

An Examination of Press Freedom Erosion in Japan during the Initial Phase of COVID-19

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Abstract

Inspired by the indicators of the Pandemic Project in V-Dem, this study goes beyond the macro data to explore the actual situation of the local media environment, especially news newspapers in Japan. Through content analysis, this study examines the intervention of the Japanese government on reporters in the initial stage of COVID-19. The government's restrictive measures are not simply a temporary emergency response, but a manifestation of preexisting fragility in the structural dependence caused by the *Kisha club* (Press club) and the increasing political pressure from the Abe administration. This study identified seven different government interventions and revealed polarized media responses through content analysis of 28 related articles from four major national newspapers. The ability of newspapers to cater to or monitor government divisions weakens oversight. This is not just a matter of different editorial lines and positions; this is a predictable result of years of sustained political pressure.

Keywords: Japanese press freedom, Government intervention, COVID-19, V-Dem, Content analysis

1. Introduction

COVID-19 is a major crisis that has far-reaching impacts on all aspects of the world. In many countries, the state of emergency became a pretext for governments to tighten their grip on information and curtail civil liberties, with freedom of the press often being among the casualties (Kolvani, Lundstedt, Maerz, Lührmann, Lachapelle, Grahn & Edgell 2020). In this international context, as a long-standing stable liberal democracy, Japan is not expected to exhibit significant democratic regression, especially since relevant research

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indicates that this pandemic did not deal a severe blow to democracy (Hellmeier, Cole, Grahn, Kolvani, Lachapelle, Lührmann, Maerz, Pillai & Lindberg 2021). Yet, the initial phase of the pandemic saw the government of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo face both domestic and international criticism for its treatment of the press (RSF 2020a). This concern was quantitatively captured by the V-Dem Institute's PanDem project, which reported "widespread" government restrictions on media access in Japan during 2020 (V-Dem n.d. a). The external indicators raised a crucial issue: were these restrictions a temporary and justifiable response to an emergency, or did they signal a deeper fragility in the democratic structure of Japan?

This study contends that these external concerns did not arise out of nowhere. To understand the events of 2020, one must consider two pre-existing conditions that have long shaped Japan's media landscape. The first is the structural feature of the *Kisha club* system, an institution often criticized for fostering an overly close relationship between major media outlets and the state (Higuchi 1993). The second is the more recent political context of the second Abe administration (2012-2020), a defining feature of this period was the intensified political pressure exerted on critical media outlets (Nishida 2015). Before the pandemic began, a media environment susceptible to government influence had already taken shape, and these two points are the key elements this study focuses on.

This study argues that the restrictive actions against the press during the COVID-19 pandemic were not an Abnormal phenomenon, but an acute manifestation of these pre-existing structural and political fragilities. To support this argument, this study selected and analyzed the content of 457 articles published in the four major newspapers, Asahi, Mainichi, Yomiuri, and Nikkei, in the first three quarters of 2020. The analysis will identify the specific actions of government interference and, by coding the articles for their stance, reveal a deep polarization in the media's response. The findings demonstrate how government pressure fragmented the press's collective watchdog function.

2. Literature Review

This study is situated at the crossings of media studies and Japanese area studies. It responds to external indicators showing an erosion of press freedom in Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic by examining the specific mechanisms of government interference and media responses. To establish the context for this

analysis, this review first outlines the findings of the V-Dem PanDem project, which served as the initial driving force behind this study. It then goes into the two critical contexts essential for understanding the findings, the long-standing structural weakness of the Japanese media landscape, embodied by the *Kisha club* system, and the political pressures that intensified especially under the second Abe administration.

2.1 The V-Dem PanDem Survey as an External Alarm Bell

The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project is a globally recognized academic initiative that provides one of the most inclusive databases on democratic quality worldwide. It distinguishes between five high-level principles of democracy—electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian—and measures them using over 600 indicators (V-Dem n.d. b). Its data is widely used by international organizations and scholars as a key reference for tracking democratic developments.

