

The Local Newspaper in Japan: Civic Participation, Local Issues, and Critical Journalism

Anthony Rausch

This paper will revisit previous research that pointed to the importance of the local newspapers of outlying areas across Japan, both in the lives of local residents and as a social science research tool. The present research, based on questionnaire survey results, together with analysis of the *rensai* columns of 40+ local newspapers and analysis of the commentary/opinion page of one local newspaper, both confirms and builds on this previous research while also revealing contemporary trends and tensions in local print media that reflect new complexities of contemporary media environments.

1. Introduction

While newspaper readership appears to be declining around the world, research into the social role and implications of newspapers and newspaper reading does continue. The 2016 *Association for Education on Journalism and Mass Communication* conference included over 40 presentations in the Newspaper and Online News category. Interestingly, while Japan claims one of the highest newspaper readership rates in the world and recent research has pointed to the high proclivity for newspaper reading in Japan, research and opinions on Japanese journalism and Japanese newspapers have been somewhat negative, pointing, for example, to controversial responses to nuclear power generation post-3.11 and the demise of an investigatory role for news in Japan. While admitting to the controversies accompanying national print journalism in Japan, this paper focuses on the local newspapers, taking the view that local newspapers—the 100+ regional and local newspapers published in prefectures and local areas throughout Japan—are important in both disseminating news—international, national and local—while also creating local residents who are informed about the issues, and characteristics, that define the place they live. While based on extensive previous research based on extensive and varied use of local newspapers, the questions that justify the present research are:

1. What underlies the high readership of local newspapers and what are the social implications of this readership?
2. What are the particularly local aspects of a local newspaper and what are the implications of such characteristics?
3. Are local newspapers subject to similar criticisms levelled at Japanese journalism at large regarding its role in providing criticism of government?

After providing an overview of previous research conducted by the author as background justifying the local newspaper as research topic and tool, the research of this paper will open with results of a survey questionnaire regarding reading patterns and attitudes held by local residents regarding their local newspapers, followed by analysis of the newspaper *rensai* columns of newspapers throughout Japan and the commentary/opinion page of a single local newspaper.

2. Background to the Present Research

I have long used my local newspaper, my *chihōshi*, as a window on Japan and, through use of *rensai*, the long-running thematic newspaper columns of my local newspaper, as a research tool. As a resident of Aomori Prefecture, the newspaper that I most often used has been the *Tōhōnippō*, the prefecture-wide newspaper read by approximately half of prefectural residents. The research I have conducted using the *Tōhōnippō* has ranged from voluntarism and local identity representation to, more recently, local (re)vitalization. In the period after the Hanshin Earthquake of 1995, which saw the emergence of Japan's volunteer movement, I pointed to the role newspaper articles and columns in the *Tōhōnippō* played in legitimizing different forms of volunteer activity and generating a local citizen consciousness of such volunteer activity (Rausch, 2002a) and in supporting and disseminating within its host community a volunteer organization agenda (Rausch, 2002b, 2008). Following on this research, I next looked at the manner in which newspaper columns in the *Tōhōnippō* contributed to a local collective identity (Rausch, 2004). The work was based on Bauer and Gaskell's (1999) components of social representation—a process of establishing socially-meaningful anchors in the naming, classifying and objectifying local phenomenon—such that local cultural images and cultural commodities become operational in creating a local collective 'place identity' through journalistic representation. Further examination in subsequent research, particularly of the *rensai*, led me to coin the term 'revitalization journalism,' wherein the *rensai* of local newspapers portray local economic and cultural news in a manner that contribute to the area's 'vitalization' (Rausch, 2011, 2012). This research identified combinative frames—information as revitalization, education as revitalization, identity affirmation as revitalization, and local business as revitalization—in *rensai* columns that ran in the newspaper for periods of months or years which added up to thematic columns numbering in some cases in the hundreds. Most recently, in the period after the Great East Japan Disaster (3.11), I outlined both the initial and early portrayal of the event through its newspaper representation (Rausch, 2013) and followed this with work detailing the longer-term memory creation function of newspaper columns (2014a, 2014b). While the representation in the immediate aftermath was what one could expect (and similar to what others had found in such 'disaster' journalism), the longer trend, apparent in the disaster *rensai*, revealed a transition in the journalistic representation that focused on multiple themes. These included recovery from the disaster, acceptance of the disaster reality and adjustment to this

reality, therapeutic processing directed toward survivors, and establishment of the contours of the collective memory of the event. While outlining my own research, I must also point out that others have also viewed, and used, the local newspaper in the same manner, for example Takada, Shimizu and Handa's 2010, 2012 and 2016 works *Nihon no Genba: Chihōshi de Yomu* and Umemoto's (2016) *Chihōshi ha Chiiki wo Tsukuru*.

3. A Tōhoku Newspaper Readership Survey

Both readership and trust of Japanese newspapers have always been comparatively high. Indeed, Chen (2014) pointed to the success of the Japanese newspaper industry, noting the dominance of Japanese newspapers in terms of circulation among the world's top papers. In order to quantify and qualify this, survey research was conducted that revealed high 'newspaper reading habits' and high 'newspaper loyalty patterns' on the one hand, countered by a declining rate for both as one looks to younger generations on the other. Chen pointed to previous data showing that over 80 percent of Japanese households subscribe to newspapers and over 55 percent read a newspaper every day. Furthermore, trust of the newspaper was found to be the highest among all media, with nearly 80 percent having confidence in the reporting of the newspaper. As for the social implications of newspaper reading, Nakano et al (2014) asserted that Japanese newspapers contribute to community engagement, finding that, unlike television media, newspaper reading is positively correlated to community engagement. They attribute this to the fact that the national level newspapers, while focusing on nation-wide news and topics, also support everyday life activities in local communities.

