

Report on FPCJ 45th Anniversary International Webinar
The Future of Media: Competition and Coexistence Between Social Media and News
Organizations—What Issues Has the Pandemic Brought to the Forefront?

December 2, 2021
Foreign Press Center Japan

1. Overview of Project

(1) On October 28, 2021, the FPCJ held its second international webinar of the year, following the previous webinar in March. Based around the topic of “The Future of Media: Competition and Coexistence Between Social Media and News Organizations—What Issues Has the Pandemic Brought to the Forefront,” journalists and experts from Japan, the Philippines, the UK, and the US were invited as panelists to discuss what role news organizations should play considering the rise of social media. The moderator for this webinar was FPCJ President Kazuo Kodama.

(2) Two keynote speakers were invited: Nonfiction writer Mr. Susumu Shimoyama, who has written many books about the changes facing the media in Japan and around the world, and International University of Japan Associate Professor Shinichi Yamaguchi, who has been carrying out research on the state of fake news and the effects of fact checking articles released by news organizations.

(3) A total of three panelists were invited, leading journalists from The Financial Times (FT) and The Wall Street Journal (WSJ), which were among the first in the media industry to succeed at introducing paid digital subscriptions, and from Rappler, an online news site in the Philippines which has gained a widespread following of readers through use of social media: Mr. Robin Harding (FT Asia Editor), Mr. Peter Landers (WSJ Tokyo Bureau Chief), and Ms. Chay F. Hofileña (Rappler Founder/Managing Editor). Ms. Maria Ressa, another founder of Rappler, receiving the Nobel Peace Prize one month before the webinar led to even greater interest in the webinar.

(4) The topic of the first session was “the issues and challenges traditional news organizations are facing with the rise of social media, and the resulting self-improvement.” The topic of the second session was “problems with social media—Anonymity allowing for the spread of irresponsible extremism, abuse, unconfirmed information, lies, and fake news, and what news organizations can do about it.” For each topic, after the expert’s keynote speech the three overseas panelists spoke about the current situation in their country and media organization, and the challenges that existed, before carrying out a free discussion.

(5) In the final concluding session, the panelists and experts all discussed the topic “what role should traditional news organizations play, and what capabilities should they be expected to have, with governments, businesses, specialists and individuals able to express themselves on social media, in what is becoming a transparent fashion?”

(6) The keynote speeches and panel discussions laid out the differences between social media and professional news organizations, along with a deep discussion of the role news organizations can play in regards to the issue of fake news and misinformation which has become more noticeable due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as what news organizations can learn from social media, and how they can coexist with it.

2. Program

Date and Time: 16:00 to 18:00, Thursday, October 28, 2021

Format: Webinar, open to the public (free of charge)

Supporters: Japan Newspaper Publishers & Editors Association
International University of Japan

Languages: Japanese and English (simultaneous interpretation)

16:00–16:05	Opening Address Moderator , Foreign Press Center Japan President Kazuo Kodama
16:05–16:15	First Session

16:15–16:30	Keynote Speech: Is Social Media Our Friend or Our Enemy? Nonfiction writer Mr. Susumu Shimoyama
16:30–16:45	Panel Discussion The Wall Street Journal Tokyo Bureau Chief, Mr. Peter Landers (US) The Financial Times Asia Editor, Mr. Robin Harding (UK) Rappler Founder/Managing Editor, Ms. Chay F. Hofileña (Philippines)
16:45–16:55	Free Discussion
16:55–17:10	Second Session Keynote Speech: The Problem of Fake News and the Role of the Media in an Age in Which Everyone Is a Reporter International University of Japan Associate Professor Shinichi Yamaguchi
17:10–17:25	Panel Discussion
17:25–17:55	Free Discussion
17:55–18:00	Concluding Session Q&A Session with Viewers
18:00	Closing

3. Content of Discussions

(1) Introduction by Moderator (Foreign Press Center Japan President Kazuo Kodama)

The topic for this seminar was chosen due to the rise of social media in recent years leading to platforms such as Facebook and Twitter becoming major sources of information for the public, along with traditional news organizations, and allowing for governments, businesses, organizations and individuals to communicate their opinions and the information they wanted to in real time using social media. Social media has become a vital tool for grassroots democracy movements in authoritarian countries where the freedom of speech and the press is restricted, and for popular social movements fighting racism, working towards gender equality, and dealing with climate change.

The occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic brought into sharp relief problems with both news organizations and social media. It is extremely difficult for news organizations to carry out accurate and critical reporting on a novel virus, and on the effectiveness and safety of new vaccines. It is difficult to demand transparent explanations for the information released by the government to fulfill the media's role as a watchdog of those in power. This can lead to a tendency to lean towards the government, and invite distrust in the news media. At the same time, on social media, where there is a lack of fact checking or self-regulation, there are various baseless claims about the side effects of vaccines, which have been pointed out as a factor in vaccine avoidance. By reconsidering the different roles of news organizations and social media through the lens of these issues brought to the forefront by the pandemic, a future path towards healthy competition and coexistence may become clear.