V-Dem expands the Pandemic Backsliding Project (PanDem) to track and evaluate how national democracies shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic. PanDem collected data from 144 countries to focus on 7 categories of democratic violations, including restrictions on the media from March 2020 to June 2021 (V-Dem n.d. a). The project found that media restrictions were one of the most frequently observed forms of democratic backsliding globally during this period (Kolvani et al. 2020). Despite Japan's high ranking on the general Liberal Democracy Index (26th in 2019), the PanDem survey identified government restrictions on media access related to COVID-19 information in the second and third quarters of 2020. On a scale of 0, which means None or Few reports of government restriction, to 2, which means Widespread or Ongoing reports of government restriction, Japan received the score of 2 for both the second and third quarters, indicating significant restrictions (V-Dem n.d. a).

The PanDem assessment was based on a limited number of English-language sources, which included an article from the Asahi Shimbun (2020), a news report from Reporters Without Borders (RSF 2020b), and a statement from the Japan Federation of Newspaper Workers' Unions (Shinbun Roren 2020). These sources expose specific government actions:

- (1) Limiting the number of participating reporters.
- (2) Insufficient responses to reporters' questions.
- (3) Collecting and answering questions from reporters in advance.
- (4) Cancellation of press conferences.

These reports highlight the early challenges to press freedom in Japan, defined by government-imposed limitations on access and information dissemination during the pandemic's initial phase.

While the PanDem provided a crucial external signal that press freedom was limited in Japan, its reliance on a small set of sources highlights the need for a more in-depth, systematic verification using domestic primary sources. This study takes the PanDem findings as its starting point, seeking to empirically validate its claims and provide a more detailed understanding of the situation at that time to clarify what specific forms this government interference took, and how Japan's major newspapers, as key actors in the public sphere, responded to these pressures.

2.2 The *Kisha Club* System

The concerns raised by the PanDem project are rooted in the structure of a complex and symbiotic relationship system that has long been cultivated between Japanese media and the government. The *Kisha club* system, a century-old institution that structures the relationship between the press and the government. This club originated in 1890 as autonomous bodies of reporters organized to collectively demand access to information from the government (Higuchi 1993: 231; Omata 2010: 257). In its modern form, the *Kisha club* system functions as an "information cartel", which means it functions through a set of established rules that govern journalists' access to sources, effectively limiting the scope of reported news and restricting participation in the reporting process to an exclusive group (Freeman 2000: 4, 68). Its most criticized point is its exclusivity, a practice that severely limits the diversity of perspectives in reporting and creates a high barrier to entry for independent journalism. (Higuchi 1993: 233-235; Inoue 2011: 5). The European Union (EU) has officially protested the system as a "restraint on free trade in information" that denies foreign media firsthand access to news sources (Inoue 2011: 5). This exclusive access promoted the reporters and a deep dependence and non-confrontational relationship between the government (Inoue 2011: 6). To maintain their

privileged access, reporters often become hesitant to ask challenging questions or publish stories that could offend the officials they cover. This creates a rich ground for self-censorship and promotes a reporting style known as *happyoo* journalism, which means announcement journalism, where news consists primarily of transcribing official government statements without critical reprocessing (Omata 2010; RSF 2022). This symbiotic relationship is a key reason why the *Kisha club* system has persisted for more than a hundred years: It provides the government with a predictable, rapid channel for disseminating information, while also offering reporters a stable, abundant, and low-cost supply of information (Higuchi 1993: 241; Sigal 1973: 104-105). This institutional framework created a media environment already susceptible to government influence long before political pressures emerged during the COVID-19.

2.3 Government Control Over News Reporting During Emergencies

In Japan, states of emergency, whether caused by natural disasters or war, have historically served as a fuse for increased government control over the media. This control is achieved through a dual approach of direct legal measures and management of information flows.