The first part of the present research thus takes up the question of what underlies the high readership of local newspapers and what are the social implications of this readership? The research is based on a six-section survey conducted late 2016 and early 2017 (N=125; response rate 42%). The survey targeted households located throughout the Tohoku area identified through university students. First and foremost, the survey indicated that while 30 percent of these Tohoku respondents subscribe to a national paper, over 70 percent subscribe to their regional/local newspaper. Twenty percent subscribe to both a national paper and a local paper and 54 percent subscribe to a local paper only, but not a national paper. Fifteen percent indicated no newspaper subscription. Regarding newspaper reading habits and general thoughts regarding the newspaper, over three quarters of respondents indicated 'reading a newspaper daily' (77%; 3.2 on a four-point Likert scale) and just under three quarters indicated that they 'enjoyed reading the newspaper' (73%; 3.1). (This follows with Chen's 2014 survey of 220 respondents, where three-quarters had the habit of reading the newspaper.) However, whereas just under 60 percent felt that reading a newspaper was a 'universal obligation' (「新聞を読むことは、とても大事なことで、皆がするべきだと思う。」 58%; 2.8), just one third saw this as a

‘personal obligation’ (「新聞を読むことは義務で、私は新聞を毎日読まなければならない。」 34%; 2.1) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Habits and General Attitude

Prompt	Likert Response (4-3-2-1)	(4) very much agree (%)	(3) agree (%)	(2) disagree (%)	(1) very much disagree (%)
I read the newspaper everyday	3.2	46	31	19	4
I enjoy reading the newspaper	3.1	46	27	21	6
Reading the newspaper is obligatory for me	2.1	13	21	35	31
Reading the newspaper is something everyone should do	2.8	27	31	31	10

Source: Original 「新聞」や「地方紙」読者調査2016.

Considering the general role of the local newspaper, a ‘news’ function and an ‘education’ function were regarded as slightly above the average for all the responses provided: (news function avg. 3.7 versus 3.3 overall; education function avg. 3.5) (see Table 2). Specifically, respondents saw this ‘news’ role in terms of both ‘national political, economic and sports news’ (78%; 3.1) and news that would be ‘related to one’s job’ (66%; 2.9), but as well and more significantly, as ‘local political, economic and sports news’ (98%; 3.9) and ‘news’ that centers on the locale’ (98%; 3.7). Regarding an ‘education’ function, respondents highlighted the newspaper’s role in informing readers of things they ‘don’t know’ (98%; 3.7), ‘deepening understanding of events’ (94%; 3.3), and informing readers regarding ‘cultural and lifestyle matters’ (87%; 3.4). In terms of a ‘local attachment’ function, the response was neither higher nor lower than responses overall (local attachment function avg. 3.3 versus 3.3 overall avg.), with the focus on ‘readers becoming focused on the region through the news’ (93%; 3.6), ‘readers coming to understand their local economy and culture through the news’ (96%; 3.4), and ‘the newspaper contributing to reader satisfaction with the locale’ (66%; 2.9). Two more themes reflected responses lower than average compared to those overall: civic participation (3.1 avg. versus 3.3 overall) and newspaper responsibility (3.2 avg.). The participation questions included a newspaper function in ‘promoting participation in local events and activities’ (73%; 3.1), ‘increasing intention to participate in local society’ (67%; 2.9), and the newspaper providing ‘community news and information’ (85%; 3.2). As for newspaper responsibility, the prompts included ‘providing information about local events’ (88%; 3.4), ‘providing information useful for local living’ (84%; 3.0), and ‘the newspaper supporting local events’ (71%; 3.0).

Turning to the ‘sociability’ of newspaper reading, respondents indicated that while they did discuss newspaper content with their families (58%; 2.8), they were less inclined to do so with co-workers (40%; 2.0) and friends (39%; 2.3) (see Table 3). Furthermore, the nature of the interaction regarding the news appeared quite dynamic, if not contentious, as ‘agreement about the news’ for each group

was cited in less than—if not well under—half of respondents (family: 48%; 2.4; co-worker: 33%; 2.1; friend: 33%; 2.1).

Table 2. Newspaper Function

Prompt	Likert Response (4-3-2-1)	(4) very much agree (%)	(3) agree (%)	(2) disagree (%)	(1) very much disagree (%)
Newspaper Function:					
National political, economic, sports news	3.1	38	40	19	6
Local political, economic, sports news	3.9	83	15	2	2
Focus on local news	3.7	67	31	4	0
Report on local events for sake of local residents	3.4	48	40	13	2
Create local interest among residents through reporting	3.6	60	33	8	0
Encourage residents to participate in local activities	3.1	40	33	21	8
Develop in residents a sense of satisfaction with the area	2.9	31	35	23	13
Support local events as a local company	3.0	33	38	27	4
Provide news in electronic formats	2.9	27	48	15	10
Local Newspapers . . .					
Educate about issues	3.7	69	29	4	0
Deepen understanding	3.3	38	56	4	4
Educate about culture/life	3.4	54	33	13	2
Educate about local society and history	3.7	67	33	2	0
Deepen understanding of local economy and culture	3.4	46	50	4	2
Increase willingness to participate in local activities	2.9	27	40	29	6
Reason for reading a local paper:					
To gain information for a job	2.9	31	35	21	13
To gain useful information for life	3.0	38	46	10	8
To gain information related to the local community	3.2	33	52	15	2
Overall Likert response	3.3				

Source: Original 「新聞」や「地方紙」読者調査2016.

