

Media Trade Wars (II)

- **Media manipulation and steering wheels**
- **How to be a Japan-basher**

Week 4: Media Trade Wars (II)

READING 1: MEDIA MANIPULATION AND STEERING WHEELS

“PART OF THE PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGN of any government deals simply with disseminating facts, out of a belief that important information has been lacking or ignored. But public relations also involves manipulating facts into a form favorable to the government’s policy stance. This effort can include overt alteration or interpretation of the facts, or a more indirect route of diverting attention to other friendlier topics...This should be no surprise; people are used to the convenient repackaging of information by politicians and political parties in domestic policy battles. Similar manipulation was often painfully obvious to foreign observers of Japan in the prewar period, but the effort continues today.

Consider the following small example. From the signing of the US-Japan Framework Agreement in July 1993 until the end of June 1995, one of the central issues being negotiated between the two governments concerned access to the Japanese auto market (including finished automobiles, assembly parts, and parts for the repair market). The three American-owned auto companies concerned had a somewhat mixed reputation in Washington, stemming from negative safety, fuel efficiency, and quality issues dating back to the 1960s. The Japanese government built upon this tarnished image by alleging that the American auto companies failed to market cars with the steering on the correct side (that is, on the right hand side of the car for the Japanese market where traffic drives on the left-hand side of the road).

I have personally given public presentations or attended functions at locations all across America where I have been told by Americans about how poorly the American auto companies did their homework in marketing cars to Japan. The attitude was... that if the American companies are so inept as to market cars with the steering wheel on the wrong side, then they certainly deserve no sympathy from the administration in Washington.

The reality was quite different. When the market for foreign automobiles opened up marginally in the 1970s, cars with the steering wheel on the ‘wrong’ side of the car carried an exotic cachet. The foreign auto companies (American and European) had accepted the standard advice to seek a niche of the market that would not compete directly with the mass market served by Japanese firms. The market for expensive, exotic, foreign cars with steering wheels on the left was the result. Even the British were marketing such cars! On a trip through the western part of Japan in 1996, I saw tollbooths on highway entrance ramps that had special ticket vending machines on the left of the lane just for those driving foreign cars.

Furthermore, the information put out by the Japanese government was simply wrong. In the 1990s, the market for foreign automobiles began to shift, and at the time that the Japanese government accused the American manufacturers of selling the wrong cars in Japan, the three American manufacturers had some fifty-nine models available for sale in Japan with the steering wheel mounted on the proper side. Nevertheless, observe the beauty of such an approach by the Japanese government. The argument was simple and appealing, particularly to US policy elites who had harbored negative feelings toward the Big Three for decades” (Lincoln 2001: 112)

Reading 2: Protectionism kicks in (but not for long)

White House makes plain need for cutback in Japan car imports

From Frank Vogl
Washington, March 24

President Reagan has decided that a reduction in Japanese car exports to the United States is essential. He is believed to have told Mr Masayoshi Ito, the foreign minister of Japan, at a White House meeting today that Japan should find a way to restrain car shipments to America.

The Administration is seeking to protect the ailing American car industry without formally approving protectionist measures, such as quotas or special import tariffs.

A cabinet level task force, headed by Mr Drew Lewis, secretary of transportation, has concluded that swift action by Japan on voluntary restraints is vital if the United States Congress is to be stopped from passing tough protectionist legislation.

The White House has not yet decided on the desirable level of Japanese car imports. Last year, Japan exported 1.9 million cars to America. The Administration is hoping that the Japanese will take the initiative and set levels of their own, but Mr Ito has indicated

that his government wants a clear signal from President Reagan.

Mr Lewis said that it was his understanding that the Japanese authorities wanted to be told bluntly just what the United States Administration really wanted. He said it was in Japan's best interest to reduce their exports, and it was his personal view that the reduction should be 200,000 to 500,000 cars below last year's level.

Leaders of the American car industry are strongly in favour of restraints on the Japanese. It looks as if the Ford Motor Company might have losses in the first quarter of this year of around \$500m after a loss of \$1,500m last year. Chrysler is also likely to sustain substantial losses.

Each of the United States manufacturers is offering rebates to boost sales.

The White House expects that any deal struck with Japan will bring angry protests from the Europeans. However, officials suggested that countries such as Italy and France had long used administrative methods to block imports of Japanese cars.

The Times March 25 1981: The White House hangs tough, (though four years later it would end the quota).

Reading 3: Edward Lincoln and *Foreign Affairs*: a case study in Japan-bashing

IN THE LATE 1990s, Dr. Edward Lincoln, whose life's work was the study of Japan, found himself labelled a 'Japan-basher'. We'll study the origin of the term later, but for now, let's look at what Dr. Lincoln did to earn his title.

"IN CONTEMPORARY TERMS, the most common form this can take is to find oneself dismissed as a 'Japan basher'. The presumption is that the criticism expressed must be invalid because the individual involved has some emotional, irrational dislike of Japan. Thus, the counterattack against the criticism involves undermining the personal qualifications of the critic rather than addressing the criticism itself.

I have been the target of such campaigns upon occasion. In the spring of 1998, for example, I published an article in *Foreign Affairs* that was quite critical of Japan's handling of macroeconomic policy and the bad debt problem during the 1990s. The situation was heading toward crisis (with the economy in a downward spiral, and with no coherent plan to rescue a banking industry that was edging closer to wholesale collapse), and strong, blunt pressure and criticism were needed to induce the government to alter its policies.

Much of the Japanese reaction to my article focused on personality. Some Japanese acquaintances in Washington asked me (some at the behest of the Embassy) what was wrong — had I had some bad experience in Japan that had prejudiced me against the Japanese government? Subsequently, I heard from others that they had been told by Japanese government contacts that I was just a 'Japan basher' and should be ignored. During one discussion of my long personal history of involvement with Japan, an interviewer from a Japanese research institute expressed great relief, and blurted out that he now recognized that I was critical because I loved Japan and not because I hated it! However, the arguments resonated with some Japanese and Americans, who now routinely categorize me as a 'Japan basher'.

Generally, one can ignore such criticisms and simply get on with the business of analysis and writing. Others, however, apparently find that their access to contacts in Japan is harmed, or even that their careers are jeopardized. These tactics are certainly less harsh than the imprisonment or expulsion some faced before the war, but still a serious issue" (Lincoln 2001: 113).

Lincoln, Edward J. (May/June 1998) 'Japan's Financial Mess', *Foreign Affairs* 77 (3), 57-66.

QUESTIONNAIRE	CLASS NAME	WEEK No.
NAME	STUDENT No.	DATE
1. WHAT WAS THIS CLASS/FILM ABOUT?		
2. WHAT ARE THE MAIN QUESTIONS IT RAISES?		
3. WHAT IS IMPORTANT ABOUT THIS SUBJECT?		
4. ANY OTHER COMMENTS?		