This pattern was established during the 1923 Great Kantou Earthquake. In the ensuing chaos, the government used widespread rumors of Korean riots as an excuse to declare martial law, subsequently implementing strict censorship under the Newspaper Law to prohibit any reports deemed a threat to “public peace,” including accurate reporting on the vigilante massacres of Koreans (Kasza 1988: 41; Maruyama 2011: 40-45). This event set a precedent for state intervention in the name of public order in modern times.

The most instructive modern precedent is the government’s response to the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and the Fukushima nuclear disaster. The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government at the time was severely criticized for a lack of transparency after attempting to downplay the severity of the crisis alongside Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) (Murai, Kingston & Burrett 2022: 102-103). Moreover, the government delayed two months to officially admit that a nuclear meltdown had occurred, long after independent experts and foreign media had pointed to this reality (Ooshima 2011: 69). During this period, the mainstream media’s reliance on official announcements distributed through the *Kisha clubs* meant that these critical omissions were not adequately challenged,

causing a significant erosion of public trust in both the government and the press (Xia 2017: 5).

In addition, the most recent major crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, drove a structural shift in how press conferences are conducted, fundamentally altering the balance of power between the press and news sources. Because the necessity of social distancing led to the popular adoption of online video conferences, these events moved outside the traditional framework of the *Kisha club*, where reporters typically held the initiative (Oomori 2021: 23, 27). Through online activities, the hosts have gained greater control over new information, allowing them to unilaterally select journalists, filter queries, and use restrictive conditions to prevent the spread of information. These issues are usually under the pretext of technical or public health problems (Oomori 2021). Each emergency, therefore, has not only measured the relationship between the government and the press but has also contributed to an expanding means of government management techniques through procedural and informational control.

2.4 Intensified Media Pressure under the Second Abe Administration

The Japanese media operated within a political context of intensified pressure during the second administration of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe from 2012 to 2020. This pressure is imposed through a combination of direct intervention, legislative tools, and fostering alternative online media fields. The Abe administration introduced controversial laws, like the 2013 State Secrets Act, which drew criticism for infringing on press freedom by allowing for the potential prosecution of reporters for revealing vaguely defined “state secrets” (Murai et al. 2022: 105; Repeta 2014; Stockwin 2017: 112). The administration also exerted control over personnel, most notably by appointing an ally, Katsuto Momii, as the chairman of the public broadcaster NHK, who subsequently stated that broadcasters’ reporting should not deviate from the government’s official position (Sunagawa 2016: 30). Leveraging the government’s power through “administrative guidance” and employing a strategy of selective access to friendly media, the government fostered media polarization that weakened the media’s function as a check on power (Sunagawa 2016: 32; Nishida 2015). Numerous studies by journalists and scholars have documented the multifaceted pressures faced by the media during this period as above (Suzuki 2015; Tajima 2019). Of course, media criticism of the Abe administration persisted rather than

disappearing entirely, as evidenced by coverage of the Moritomo and Kake Gakuen scandals (Nishimura 2017).

Above all, by the time the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020, the Japanese media landscape was already operating in a high-pressure environment. The structural dependency created by the *Kisha club* system, combined with years of intensified political pressure from a historically stable and powerful administration, had created a climate of caution and self-censorship. The pandemic provided a new context—a state of emergency—in which these preexisting structural and political issues may manifest in new and acute ways.

2.5 Research Gap

While research has thus highlighted Japan's structural media issues and recent political pressures, a gap remains in empirically analyzing how these preexisting problems manifested during the global public health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. How the government used the "state of emergency" to manage information and how different news media outlets reacted remains under-examined. The unique contribution of this study, therefore, lies in its empirical approach to this specific juncture. By combining a macro-level external indicator from V-Dem with a micro-level textual analysis of major domestic newspapers, this study provides the first systematic investigation of the Japanese government's interference practices through newspapers during the initial phase of the pandemic. This approach not only validates the concerns raised by V-Dem but also adds crucial texture and on-the-ground detail to its macro-level findings. It also reveals how different newspapers responded to these pressures, offering a detailed snapshot of media-state relations in a time of crisis.

To bridge this gap and provide the scientific inquiry mentioned above, this study constructs its inquiry around the mechanisms of state control and the corresponding media responses.

