles, economic elites). Though large in number, most were small in circulation, often rather short-lived.29 As a result, adequate treatment of the periodical press must be left for another study. The other news-oriented media, radio and television, simply did not exist in the period under discussion, with the dawn of radio broadcasting not coming until 1925 and TV not until 1953.30 The focus on mainstream journalism also means that extremist and fringe papers as well as the sensational, entertainment-oriented koshimbun of the early Meiji years are discussed only as
they exerted an influence on what opinion leaders of the time saw as the more influential, respectable press.

A final delineator relates to time. The Meiji years form the core of the study. Since imperial ascensions and deaths create artificial boundaries, however, I begin with an examination of the Tokugawa publishing legacy, which was considerable in terms of both volume and ideas, then look at the press in some detail from 1861 onward, when the country’s first private newspaper, the English-language *Nagasaki Shipping List and Advertiser*, appeared. The concluding date is more problematic, since the urban press in 1912 was a large engine gathering steam. For this reason, I also look briefly at the 1910s and early 1920s, a time in which most of the late-Meiji journalistic trends reached maturation. The heavy hand of the authorities during the 1918 rice riots, combined with the destruction of all but three Tokyo newspaper offices during the Kantō Earthquake of 1923, gave Japan quite a different press after the late Taishō years—and made mid-Taishō a somewhat more “natural” point of conclusion.

Moving to the smallest of detail, a few words about style may save the reader some mystification. Romanization of Japanese words generally follows *Kenkyusha’s New Japanese-English Dictionary* (an exception being the word *shimbun*, where the “m” has been used long enough and widely enough to have become standard), with macrons used over long vowels except in such well-known geographical names as Tokyo, Osaka, Hokkaido, and Kyushu, in words that have attained sufficient English-language usage to be included in standard dictionaries (e.g., daimyo, shogun), and in quotations from which the macrons were omitted in the original. Dates, including those before Japan switched to the Gregorian calendar in 1873, have been rendered according to their equivalent in the Western calendar. Personal names are given in standard Japanese form (surname first) unless they were used otherwise in the source of the quotation. Notes omit translations of Japanese titles, since they can be found in the bibliography. And the names of newspapers have not been translated unless the translation has something special to tell us, on the grounds that English renderings of newspaper names usually are more quaint than useful.