Table 3. Communicating about Newspaper Content

Prompt	Likert Response (4-3-2-1)	(4) very much agree (%)	(3) agree (%)	(2) disagree (%)	(1) very much disagree (%)
I talk about content with family	2.8	23	35	33	10
We generally agree	2.4	6	42	40	15
I talk about content with co-workers	2.0	15	25	23	23
We generally agree	2.1	4	29	38	27
I talk about content with friends	2.3	8	31	38	25
We generally agree	2.1	4	29	44	23

Source: Original 「新聞」や「地方紙」読者調査2016.

Opinion regarding the reliability, social contribution, similarity to national framing, and similarity to

local broadcast news for the local newspaper was elicited using a five-point visual-oriented scale. Regarding reliability, 65 percent viewed the local newspaper as reliable (if not highly reliable), with 29 percent being ‘neutral’ (27%-38%-29%-4%-0%) (see Table 4). The local newspaper was deemed as making a social contribution to some degree (45%), with a similar level being neutral (10%-35%-42%-10%-2%). Respondents were virtually neutral regarding the local newspaper sharing the viewpoint as national news coverage with the same levels of agreement versus disagreement (6%-25%-35%-21%-10%), but felt clearly that the local newspaper held a viewpoint similar to the local broadcast news, cited by 65 percent of respondents (15%-50%-27%-6%-2%).

Table 4. Reliability, Social Contribution and Viewpoint

Prompt A	++	+		+	++	Prompt B
Information is reliable	27	38	29	4	0	Information is unreliable
Make a social contribution	10	35	42	10	2	Make no social contribution
Agree with national news viewpoint	6	25	35	21	10	Differ from national news viewpoint
Agree with other local news viewpoint	15	50	27	6	2	Differ from other local news viewpoint

Source: Original 「新聞」や「地方紙」読者調査 2016.

4. The *Rensai* of Local Japanese Newspapers

The premise of the *rensai* research of this paper is that the local newspaper plays an important role in the process of defining and confirming issues of importance in local society. The mass media provides for messages to be produced and disseminated to large audiences on one side, with those messages sought out and interpreted, sometimes recursively, by audiences who view the newspaper as credible on the other. Gerbner contextualized the importance of mass media when he referred to “[t]his broad public making significance of mass media of communications—the ability to create publics, define issues, provide common terms of reference, and thus to allocate attention (1967:45). McQuail (1987) offered several metaphors which capture the range of roles the mass media takes on: carriers that convey information, windows that enable us to see, signposts that provide directions, filters that screen excess and focus attention, barriers that block us from the truth, interpreters that help us make sense, and mirrors that reflect ourselves onto ourselves. However, while mass media messages are seen as originating in the principle social institutions of society, there is debate as to the degree that such message generation is not partially or wholly a reflection, if not reification, of overall public sentiment. Anastasio, Rose and Chapman (1999) applied these notions to a study of public opinion as dictated by the media, concluding that the media subtly, but powerfully creates the very opinions among their audience they then report on in a manner so as to seen as reflecting their audience. In this sense, mass media is seen as both bringing about changes in media consumers’ attitudes and opinions, but often with regard to and in a manner that reinforces existing attitudes and opinions. It can be assumed that *rensai*, the long-running thematic columns carried in local Japanese newspapers operate in such a

manner so as to ‘define issues, provide common terms of reference, and thus to allocate attention’ to them, resulting in the ‘creation of the very opinions that are reported on.’ Specific to the case for contemporary Japan, Kitahara (2012), for instance, examined newspapers in areas that hosted nuclear power plants, analysing editorials referring to the Fukushima nuclear accident for one year after the accident, finding that while the number of newspapers that advocate for nuclear power are few, the same newspapers do carry opinions promoting nuclear power. This paradoxical stance is further reflected in content carried by the newspapers acknowledging both the anxiety of hosting nuclear power plants alongside the economic and livelihood benefits that accompany the plants.

The present *rensai* research continues this focus on issues as presented in the newspaper, using a methodology similar to that used by Rausch (2012) and based on D’Angelo and Kuypers (2010) and Kuypers (2010): News Framing Analysis. News framing analysis provides both for recognition of columns as the ‘format frame’ and assessment of the content of the column within a ‘thematic frame.’ News framing analysis offers a means of objectively extracting, coding, and viewing, in this case, newspaper content, in a manner so as to identify, confirm and assess the frame of the content and the content that is included in the frame. The notion of news framing analysis implies that there is thematic connection both across frames and within a single frame, such that after repeated exposure to the notion of the frame and the frame and the content that is included in any specific frame, audiences accept the frame and the reasoning of the frame, together with the content that is connected through its inclusion in the frame (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; Nisbet, 2010). The specific methodology (Van Gorp, 2010) hinges on a frame matrix, reflecting not only what the text is about, but the manner in which the context is established and the content is provided. Herein, this is the *rensai*, the newspaper column. Describing and determining what constitutes a ‘newspaper column’ is somewhat variable and depends largely on the research objective. Conventional wisdom would indicate that a column is a recurring and themed piece of writing carried in a newspaper or magazine. Columns are written by columnists, either journalists or institutions that speak as representatives of the theme, and can be objective and informative or as subjective, emotional and persuasive as the columnist wishes. Columns can be as short as three successive entries (上、中、下) or longer and usually numbered. There is usually some appealing and pithy column title and the column is usually ‘set off’ from other content, whether simply by use of some colorful heading or by a border. In the present research, the objective is to identify the prevalence and thematic trends in Japanese local newspaper columns, the *rensai* of Japan’s local newspapers.