(2) Summary of First Session

① Keynote Speech: Nonfiction writer Mr. Susumu Shimoyama

The news media is currently in an age of the most massive change since Gutenberg's invention of the printing press. In the past 10 years, circulation of Japanese newspapers has dropped by 15 million copies, and other developed nations are facing similar situations. However, as a platform Yahoo has increased sales in the past 20 years an equal amount to the losses of all newspaper companies within Japan, and has established a position of dominance.

Japanese newspapers began making paid digital versions available around 2010, but being influenced by free advertising models that primarily place value on pageviews, papers such as Asahi have had difficulties attracting subscribers. In contrast, other papers such as The Economist, which invested in increasing digital subscriptions and stopped relying on advertising income, have been successful.

It could be said that news media which relies on advertising income sees social media as an enemy, whereas those with subscription-based income such as The Economist and The New York Times see social media as a friend. They use social media to attract readers to their digital versions and increase paid digital subscribers.

Chukai TV, a paid cable television station in Tottori Prefecture, has focused on local information since the beginning and has strong support from local residents. It has continued to grow profits during the pandemic. This shows that only media organizations that provide unique content for a fee will be able to survive.

② The Wall Street Journal (WSJ): Mr. Landers

The WSJ introduced digital subscriptions around 25 years ago. In recent years, they have placed a greater focus on producing unique content, and emphasizing exclusive articles by the WSJ that cannot be read elsewhere.

This year, digital platforms such as Facebook and Amazon are expected to see an increase of 25 billion dollars in advertising income over one year, approximately three times the total advertising income brought in by all newspapers in the US. Until early 2000, print advertising was a major source of income for the WSJ, but now they have shifted to a digital subscription model, and rely much less on print advertising income. The ratio of digital advertising income compared to overall advertising income changed from 46% two years ago to 58% last year, in a major shift over just one year. The WSJ emphasizes to advertisers the benefits of advertising in trustworthy media.

It is possible to develop a win-win friendship with social media. There are elements to learn from social media, such as creating headlines that clearly state the content of articles and entice people to read them.

Since exclusive articles based on unique, trustworthy investigative journalism have higher access numbers, more investigative journalism should be carried out from a business perspective as well. The WSJ released "The Facebook Files," a series of news reports detailing internal information from Facebook, which received significant attention.

③ The Financial Times (FT): Mr. Harding

This is a personal opinion. Social media is a major threat to traditional media. It has become an unprecedented, powerful kind of news media which can be immediately accessed from around the world at no charge, and customized to personal preferences. Not only is social media taking away time which people used to spend on traditional media, it also makes it possible for the general public to easily steal and reuse traditional media content. Since traditional media needs large numbers of readers, they tend to provide moderate content, but as social media does not need broad public support, people can speak freely.

When social media first appeared, traditional media companies experimented with providing their valuable content free of charge, but now the situation has improved through efforts such as using social media as a promotional tool.

For example, FT journalists only make Twitter posts after an article has been released. Although it is possible to read FT articles for free on some social media sites, it becomes necessary to purchase a subscription after reading a certain number.

④ Rappler: Ms. Hofileña

Compared to developed countries, the situation in the Philippines is different. Rappler is an online-only news organization, which began on Facebook in 2012. We've seen massive misinformation online, which has adversely affected media credibility. Traditional media are no longer the gatekeepers of information, with social media becoming a democratized means of communication and information source, but the quality of information has declined. In the Philippines, the most popular news sources are TV, radio, the internet, and then Facebook, at 44%. YouTube is also gaining popularity, which is dangerous as anyone can easily upload a video with unverified claims.

Good points about social media are that everyone is able to engage in free speech, but this is used maliciously. As indicated by examples such as activists being tagged as enemies of the state on social media and then killed, online threats can become real threats, and this has led to a chilling effect on protests. As online news media, Rappler cannot avoid using social media, and this has caused a dilemma. Fact checks, which there has been an increased demand for during the pandemic, are an effective method to fight misinformation. Rappler actively cooperates with other media outlets to carry out investigative reporting. Topics include drugs, murder, and government restrictions on the media. They considered making this reporting paid content, but since that would lead to fewer readers and less awareness of these problems, they plan to provide this content free of charge for the time being.

(3) Summary of Second Session

① Keynote Speech: International University of Japan Associate Professor Shinichi Yamaguchi

The WHO has warned of an “infodemic,” as various kinds of information are passed around during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fake news related to the pandemic and politics has spread in Japan as well, and research has shown that one out of two people have encountered some form of fake news. The most common method of transmission for fake news is direct conversations with family, friends, and acquaintances. The news media reported on the results of fact checks related to COVID-19, and this was effective.

Characteristics of people who cannot identify fake news as misinformation are low information literacy, having a high opinion of themselves, and being distrustful of the mass media. Over 95% of fake news is spread by super-spreaders, who account for less than 1% of those spreading fake news.

Fact checks are able to change the conversation on Twitter. Comments by people responsible for running the country are particularly effective. The news media should carry out: 1) Reporting with an emphasis on quality information, 2) Initiatives to increase trust in the media, and 3) Fact checks in cooperation with various stakeholders, which are then reported to the public.