This study aims to address the following two questions:

- (1) What were the aspects of government intervention in the initial phase of COVID-19 for the freedom of the press?
- (2) What was the attitude of the major newspapers toward the intervention of the free press?

3. Methodology

The primary data for this study consists of ten press conferences held by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe between February 29 and August 28, 2020.

This timeline was strategically chosen to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Abe administration's communication during the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, beginning with the first major press conference on the crisis and concluding with the announcement of his resignation in August, according to written records from The World and Japan Database provided by the University of Tokyo's Institute of Oriental Culture (Tanaka n.d.). The core of this period, Q2 and Q3 2020, aligns with findings from the V-Dem Institute, which identified heightened government interference with press freedom at that time. By extending the scope to include the pandemic's outset, this study can examine the evolution of the government's narrative from the very beginning of the public health emergency.

3.1 Type of Media Analyzed and Sources

Four major national newspapers in Japan, the Asahi Shimbun, the Mainichi Shimbun, the Yomiuri Shimbun, and the Nikkei (the Nihon Keizai Shimbun), were analyzed, focusing on coverage in the "Tokyo edition" of each newspaper. The Tokyo Honsha edition, which is the headquarters, is usually the main edition of the newspaper, and its content and editorial policies are the most representative and most influential as they best reflect the stance and viewpoint of the newspaper.

For data collection, the online databases of each newspaper were utilized, specifically the following databases:

- (1) Asahi Shimbun: Asahi Shimbun Cross Search
- (2) Mainichi Shimbun: Mainichi Shimbun Cross Search
- (3) Yomiuri Shimbun: Yomidas History Museum
- (4) Nikkei: Nikkei Telecom

There is no denying that newspapers still have a strong influence in Japan. Japanese newspapers remain among the best in the world in terms of both circulation and penetration. Also, newspapers continue to be recognized as a more reliable way for the public to access information and remain a major source

of information, according to the results of Asahi Shimbun’s “2023 Comprehensive Survey on Newspaper and Internet Usage.”

By studying press freedom through the various positions and views represented in the Japanese press, multiple perspectives on each position, style of reporting, and attitude toward this agenda were expected to be seen.