The Present Rensai Research

The present research reviewed 44 local newspapers, one via daily print editions together with the

paper’s website, and the others via their respective websites (accessed through the 47NEWS site: www.47news.jp/). Each site was viewed for *ren sai* information, which if available, usually appeared as a ‘special news-columns’ section (特集・連載). When such ‘*ren sai*’ information was available, the information was gathered, organized, and analyzed on the basis of theme, number of successive *ren sai* columns, starting year/month and any other features. Of course, not all local newspapers either had *ren sai* or carried information of their *ren sai* on their websites in an identifiable or analyzable form. Further, the information available was inconsistent across newspapers. Such limitations notwithstanding, the categories for analysis are defined as shown in Table 5, where the *ren sai* were categorized in a grounded method on the basis of *ren sai* title, *ren sai* description, view of a representative *ren sai* (where available) and if not, the *ren sai* title alone.

Table 5. *Ren sai* Category Thematic Definitions

Category	Concerning / Focusing on. . .
Local Culture - History	local cultural and historical themes
Town Life	aspects of town life (city walking, local scenic views, etc.)
Local Economy	information regarding the local economy (growth, export, problems)
Local Businesses	introduction/promotion of local businesses
Local Vitalization	local economic revitalization, using the terminology of 創生
Contemporary Topics	topics that have emerged in the time of the <i>ren sai</i>
Modern Life - Society	aspects of modern life (relationships, aging, investments)
Local Issues	specific local issues to an area at the time of the <i>ren sai</i>
Medical care	specific medical care, often written by medical professionals
Health related	general health-related themes (stretching, long life, diet)
Youth - Education	youth activities and education-related themes
Essays	connected or thematic essays written under appealing headings
Local People	introductions of residents; various themes (workplace, neighborhood)
Persons of Influence	biographies and profiles of local famous persons
Disaster Preparation	disaster preparation consciousness / activity
Local Event - Performance	local events, festivals and performances
Prefectural Residents in Tokyo	prefectural residents who have moved away to Tokyo
World Heritage Sites	information on World Heritage Sites in the area and in Japan
Other	home life, constitutional reform, science, newspaper activity,

Source: Original research.

Ren sai Columns Research Findings

First of all, the total number of local newspapers viewed were 44, of which 28 carried *ren sai*, with the average number of *ren sai* reported by any newspaper via the website being 6.4, with a range from a single *ren sai* to up to 17 (Table 6).

A typical *ren sai* data set for a single newspaper is shown in Table 7, the case for the *Yamanashi Nichi Nichi Shimbun*. As alluded to above, the information includes the Japanese title, the category/theme, the number of *ren sai* in the column (with an indication of the *ren sai* continuing where this information could be ascertained), the start date (again, where this information could be ascertained), and any other

relevant or available information, such as the date of finish or the organization of the column.

Table 6. *Rensai* Basic Data

Total number of newspapers viewed:	44
Number with <i>rensai</i> :	28
Number with no <i>rensai</i> :	16
Total Number of <i>rensai</i> identified:	179
Total Number of <i>rensai</i> categorized (not ‘other’):	154
Average number of <i>rensai</i> per ‘ <i>rensai</i> newspaper’	6.4
Range of <i>rensai</i> per ‘ <i>rensai</i> newspaper’	1 ~ 17

Source: Original research.

Table 7. *Rensai* for 山梨日日新聞 (連載・特集)

Japanese Title	Category / Theme	#	Start Date	
メディカル・テラス	medical care	72~	2012. 9	
扉の向こうへ山梨発ひきこもりを考える	youth - education (hikikomori)	125	2014. 8	2016. 9; 9 部+ epilogue and 57
すぐにおいしい！いっぴん料理	home life	39~	2015. 5	
Dr. あやこ精神科医のしあわせ論	health related	34~	2015. 7	
えんぴつが歩く	essay	30~	2015. 8	
独人社会	modern life - society	32	2016. 1	2016. 9; 5 部
廃校再興 学びやは今	youth - education	24	2016. 1	2016. 8
印象力アップ！私、変われます	modern life/society: self improvement	5	2016. 5	2016. 9
踏ん張る商店街	town life	12~	2016. 7	
やまなし「農」の風景	local economy (agriculture)	15~	2016. 7	Prologue, 3 部, 4-5 columns/部
サンセット (Sunset)	modern life - society	9~	2016. 9	
心と仕舞う	health related	2~	2016. 10	
ドクター本田のにじいる子育て	youth – education	81~	*	2 columns/month
山梨のものづくり企業レポート	local economy	129	*	2 columns/month
女性それぞれの今	modern life - society	155	*	1 column/week

Source: Original research.

The historical trends that can be ascertained from the available information reflect recent *rensai* columns (see Table 8). That is to say, while in some cases, information on a discontinued *rensai* may still be found, in more cases, once a *rensai* is discontinued the trace of its existence is usually removed from the website. Therefore, while the early figures from 2005 to 2013 are low, research by Rausch (2012) showed the numbers of *rensai* in the *Tōōnippō* as averaging 15 over the period 2009 to 2010. This drop-off in the number of *rensai* in the present research can be discerned in the 2014 to 2016 data as well, as eight of the 16 *rensai* for 2014 are now discontinued, 13 of the 29 for 2015, and 27 of the 61 for 2016, meaning that these *rensai* were carried on the order of weeks or months, rather than years.

