

# Sophia University –January Session 2026

January 7 – January 28, 2026 \*January 7: Orientation

Date: September 10, 2025

<b>Course Title</b>	Media and Contemporary Issues in Japan
<b>Course Code</b>	SOZ201
<b>Instructor</b>	Robert Gilhooly
<b>Class Period</b>	2 <sup>nd</sup> Period (10:55-12:35)
<b>Course Format</b>	In-Person
<b>Language of Instruction</b>	English
<b>Maximum class size</b>	40
<b>Course Description</b>	<p>The Internet in general and social media in particular have become significant engines for alternative sources of information, including the news, often usurping conventional media outlets due to the immediacy that is inherent in new media. A perennial problem for the consumer is determining which media is providing reliable, trustworthy information, not least of all in an era when prominent figures in authority are accusing even the most respected news outlets of spreading “fake news” and then using social media to convey their own version of “the truth.” This is particularly problematic when issues that directly impact society are brought under scrutiny and its polarizing effects begin to be felt and even seen. On the other hand, conventional media are often held hostage by the masters of industry – i.e. their advertisers or “sponsors” – who can influence the way certain topics are covered and relayed to the public.</p> <p>In Japan, consumers are faced with a conundrum that differs to many other countries. Many of Japan’s main media outlets are often viewed as lacking a clear voice, avoiding controversy in favor of appearing “impartial.” What’s more, its journalists are kept in line via a restrictive “press club” system, which in turn can lead to a culture of self-censorship. Thus, despite a wide range of controversial social issues in Japan – from the country’s nuclear energy policy to the continuation of capital punishment and poor gender equality record – the perception is of a media that, at best, aims for neutrality and at worst seems to toe the government line.</p> <p>This ultimately means that views expressed by new media (sometimes in the form of Western news sources that have a Japanese presence online) can stand in stark contrast to those expressed by conventional Japanese outlets. What is becoming increasingly clear, however, is that the reliability of social media in Japan is as unpredictable as anywhere. And despite the problems of legacy media, which occasionally make front page headlines, Japanese consumers tend to take a “better the Devil you know” stance, meaning the influence of Japan’s legacy media continues to be strong. For example, its newspaper circulation figures, while falling, remain considerably higher than many other developed countries around the world.</p>

	<p>This course will look at the influence of the various types of media in Japan, the problems that impact its effectiveness, while also examining how they impact the coverage of a variety of social. Students will be challenged to think critically about these issues as they are presented by different types of media and how those media, in turn, are influenced by external societal and other factors. The course will also provide the opportunity to discuss how the situation in Japan compares internationally.</p>
<b>Course Objectives</b>	<p>This course aims to introduce students to some important social issues faced by Japan and how those issues are reported in the media. By examining the complexity of the nature and background of the media, the course aims to get students to think critically about the role various media play in raising, or stymying, awareness about social issues, as well as thinking about how they themselves can help develop a more conducive environment for improved media coverage of such issues.</p>
<b>Expected work outside of class</b>	<p>This course combines lectures, discussions, presentations, written reports and a final examination. Students will learn not just through instruction, but from one another by active participation in the exchange of ideas and opinions. Students are encouraged and expected to share their opinions, personal experiences and views in class.</p> <p>To this end, students will be required to study suggested reading, videos and other content, which will be posted on the Moodle portal and form the core of work outside the class. They will also be required to work on their final presentation and written assignments.</p> <p>The length of time required for the above-mentioned work outside classes varies, but on average is approximately 1 hour per class.</p>
<b>Course Materials</b>	<p>URLs and other resources will be provided via the university's online Moodle portal</p> <p>Purchase of textbook: not necessary</p> <p>e-book: not applicable</p>
<b>Moodle</b>	<p>Course-related materials will be uploaded to Moodle</p>
<b>Contact Instructor</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• via Moodle message</li> <li>• via Email</li> </ul> <p>*The email address will be available at CGED office or informed by the instructor in the first class if needed.</p>
<b>Evaluation (Attendance, Class participation, in-class assignments, final exam, quizzes, etc.)</b>	<p>The final grade for the course will be determined by evaluation in the following areas, with the weight attributed to each in parentheses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Class Attendance and Participation<sup>1</sup> (10%)</li> <li>• Homework (10%)</li> <li>• Term paper<sup>2</sup> (30%)</li> <li>• Presentation<sup>3</sup> (30%)</li> <li>• Final Examination (20%)</li> </ul>