3.2 Data Collection

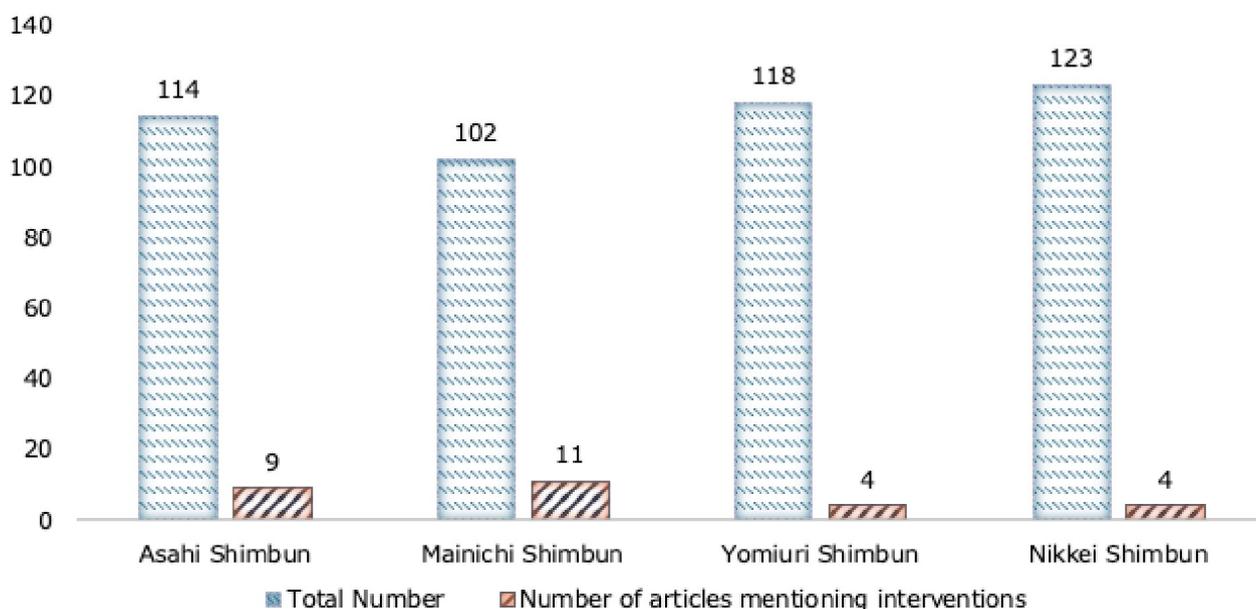


Figure 1: Number of Press Coverage of Abe Cabinet Press Conferences (Source: Compiled from databases of four newspaper companies.)

To collect data, the search was conducted in each database using the query “Abe & press conference” in Japanese, and relevant news articles were extracted and included in the analysis. Articles in the morning and evening newspapers over one week from the day of the press conference were counted and analyzed.

First, the number of news articles on the press conference in each newspaper (Figure 1) is counted, and which newspaper that provided the most coverage is compared. 457 articles about Prime Minister Abe’s ten press conferences held between February 29 and August 28, 2020, were retrieved. The location of the article, headline, text, etc., and the length of the article are also analyzed.

Attempting to unravel RQ1 through the lens of reality, first, the relevant news content was examined. After gaining a comprehensive understanding of the

relevant news content, I first developed a coding framework (Table 1). This framework categorizes specific restrictive actions identified in news reports based on the types of action restrictions mentioned in V-Dem. Subsequently, each relevant report was coded according to the following definitions.

No.	Category	Coding Criteria	Examples
1	Limiting the number of participating reporters	Article clearly mentions a limit on the number of attendees.	① "restricted to 29 individuals" ② "limitation on the number of people"
2	Cancellation of press conferences	Article describes a press conference being ended prematurely or notes official excuses.	① "the press conference was cut short" ② "time limit" ③ "having another appointment"
3	Lack of Information Sharing	Article points out an unusually long period without a press conference.	① "had not held a briefing for nearly two months"
4	Insufficient responses to reporters' questions	Article uses phrases describing inadequate answers from the official side.	① "insufficient responses", "failing to adequately answer" ② "the explanation was insufficient"
5	Collecting and answering questions from reporters in advance	Article describes a system of pre-submission or advance collection of questions.	① "collecting questions in advance", ② "collecting questions in advance"
6	Not answering questions directly	Article describes the press conferences avoiding sensitive questions or not answering directly.	① "not answering directly"
7	Answering questions in writing only and not making them public	Article mentions answers were provided in writing and notes that the answers were not initially made public.	① "answered in writing"

Table 1: Categories and Criteria for Analyzing Press Freedom Restrictions

In addition to classifying the type of interference, this study also coded each article for its overall attitude toward the government's restriction actions. This second layer of coding helps to answer RQ2 concerning the different stances of the major newspapers. The analysis used the following four categories, with specific criteria drawn from the source texts (Table 2):

No.	Stance	Coding Criteria	Examples
1	Critical	The article explicitly expressed an opposing view or used negative language.	①Direct language: "criticize," "problem" ②Quoting criticism: Citing a mayor who called a press conference a speech ③Describing protest: Reporters shouting, "Can you truly call this a press conference?"
2	Questionable	The article implied criticism without stating it directly, often by highlighting a contradiction.	①Juxtaposing the official reason for ending a conference, "having another appointment", with the fact that the PM "went straight home"
3	Neutral	The article reported facts without subjective or emotional language.	①Objective descriptions of rules, such as limiting attendance to "one reporter per media" or keeping seats "keep about 2 meters apart".
4	Compliant	The article described the government's actions in a positive way or offered a justification.	①Positive framing: Describing a long press conference as showing a "stance of explaining carefully" ②Uncritical reporting: Quoting the PM's promise that "freedom of the press will be protected" without any challenge.