Regarding long-running *rensai* shown in Table 8, the 1999 *rensai* is a ‘Local People’ column carried once a week in the *Tokushima Shimbun*, and continues even now. The 2007 *rensai* at 130 columns is an ‘Essay’ *rensai* carried in the *Shikoku Shimbun*, the 2008 *rensai* at 300 columns is a ‘Local Culture – History’ column detailing temples and shrines carried in the *Kobe Shimbun*, the 2009 *rensai* at 176

columns is a ‘Medical Care’ *rensai* organized into 44 parts (部) of four columns each also carried in the *Kobe Shimbun*, and the 2010 *rensai* at 200 is a ‘Prefectural Residents in Tokyo’ *rensai* carried in the *Kita Nihon Shimbun*. The 2014 at 130 is a ‘Local Event – Performance’ *rensai* from the *Tokushima Shimbun*, the 2015 *rensai* at 115 is a ‘Contemporary Topics’ *rensai* about consumer protection also carried in the *Tokushima Shimbun*, and the 2016 *rensai* at 124 is a ‘Contemporary Topics’ *rensai* in the *Sanyō Shinbun*.

Table 8. *Rensai*: Recent Historical Trends

Year	Number of newspaper <i>rensai</i> (# discontinued)	Highest number of individual <i>rensai</i> (for year)
1999	1	continuing, once/week
2005	4	continuing everyday / once/week
2006	1	—
2007	2	54 / 130~
2008	2	170~ / 300
2009	2	115~ / 176
2010	2	200~
2011	3	92
2012	6	55 / 92
2013	6	—
2014	16 (8)	104 / 125 / 130~
2015	29 (13)	36 / 115
2016	61 (27)	60 / 77 / 124
N	135 (48)	

Source: Original research.

~ : continuing column as of paper preparation

As shown in the thematic category data for all the *rensai* examined (2005-2016), *rensai* related to ‘Local Culture – History’ are most common, followed by ‘Modern Life – Society,’ and ‘Local Economy + Local Businesses’ (see Table 9). There then comes a grouping of ‘Town Life,’ ‘Medical Care,’ ‘Essays’ and ‘Contemporary Topics.’

While recalling that past *rensai* categorization is limited in its representation due to the fact that once *rensai* are discontinued, the information is usually removed from the website, the thematic category data for the period 2015-2015 does however, show some shifts in the focus of *rensai*. As shown in Table 10, ‘Modern Life – Society’ is now the top thematic category, followed by ‘Essays,’ ‘Local Business’ and ‘Contemporary Topics.’ In the case of ‘Essays’ and ‘Contemporary Topics,’ these were not major in the overall data, both at rank five. In addition, the ascension of ‘Disaster Preparation,’ from eighth in rank overall to fourth in the 2015-2016 data, was notable. Of course, there were shifts away from certain themes as well, as ‘Local Culture – History’ themed columns decreased, as did

columns focusing on ‘Local Economy.’

Table 9. *Rensai*: Thematic Category Data Overall

Rank	Category	columns totals
1	Local Culture - History	21
2	Modern Life - Society	17
3	Local Economy	15
4	Local Businesses	13
5	Town Life	12
5	Medical care	12
5	Essays	12
5	Contemporary Topics	12
6	Local People	10
7	Youth - Education	7
7	Health related	7
8	Persons of Influence	6
8	Disaster Preparation	6
9	Local Vitalization	5
10	Local Issues	4
10	Local Event - Performance	4
11	Prefectural Residents in Tokyo	3
11	World Heritage Sites	3
	Other	13
	N	179

Source: Original research.

Table 10. Thematic Category Data 2015-2016

Rank 2015-2016	Category	Rank overall (2005-2014)	Number of columns begun in 2015-16
1	Modern Life - Society	(2)	9
2	Essays	(5)	8
2	Local Business	(4)	8
2	Contemporary Topics	(5)	8
3	Town Life	(5)	7
3	Medical care	(5)	7
4	Disaster Preparation	(8)	5
5	Local Culture - History	(1)	4
5	Health related	(7)	4
5	Youth - Education	(7)	4
6	Local Economy	(3)	3
6	Local Vitalization	(9)	3
6	Local Event - Performance	(10)	3
6	Local People	(6)	3
7	Local Issues	(10)	2
7	Persons of Influence	(8)	2
7	World Heritage Sites	(11)	2
-	Prefectural Residents in Tokyo	(11)	0
	Other		8
	N		90

Source: Original research.

Aside from these overall trends, there are several specific themes among the *rensay* carried by local

newspapers that are notable. In terms of social themes, the *Minami Nihon Shimbun* included two *rensay* in 2016 over the course of a week in one case and a month in the second taking up handicapped and disability issues in contemporary society ((1) 闇と光の日々: *living with handicapped*; (2) 精神科密着 240 時間: *living with mental disability*) and the *Yamanashi Nichi Nichi Shimbun* carried a long-running column (N=125; starting from 2014.8) on *hikikomori* (扉の向こうへ山梨発ひきこもりを考える: *youth - education (hikikomori)*). The *Miyazaki Nichi Nichi Shimbun* carried a 10 column *rensay* in 2014 focusing on youth poverty (だれも知らない みやざき子どもの貧困: *No one knows: Poverty Among Miyazaki Youth*) while the *Chunichi Shimbun* carried a six-part column on ‘the story of new poverty’ (新貧乏物語) in 2016. Other societal issues included investment information and fraud, as seen in the *Fukushima Minyū Shimbun* ((1)知りたい資産運用: *NISA investments*; (2) S T O P ! なりすまし詐欺: *consumer protection (fraud)*). *Rensai* on fraud were also carried in the *Chunichi Shimbun* (シリーズ「あなたも騙される」～実録ニセ電話詐欺～) and the *Yamagata Shimbun* (県内、特殊詐欺の実態). Finally, there was clearly a presence on the ‘individual,’ in the form of the ‘Local People’ columns carried by many newspapers, as well as ‘individual situation,’ as seen in a 5 column *rensay* self-improvement column carried by the *Yamanashi Nichi Nichi Shimbun* (印象力アップ! 私、変われます; *improving your impression – changing yourself*).