② The Financial Times (FT): Mr. Harding

This is a personal opinion. The fact that information on social media is untrustworthy is increasing the value of the existence of traditional media. Readers go to the traditional media to read news to learn the truth. Fighting misinformation with the truth is the role of the traditional media.

However, an issue is how to deal with people who ignore the reporting by traditional media and believe whatever information on social media suits them. One solution is for social media platforms to take responsibility as publishers for the information they distribute. As shown by how Twitter suspended former President Trump’s account, the platforms themselves are able to control information.

③ Rappler: Ms. Hofileña

There has also been misinformation about COVID-19 in the Philippines. Of all of Rappler’s fact checks, 40% are now about COVID-19. With a presidential election approaching, information about COVID-19 may be used to political ends. With social media influencers having millions of followers, if they share lies then their followers are exposed to misinformation as well, and Rappler has been responding with fact checks, media literacy programs, and video explainers. International cooperation between news media around the world is necessary.

Agreed with the opinion that social media platforms should take responsibility as publishers for the content on their platform. However, noted concerns that legal restrictions might have a negative impact on the freedom of speech. Lawmakers could call for transparency from Facebook and other social media platforms.

④ The Wall Street Journal (WSJ): Mr. Landers

The CEO of the WSJ's parent company has long been calling for Facebook to be held responsible as a publisher for the content it allows. Not just to comply with the law, but to avoid violating the public interest. The traditional news media is now closely working with social media. They create profit together, and cooperate to increase the quality and trustworthiness of news reporting available on social media.

If fact checks become commonly accepted, they can prevent the spread of misinformation. However, there are some people who are largely biased against the mainstream media in the US, and so dealing with those who distrust fact checks given by the media in the first place is an issue. The role of and effective methods for fact checks in each country may become clear going forward.

With debate on regulating platforms going on in the US Congress, things remain tense (from the perspective of freedom of speech). The release of internal documents by a Facebook whistleblower led to the topic being seriously considered, but what regulations should be put into place is a major issue. Although freedom of speech is a constitutionally protected right, social media platforms also need to be held accountable.

(4) Summary of Concluding Session

① Nonfiction writer Mr. Susumu Shimoyama

When writing *Media in 2050*, Mr. Tsuneo Watanabe, the representative director and editor-in-chief of Yomiuri Shimbun, commented, "The answer is not in the internet, it is in books." This could be said of all journalists. Solid and timeless articles are important.

② International University of Japan Associate Professor Shinichi Yamaguchi

The issue is how to reduce the bad parts of social media while continuing to ensure free speech. Aside from legal regulations, he suggested: a) Improving the structure of social media (an alert popping up if you try to retweet without reading, taking action based on the terms of service, etc.), b) News media promoting fact checks and efficiently releasing them through social media, c) Informing the public of how reporting is carried out and increasing trust in the news media, and d) Education and awareness.

③ Rappler: Ms. Hofileña

We are still at the starting point. Even before the issues with social media became discussed because of former President Trump, the same problems had been happening in the Philippines, and we actually called the attention of Facebook to this, but it never paid attention. Parliamentarians and policy makers need to understand what is happening on social media and to see the harms and dangers of it. IT companies and civil society have to become involved as well in order to make social media better.

④ The Wall Street Journal (WSJ): Mr. Landers

Education and awareness are important. Children tend to accept information they encounter on the internet without question. Journalists are careful about what information sources to trust, and the general public needs to acquire this skill as well.

⑤ The Financial Times (FT): Mr. Harding

The role of the traditional media is nothing more than to report news accurately. Education and regulation are issues for society as a whole.

(5) Q&A Session with Viewers

① Q: 25 years ago, I heard there was a concern about the dumbing-down of the quality newspapers in the UK, but how is the situation now?

Mr. Harding: With the number of people reading newspapers declining and a growing

divide along political lines in the UK, a decline in the quality of the news media has been an issue since before the internet. Really, the issue is not one of quality, but of how to distribute articles to people who do not want to pay money for them.

②Q: Is it possible for media with different strengths to coexist, such as social media and TV being timely and traditional media carrying out more analysis?

Mr. Harding: Both scoops and analysis are important. At the FT, we not only report the news, we want to tell people what the news means.

③Q: What do you think of social media influencers?

Mr. Yamaguchi: It is an issue that influencers are receiving more attention and praise. It is important for the audience to examine information and think about it for themselves, but it is also important for social media platforms to take action.

4. Overview of Webinar Viewers and Survey Results

(1) There were 190 applications to this webinar from people in domestic and international media, businesses, organizations, local governments, and universities, and 109 of those (57%) joined the webinar when it was held. Viewers were located in Japan, South Korea, China, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and more.

(2) According to the results of a survey held after the webinar, 90% of respondents said the webinar was “good” or “excellent,” with comments such as, “I was impressed with the fantastic content,” and, “It was very interesting to hear from panelists with different backgrounds.” There was also a comment about using the information as a reference in the future: “It could have been better if we heard success stories from new media in Japan and abroad.”