Table 2: Definitions and Criteria for Coding Article Stance

4. Results

The content analysis of articles from the four major newspapers confirms the V-Dem project's concerns and reveals a clear polarization in how the government's actions were reported. While the newspapers published a total of

457 articles related to the Prime Minister’s press conferences during the studied period, only a small fraction, 28 articles in total, directly addressed the issue of government interference and restrictions on press freedom.

The results of the coding are summarized in Table 3, which shows which types of interference were reported by each newspaper. This table serves as the foundation for the detailed analysis that follows.

Category	Limitation on the number of reporters	Canceling the press conference	Lack of Information Sharing	Insufficient Question Answers	Collecting questions in advance	No straight answers	With written response
Asahi Shimbun	1	7	0	6	3	1	4
Mainichi Shimbun	3	5	3	3	0	0	2
Yomiuri Shimbun	1	2	0	3	0	0	1
Nikkei Shimbun	0	0	1	1	0	0	2
Total	5	14	4	13	3	1	9

Table 3: Interferences Included in Each Newspaper’s Coverage

4.1. Answering RQ1: Aspects of Government Intervention

The analysis identified seven distinct types of restrictive actions, validating reports of government interference. As shown in Table 3, the extent to which these actions were reported varied significantly across the newspapers. Most of the coverage took place in March, April, May with the August coverage reflecting analysis based on long-term observations. The articles are almost always published in the morning editions. The number of words varies considerably depending on the content of the article, and generally, objective descriptions of the situation are short. In addition, the articles are mainly published on the second and third pages and the political pages, but not on the front page.

Two forms of interference were the most widely reported: “Insufficient responses to reporters’ questions” and “Cancellation of press conferences.” The former was mentioned in reports by all four newspapers, while the latter was covered by three of the four, making them the most visible and commonly acknowledged issues. In contrast, more subtle forms of control received far less attention. The

practice of “Collecting and answering questions from reporters in advance” was reported exclusively by the Asahi Shimbun. Similarly, the act of “Not answering questions directly” was also a unique point of focus for Asahi.

The seven actions we observed can be divided into three broad categories: the first three: 1. Limiting the number of participating reporters; 2. cancellation of press conferences; 3. Lack of Information Sharing is a restriction on opportunity and access, limiting the physical and timely opportunities for journalists to access information sources and attend briefings. The 4th action: Insufficient responses to reporters’ questions, 5th Collecting and answering questions from reporters in advance, and 6th Not answering questions directly. These three actions are uniformly classified as the intervention in the questioning process that interfered with the core process of asking questions and receiving answers, thereby damaging the interactive nature of press conferences. The last 7th action: Answering questions in writing only and not making them public is seen as the restrictions on the format of information provision. Generally speaking, the above restrictive actions mainly limit the number of people and time, obstruct or even cut off the access to information.

4.2. Answering RQ2: Attitudes of Major Newspapers

The divide in media attitude is illustrated by the reporting. The Mainichi Shimbun and Asahi Shimbun were the most active, publishing 11 and 9 articles that discussed interference, respectively. Together, they accounted for 20 of the 28 total articles on this issue, over 70%. In contrast, the Yomiuri Shimbun and Nikkei dedicated significantly less content to the topic, with each newspaper publishing only 4 such articles. This quantitative difference was matched by a profound qualitative one. The Asahi Shimbun’s 8 places of the articles were consistently Critical or Questionable.

The Asahi Shimbun’s reports were rich with detail, describing scenes of protest where reporters shouted, “Can you truly call this a press conference?” or quoting critical third-party opinions like RenHo (A Japanese female politician) criticized “Why didn’t you demonstrate leadership yourself by continuing the press conference to respond to everyone’s voices”. Its way of expression is more direct and sharper.