5. The Commentary/Opinion Page

Much ink has been dedicated to the demise of journalism in Japan of late. Sekiguchi (2014) and Pollman (2015) wrote early on regarding the implementation of the controversial state secrets law, which tightens penalties on leaking intelligence, thereby weakening the watchdog function of domestic journalism. While the law specifically applies to ‘leakers,’ it also implies that those who receive and use leaked information could face penalties. Fackler (2016) and McNeill (2016) extend the theme to investigative journalism, connecting the issue directly to Japanese journalism’s handling of the triple meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in 2011. Fackler (2016) outlines specifically the creation of the Investigative Reporting Section at the *Asahi Shimbun* in October 2011, its ‘indispensability’ according to the newspaper’s president at the time, and its emasculation at the hands of the revisionist right and the Abe Cabinet in 2014. Amidst suspicions of foul-play regarding the release of sensitive information to be used against the *Asahi*, Fackler notes that the newspaper’s decision to punish its own journalists for their investigative push will discourage other journalists, and certainly other newspapers from taking the risks inherent in investigative journalism again, meaning Japan’s newspaper media will lapse back into the old, access-driven Press Club patterns of mainstream journalism. McNeill (2016) provides more background on pre-war and post-war approaches to journalism in Japan, including the current Press Club system, as well as offering details on how the

Japanese press has handled a number of recent and contemporary issues. This is the background that contextualizes the third part of the present research, an analysis of a commentary/opinion page of a local newspaper, aiming at determining the level of criticism presented in a local newspaper.

The ‘Commentary/Opinion’ page that constitutes the research material for this section comes from the *Tōhōnippō* newspaper of Aomori Prefecture. Taking up one full page (page 7), the ‘Commentary/Opinion’ page is carried daily from Tuesday to Saturday, not appearing on Sunday or Monday. Most days, four independent columns on different topics will be carried, but sometimes the page will be given over to a single topic. The examination of the ‘Commentary/Opinion’ page consisted of three points: format, theme and orientation. The data for this analysis is provided in the tables below.

Table 11 shows the number of columns carried for each of the four time periods, one early in 2016 and three in the first three months of 2017.

Table 11. ‘Commentary/Opinion’ Newspaper Days and Number of Columns

	Number of Newspaper Days	Number of Columns Total
2016, Feb-Mar	8	35
2017, January	10	45
2017, February	15	52
2017, March	17	58

Source: Original research.

Tables 12, 13, and 14 show the page format, theme content and column orientation for the columns carried on the ‘Commentary/Opinion’ page for the three periods. As shown in Table 12, from 40 to over 55 percent of columns carried on the ‘Commentary/Opinion’ page are offered with no source indication. The other patterns found were columns written by ‘named experts,’ usually ex-government officials or university-affiliated faculty, or Q&A formats (not sourced) or shared overseas wire services (with the wire service provided). The themes were fairly evenly spread over domestic politics and economics, followed by foreign affairs (the Trump presidency, the situation on the Korean Peninsula—both North regarding weapons testing and South relating to domestic politics—Japanese PKO activities in Southern Sudan), legislative issues (the labor overtime law, the amakudari law, the terror-conspiracy law) and the Imperial Abdication issue (Table 13). The social trend/events content primarily concerned the increased accidents attributed to aged automobile drivers and the Moritomo School Group-Abe Family Relationship issue. Finally, and of particular concern with regard to the function of Japanese press as fulfilling a watchdog role as a check on governmental action, there seems to be a balance, if not tension, between content on the ‘Commentary/Opinion’ page that is primarily

informative, versus that which includes some element of comment and that which is outright critical of an actor’s action (see Table 14).

Table 12. ‘Commentary/Opinion’ Page Format

	Columns Total	Not Sourced Column (%)	Q&A Format	Expert (with name)	Diet Notes	Shared Source: overseas wire service
2016, Feb-Mar	35	14 (40%)	6	10	3	2
2017, January	45	25 (56%)	2	6	3	7 (Kyodo Tsushin: 3)
2017, February	52	23 (44%)	3	14	3	6
2017, March	58	31 (53%)	5	4	7	11

Source: Original research.

Table 13. ‘Commentary/Opinion’ Theme

	Columns Total	Domestic Political	Economic Domestic/ International	Foreign Affairs (Trump)	Imperial Abdication	Social Trend/ Events	Legislative (Overtime/ Amakudari)	Education
2016, Feb-Mar	35	8	5	1	0	5	0	4
2017, January	45	5	7	8	8	4	10	0
2017, February	52	7	9	16 (9)	2	4	7	1
2017, March	58	6	3	12 (5)	5	10	15	3

Source: Original research.

Table 14. ‘Commentary/Opinion’ Orientation

	Columns Total	Informative (%)	Informative + Comment	Critical Opinion (%)	Specific Event-Related
2016, Feb-Mar	35	18 (51%)	5	6 (17%)	3
2017, January	45	21 (47%)	10	11 (24%)	2
2017, February	52	18 (35%)	11	19 (37%)	2
2017, March	58	13 (22%)	13	20 (35%)	13

Source: Original research.