	<p><sup>1</sup>Class attendance and active participation in discussions are mandatory. Students are expected to keep abreast of current news and issues within and outside of Japan and be prepared to discuss them in class.</p> <p><sup>2</sup>One paper (written in English) should be approximately 800 words. Students with advanced level Japanese-language skills who feel more comfortable writing in that language rather than English may be permitted to write papers in Japanese.</p> <p><sup>3</sup>Students are required to make a group presentation in a preferred medium.</p>
<b>Other comments</b>	-
<b>Class schedule</b>	<p>*January 7: Orientation</p> <p>*January 12: No-Class Day</p> <hr/> <p>[DAY 1] Media and Society I</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Overview of Japanese media and society</li> </ul> <p>This session will provide an overview of Japan's media, looking at its characteristics and the concepts of "freedom of the press." It also looks at what conventionally are considered to be the responsibilities of the media in a democratic society, why newspapers and so on exist, or are supposed to exist, and how they can be influenced by certain entities and institutions.</p> <hr/> <p>[DAY 2] Media and Society II</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•This session follows continues the theme of Japan's media, but expands the topic to also look at society's attitudes to mainstream and other media and media responsibilities in a democratic society. It also looks at the kinds of events that can trigger public mistrust, and the effectiveness of legal frameworks to set media standards.</li> </ul> <hr/> <p>[DAY 3] Exerting control: Nuclear Power</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Japan's "Nuclear Power Village" and the role of the media</li> </ul> <p>This session looks at example(s) of how public trust in the media can be eroded, starting with the way legacy media reported the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 and how it compared with new media's views of events. It also provides historical perspectives to help understand how such natural disasters, coupled with political and other types of vested interest, can have a devastating and long-lasting impact on local communities and the national psyche. Another important element that will be introduced is Japan's post-war energy policy, and how that is inextricably tied to legacy media's independence, or lack thereof.</p>

[DAY 4] Discrimination I

•Racism and Japan's minorities – Hate speech vs freedom of expression  
This session focuses on racial discrimination, and how Japan's attitudes toward non-Japanese is changing with the urge in foreign visitors and residents, who are increasingly in demand due to Japan's plummeting workforce. It also takes a look at some historical factors that have influenced attitudes toward certain ethnic minorities who have settled in Japan, or are a part of the social framework, and how nationalist attitudes have led to an increasing number of municipalities introducing hate speech legislation, which has been found to be wanting at the national level.

[DAY 5] Discrimination II

•Gender inequality – Japan's #MeToo movement  
This session continues the theme of discrimination, moving on to look at how Japan fares in the area of gender discrimination. Areas that are covered include Japan's #MeToo movement and other more unique women-driven movements that grew out of that global crusade, and new legislation that attempts to correct the imbalance that exists in politics and executive positions in the corporate world. It will also examine the social stigmas and expectations that influence attitudes toward women, especially women leaders in these fields, and other issues pertaining to women's position in society, as well as attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals.

[DAY 6] Guest speaker : Sayuri Daimon

•Gender equality  
Journalist and former newspaper executive Sayuri Daimon will talk about life for women in politics and the corporate world and how the Japanese media portrays women.

[DAY 7] The Wealth Gap & Japanese Uniformity

This session looks at some of the issues that have led to a widening wealth gap in Japan, not to mention an increase in relative poverty. It also looks at some of the social issues that emerged from Japan's economic slowdown starting in the 1990s including "Hikikomori," or social recluses, and the impact of Japanese popular culture on some of these problems. The session will also introduce some of the social problems that are inextricably tied with the kind of social uniformity that is a hallmark of post-war Japan, including bullying and "juken" exam pressure. Lastly, we will talk about Japan's greatest "resource," increasing job insecurity, and the fall and rise and fall of suicidal ideation.

[DAY 8] Labor issues

	Continuing on the theme of Japan's labor force, uniformity, and social behavioral expectations and pressures, this session introduces the concept of "Karoshi," now an internationally recognized word, and working for "Black Corporations." It will also examine aspects of the Japanese consumer society and its "demanding" consumers, including the sinister side of "claimer" culture.
	[DAY 9] Guest speaker : Noriko Nakahara & Yohei Suda Ms. Nakahara and lawyer Yoshei Suda will visit to give presentations on the labor-related problems of "Karoshi" and "Karojisatsu," giving insights into how these issues impact the families of victims and how Japan's legal framework has been amended to support them.
	[DAY 10] The Legal System/Penal Code This session will look at attitudes toward capital punishment in Japan and a system of police interrogation that has been widely condemned, leading to wrongfully convicted individuals being given the death penalty. It also introduces the complexities of Japan's penal code, which essentially is based in the premise that a criminal is guilty until proven innocent, and the rise of the mass murderer in Japan.
	[DAY 11] Environmental Issues This session looks into Japan's efforts to tackle a number of environmental problems in light of its difficult past, including the fallout of the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011. It will also talk about Japan's approaches to protecting animals and marine ecosystems, etc., and how they are inextricably linked to "food culture."
	[DAY 12] Student presentation (1)
	[DAY 13] Student presentation (2)
	[DAY 14] Final Examination

\*Course format, evaluation methods and class schedule may be subject to change.

**[Important Note Regarding Class Capacity]**

Course enrollment in each course is on a first-come, first-served basis. Please be aware that once the maximum capacity is reached, you will no longer be able to select that course.

If you plan to transfer the credits to your home university, please consider alternative courses as well when making your study plan, in case the courses you want to take are full.