Attitude	Critical	Questionable	Neutral	Compliant
Asahi Shimbun	6	2	5	0
Mainichi Shimbun	3	3	9	1
Yomiuri Shimbun	0	0	2	2
Nikkei Shimbun	0	1	2	1

Table 4: Attitudes According to Newspapers

The Mainichi Shimbun, with 6 places of articles, also took a critical stance but was often more measured. A significant portion of its coverage was classified as Neutral, focusing on objectively conveying information. Unlike the Asahi Shimbun, the Mainichi, on the one hand, reported an act of answering questions in writing and added the information that the briefing room of the Prime Minister's Office eventually made the answers fully public. On the other hand, it also noted that this would be the Abe administration's last press conference with the prime minister in almost two months, since June 18, the day after the regular Diet session ended. When it was critical, its tone was generally milder than Asahi's.

The Yomiuri Shimbun's 4 articles were balanced evenly between Neutral and Compliant stances. Two of its articles framed the government's actions in a positive light, for example, by interpreting a longer press conference as the government's effort to "show a stance of explaining carefully" in response to public criticism. Most of the content from Nikkei, which dealt with obstruction of freedom of reporting, was more positive, reporting from a position of defense of the government, with only a softer stance of disapproval expressed in an editorial evaluation of the Abe administration's last press conference. For example, it uncritically reported the Prime Minister's promise that "freedom of the press will be protected".

Each of Japan's major newspapers reported different percentages and perspectives on the restrictions on coverage of the prime minister's press conferences in the first three quarters of 2020. Asahi Shimbun took a critical stance and specifically addressed the restrictive actions, while Mainichi Shimbun was more conciliatory than Asahi, criticizing the government but in a slightly

more permissive manner. Yomiuri Shimbun and Nikkei, while objective and neutral in their reporting, were the main ones to put out reports with the same stance as the government.

5. Discussion

The preceding analysis has established two central phenomena: the government's deployment of at least seven specific kinds of actions for interference, and a polarized media response to these actions. The task of this discussion is to interpret these findings. By connecting them to the broader structural, political contexts of Japanese journalism, this section will explore why these patterns occurred and what they signify for press freedom in Japan.

5.1 The Pandemic as a Reconfirmation of Structural Problems

The government's restrictive actions during the pandemic were not a separate phenomenon. Instead, they should be understood as acute expressions of long-standing structural problems within the Japanese media landscape. The findings provide fresh empirical evidence for how these preexisting weaknesses were activated and exploited during a national crisis.

First, the effectiveness of certain interference is deeply connected to the *Kisha club*. Practices such as "collecting questions in advance" and controlling which reporters were called upon are only possible within a system where a close, often collusive, relationship already exists between government officials and a select group of reporters. The government could leverage the established norms of the *Kisha club* to manage the flow of questions and control the press conference agenda, even the whole flow of the press conference. This shows how the pandemic emergency provided a new justification for old practices of information control that are inherent to this structural feature of Japanese journalism. Combining the research results with the online press conference mentioned in 2.3, when facing a crisis, the government will not only restrict the dissemination of information but also flexibly develop new restrictive measures as the situation evolves to achieve its goals. This is not unchangeable.

Research on the Fukushima crisis highlights a pattern of withholding critical information, downplaying risks, and prioritizing a unified official narrative to prevent public panic (Murai et al. 2022; Ooshima 2011; Xia 2017). This study finds a clear echo of that playbook in the COVID-19 response. Actions such as

“answering questions in writing only and not making the answers public” and providing “insufficient responses” to critical questions demonstrate a similar lack of transparency. The government’s effort to control the press conference environment can be seen as a strategy to manage the official narrative of the pandemic, just as it tried to manage the “safety myth” during the nuclear crisis. This comparison suggests that restricting information flow during emergencies has become a recurring pattern in Japanese governance, regardless of the ruling party or the nature of the crisis.