6. Discussion: Newspaper Readership, Meaningfulness and Critical View

This paper opened by detailing past research conducted using a local newspaper, research which, for the most part, illuminated the important role the local newspaper plays in its host community. This was shown in reference to local volunteerism, local ‘place identity’ creation, local revitalization—both

economic and cultural—and event memory creation, in the research in the case of Japan’s 3.11 triple disaster. The present research, based on questionnaire survey results, together with analysis of the *ren sai* columns of 40+ local newspapers along with analysis of the commentary/opinion page of one local newspaper, both extends and in some cases, counters this research, and in so doing reaffirms the importance both of the local newspaper in its community as well as research directed specifically toward local media formats in the local community.

The Tōhoku Newspaper Readership Survey confirmed high readership levels for local newspapers. In addition, and in terms of readership and the social implications thereof, the survey identified several meaningful ‘gaps’ in readership patterns. First of all, while a majority saw newspaper reading as a ‘universal obligation,’ a minority saw it as a ‘personal obligation.’ Secondly, and countering previous research, the function of the newspaper was seen by readers to be primarily in the areas of ‘news’ and ‘education,’ but less so in terms of ‘local attachment’ and ‘civic participation.’ Opinions regarding the ‘sociality’ of newspaper reading and the ‘reliability-contribution-agreement’ of the newspaper were likewise divided. Most readers indicated that they discussed the ‘newspaper news’ with family; few indicated doing so with co-workers and friends. Most viewed the local newspaper as reliable and in agreement with other local news sources, but fewer saw the newspaper as making a social contribution to the local community.

The *ren sai* column research herein speak to the particular local aspects of any local newspaper, and points to six out of 10 local newspapers carrying *ren sai* columns to some degree, whether short term to long term or in few *ren sai* or rather in high numbers of *ren sai*. Viewing the *ren sai*, largely via the newspaper websites, revealed 18 *ren sai* categories, for which both long term as well as more recent, short-term patterns could be discerned. The long-term trends appear to point to a focus in the local newspaper *ren sai* on ‘place creation,’ ‘modern society,’ and ‘economy and business,’ as shown in the long term ranking (1~4 in Table 15 below. However, in the 2015-2016 *ren sai*, the shift appears to be toward ‘modern life and society’ and ‘contemporary topics’ (2015-2016 rank 1 and 2, respectively), along with an ‘expressive component’ (essays: rank 2; up from 5) and ‘local boosterism’ in the form of a focus on local businesses (rank 2; up from 4) and ‘place creation’ in the form of ‘town life’ (rank 3; up from 5). ‘Medical care’ (rank 3; up from 5) together with ‘health related’ (rank 5; up from 7) indicate an emerging focus on ‘social health,’ while ‘disaster preparation’ and ‘youth and education’ also appear to have gained in social importance (from 8 to 4 and from 7 to 5, respectively).

Table 15. Rensai Frames 2015-2016

Frame	Frame: Category 1	2015-2016 rank	Long-term rank	Frame: Category 2	2015-2016 rank	Long-term rank
Modern Society	Modern Society and Life	1	2	Contemporary Topics	2	5
Individual Expression	Thematic Essays	2	5			
Economy and Business	Local Businesses	2	4	Local Economy	(6)	3
Place Creation	Town Life	3	5	Local Culture - History	(5)	1
Medicalization and Health	Medical Care	3	5	Health Related	5	7
Disaster Preparation	Disaster Preparation	4	8	Youth – Education	5	7

Source: Original research.

The research on the ‘Commentary/Opinion’ page revealed a lack of sourcing for a majority of the opinion pieces, which is common practice in Japanese newspapers and magazines, but use of named experts to some degree as well. The research also showed a range of topics taken up on the ‘Commentary/Opinion’ page—domestic as well as international, specifically timely (abdication) as well as political (the Moritomo school issue) and legislative (labor law), with a tense balance regarding criticism, being noticeably low in one period but conversely notably high in another.

Taken together, the research reveals the idea, practice and influence of the local newspaper in Japan. While the present research should be viewed both as a continuation of the previous research introduced in the beginning of this paper and precursory to additional and more detailed research, the results do point to several areas of interest. Regarding the readership patterns and implications thereof, it appears that the reading of the local newspaper is viewed as obligatory at a social level, but which also comes with perhaps less power to generate local attachment and civic participation—both in terms of volunteer participation as well as individual interaction—than once thought. That said, the local newspaper is still highly read, highly trusted and viewed positively. Regarding the *rensai*, the research points to a view of local newspaper *rensai* as providing readers with information necessary to cope with modern society and contemporary issues—in the form of the content-oriented *rensai*—while also offering an expressive experience, albeit passively—in the form of the ‘essay’ *rensai*—and a sense of place for readers—in the form of the ‘town life’ and ‘local culture and history’ *rensai*. In this sense, the *rensai* seem to continue to set an agenda of economic, if not ‘urban cultural’ (re)vitalization, while also recognizing the emerging and growing demands for health information and the ongoing consciousness of, if not active preparation for disasters. Finally, the local newspaper seems, if only on its ‘Commentary/Opinion’ page, to be embracing to some degree, elements of, if not ‘investigative

journalism,' then at a minimum 'critical journalism.'

If, as the premise of media research holds, the mass media focuses attention and defines social issues, while also offering interpretations of the details and implications of those issues, then, given the news dissemination functions, the categorical range of *rensai*, and the criticism of national issues offered by local newspapers that are described herein, an important conclusion that can be drawn from the present research is that the societal implications of the local newspaper are potentially quite significant, and if nothing else, certainly worthy of more extensive and detailed research. While the local newspaper can be viewed conservatively as influencing only the readership of its host region, given the level of local newspaper readership in Japan, the research that follows on what has been offered in this paper thus concerns the aggregate effect of the over 40 local newspapers that cover the whole of Japan.