Secondly, the polarization of newspapers remains obvious under the intensified political pressure during Abe’s second administration by effectively sorting media outlets into friendly and critical camps (Nishida 2015). This study’s findings tell this dynamic in action, that the Asahi Shimbun, long positioned as a critical voice, performed its watchdog role most aggressively. The Mainichi Shimbun, which is also critical, but often adopted a more measured, neutral voice in its press to the government. In contrast, the Yomiuri Shimbun and Nikkei provided predominantly neutral or compliant coverage, reinforcing their historically more cooperative relationship with the government. The polarization observed is a predictable result of years of sustained political pressure and not just a matter of editorial differences, but the polarization has persisted over the years.

Besides, the most immediate consequence of the polarized media coverage is the fragmentation of the media’s collective “watchdog” function. When only a few newspapers, like the Asahi Shimbun, are willing to critically report on government restrictions, while others remain silent or even defend the government, the overall pressure on the government to stay accountable is severely weakened. This study’s findings empirically demonstrate how government pressure on the media during a crisis can accelerate this dangerous process of democratic erosion.

5.2 Contribution of this Study: Verifying V-Dem’s Macro-Level Data with a real-world observation

This study makes an important methodological contribution by positioning its findings in relation to macro-level democratic indicators like the V-Dem survey. This study was not intended to prove V-Dem’s assessment “wrong,” but rather to complement and anchor it in real-world observations.

V-Dem's data served as a crucial "external alarm bell," correctly identifying that a problem existed. However, such macro-level indicators cannot explain how or why the problem is occurring. This study's micro-level, qualitative analysis provides the practical, on-the-ground details that are missing from datasets. It moves beyond a numerical score to identify the specific actions of interference and the nuanced reactions of key newspapers.

In this way, this study demonstrates the critical importance of combining macro-level quantitative assessments with in-depth, context-specific qualitative analysis. To gain a comprehensive understanding of a government and media landscape during times of crisis, we must not only measure the outcome but also deeply investigate the process. This study has done so by revealing the concrete mechanisms through which press freedom was eroded in Japan during a critical historical moment.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that during the initial COVID-19 pandemic, the Japanese government restricted press freedom through a range of identifiable actions, by press conferences. This pressure was not met with a unified newspaper response; instead, it fractured the press landscape, revealing a divide between a small number of critical watchdog outlets and a larger contingent of compliant or neutral newspapers.

6.1 Summary of Findings

As a result, I verified the concerns raised by the V-Dem project, identifying seven specific types of government interference in press freedom during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan.

1. Restriction on opportunity and access
 - (1) Limiting the number of participating reporters.
 - (4) Cancellation of press conferences.
 - (7) Lack of Information Sharing.

2. Intervention in the questioning process
 - (2) Insufficient responses to reporters' questions.
 - (3) Collecting and answering questions from reporters in advance.
 - (5) Not answering questions directly.

3. Restrictions on the format of information provision

- (6) Answer questions in writing only and do not make the answers public afterward.

The analysis further revealed a polarization in the media's response, with the Asahi and Mainichi newspapers playing a critical watchdog role, while the Yomiuri and Nikkei provided largely compliant coverage.

6.2 Implications of the Study

The implications of these findings are twofold. First, they demonstrate how a national crisis can activate and intensify preexisting structural issues within a nation's media system, leading to a fragmentation of the media's collective watchdog function. Second, and more profoundly, this study shows how such media polarization erodes the shared factual basis necessary for rational public debate, thereby posing a significant threat to the health of the public sphere and democratic society itself.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study has its limitations. The content analysis was conducted by a single author, while the detailed coding criteria aimed to ensure consistency, this approach cannot fully eliminate the potential for subjective interpretive bias. The analysis is confined to the initial phase of the pandemic under the Abe administration. To fully grasp the long-term impact of the crisis on press freedom, future research should extend this analysis to the subsequent Suga and Kishida administrations. A long-term comparative study would provide insights into whether these restrictive practices were a temporary emergency response or have become an enduring feature of media-state relations in Japan. Of course, with the development of new media, the scale of traditional media has shrunk. It is still unknown whether the study only focuses on news newspapers, one of the representative channels of traditional media, is still representative today. Therefore, as a future topic, conducting comprehensive research on multimedia will also be an important task.

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