References

Anastasio, P., K. Rose, and J. Chapman, 1999, "Can the Media Create Public Opinion? A Social-Identity Approach," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 8(5): 152-155.

Bauer, M., and G. Gaskill, 1999, "Towards a Paradigm for Research on Social Representations," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 29(2): 163-186.

Chen, C. C., 2014, "A Research on Newspaper Reading Habit in Japan: An Empirical Study (*sic*)," 3rd *International Conference on Science and Science Research*, 636-641.

D'Angelo, P. and J. A. Kuypers, 2010, "Introduction: Doing News Framing Analysis," in P. D'Angelo and J. A. Kuypers (eds.) *Doing News Framing Analysis: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives*, New York: Routledge, 1-14.

Fackler, M., 2016, "Sinking a bold foray into watchdog journalism in Japan," *Columbia Journalism Review*, 25 October 2016; www.cjr.org/the_feature/asahi_shimbun_japan_journalism.php

Gerber, G., 1967, "Mass Media and Human Communication," In *Human Communication Theory*, ed. F.E.X. Dance. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Kitahara, T., 2012, "Genpatsu ritchiken no chihoshi no roncho-bunseki: 3.11go wo dou ronjitekitak (Analysis of editorials of regional newspapers in publishing areas of which locate nuclear power plants: How have these papers reported post 3.11)," (*sic*), *Shobi gakuen daigaku sogo seisaku ronshu*,

14, 43-65.

Kuypers, J.A., 2010, "Framing Analysis from a Rhetorical Perspective," in P. D'Angelo and J. A. Kuypers (eds.) *Doing News Framing Analysis: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives*, New York: Routledge, 286-311.

McNeill, D., 2016, "False Dawn: The Decline of Watchdog Journalism in Japan," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 14, 20 (2); 1-17.

McQuail, D., 1987, *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction*. London: Sage.

Nakano, K., J. Yu, R. Sakakibara, T. Kitahara, M. Ariga, K. Hayashi, and H. Tanaka, 2014, "How Japanese Newspapers Contribute to Community Engagement," *Journal of Socio-Informatics*, 7(1); 13-24.

Nisbet, M. C., 2010, "Knowledge into Action: Framing the Debates over Climate Change and Poverty," in P. D'Angelo and J. A. Kuypers (eds.) *Doing News Framing Analysis: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives*, New York: Routledge, 43-83.

Possmann, M., 2015, "Japan's Controversial State Secrets Law: One Year Later," *The Diplomat*, online, available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/12/japans-controversial-state-secrets-law-one-year-later/?allpages=yes&print=yes>.

Rausch, A., 2002a, "The Role of the Local Newspaper Media in Generating a Citizen Volunteer Consciousness," *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, 11: 102-117.

Rausch, A., 2002b, "Volunteer Organizational Agenda Setting in the Print Media: A Case Study in Rural Japan," *The Nonprofit Review*, 2(1): 35-45.

Rausch, A., 2004, "Collective Identity Creation and Local Revitalization in Rural Japan: The Complex Role of the Local Newspaper," *electronic journal of contemporary Japanese studies*. Online. Available at: www.japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/Rausch.html.

Rausch, A., 2008, "Media Representation of Volunteerism and the Nonprofit Sector in Rural Japan:

- The 'Issue-Attention Cycle' and the Potential for Agenda Setting," *The Nonprofit Review*, 7(2): 75-82.
- Rausch, A., 2011, "Revitalization Journalism in Rural Japanese Newspapers: A Case Study of the Toonippo Newspaper and Aomori Prefecture," *International and Advanced Japanese Studies*, 3: 1-14.
- Rausch, A., 2012, *Japan's Local Newspapers: Chihoshi and Revitalization Journalism*. London: Routledge.
- Rausch, A., 2013, "The Regional Newspaper in Post-Disaster Coverage: Trends and Frames of the Great East Japan Disaster, 2011," *Keio Communication Review*, 35; 35-50.
- Rausch, A., 2014a, "The Great East Japan Disaster, 2011 and the Regional Newspaper: Transitions from News to Newspaper Columns and the Creation of Public Memory," *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, 32(2); 275-296.
- Rausch, A., 2014b, "From News to Memory Creation: Regional Newspaper Coverage of the Great East Japan Disaster, 2011" in *Japanese Journalism and the Japanese Newspaper: A Supplemental Reader*, ed. Anthony Rausch; Teneo Press; pp. 243-265.
- Scheufele, D. and D. Tewksbury, 2007, "Framing, Agenda-Setting and Priming: The Evolution of Three Media Models," *Journal of Communication*, 57(1): 9-22.
- Sekiguchi, T., 2014, "Japan Real Time: Controversial Japan State Secrets Law Implemented," *The Wall Street Journal*, online. Available at: <http://blogs.wsj.com/japanrealtime/2014/12/10/jsecret1210/>
- Umemoto, S., 2016, *Chihoshi ha Chiiki wo Tsukuru – Jumin no tame no Journalism*. Tokyo: Nantsumori Shokan.
- Van Gorp, B., 2010, "Strategies to Take Subjectivity out of Framing Analysis," in P. D'Angelo and J. A. Kuypers (eds.) *Doing News Framing Analysis: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives*, New York: Routledge, 84-109.