

Sophia University –January Session 2027

January 7 – January 29, 2027 *January 7: Orientation

Date: August 2026

Course Title	Media and Contemporary Issues in Japan
Course Code	SOZ201
Instructor	Robert Gilhooly
Class Period	2 nd Period (10:55-12:35)
Course Format	In-Person
Language of Instruction	English
Maximum class size	40
Course Description	The Internet in general and social media in particular have become significant alternative sources of information, including the news, often usurping "legacy" (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 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. 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, and indeed does lead to a culture of self-censorship. Thus, despite a wide range of social issues in Japan – from the country's 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. 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. Added to this is the surge in recent years in the number of AI-enabled (fake) news sites, which researchers say is exacerbating the spread of misinformation and disinformation. What is becoming increasingly clear, however, is that the reliability of new media in Japan is as unpredictable as anywhere. And despite the problems of legacy media, which occasionally make front page headlines for the wrong reasons – some of them legitimate – Japanese consumers tend to take a "better the Devil you know" stance, meaning the influence of Japan's traditional media continues to be strong. For example, its

	newspaper circulation figures, while falling, remain relatively high compared with many other developed countries around the world, where newspapers, for example, are closing one after another. This course will look at the nature of Japan's media; how it is changing in this world of new media; the influence of the various types of media on the general public; and the obstacles that impact the media's effectiveness. It will also examine how inherent shortfalls in the organizational structure underpinning the media impact the coverage of a variety of social problems. 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.
Course Objectives	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.
Expected work outside of class	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. 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. Additionally, they will also be required to work on their coursework assignments. The length of time required for the above-mentioned work outside classes varies, but on average is approximately 1 hour per class/day.
Course Materials	URLs and other resources will be provided via the university's online Moodle portal
	Purchase of textbook: not necessary
	e-book: not applicable
Moodle	Course-related materials will be uploaded to Moodle
Contact Instructor	• via Moodle message • via Email *The email address will be available at CGED office or informed by the instructor in the first class if needed.
Evaluation (Attendance,	The final grade for the course will be determined by evaluation in the

Class participation, in-class assignments, final exam, quizzes, etc.)	following areas, with the weight attributed to each in parentheses: • Class Attendance and Participation¹ (15%) • Homework (10%) • Term paper² (15%) • Presentation³ (30%) • Final Examination (30%) ¹Class 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. ²One paper approximately 800 words in length to be submitted by the end of the course. 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. ³Students are required to make a group presentation in a preferred medium.
Other comments	-
Class schedule	*January 7: Orientation *January 11 & January 22: No-Class Days [SESSION 1] Media and Society I •Overview of Japanese media and society This session will provide an overview of Japan's media, looking at its characteristics and the concept of "media freedom/ 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, broadcasters, and so on exist, or are supposed to exist, and how they can be influenced by certain entities and institutions. [SESSION 2] Media and Society II •This session 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 undermine the media's effectiveness and trigger public mistrust, as well as the effectiveness or otherwise of legal frameworks to set media standards. [SESSION 3] Exerting control: Nuclear Power •Japan's "Nuclear Power Village" and the role of the media This session looks at examples 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 (including personal blogs, YouTube!, etc.) views of events. It also provides historical perspectives to help understand how such natural disasters, coupled

	with political and other types of vested interests, 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.
	[SESSION 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.
	[SESSION 5] Discrimination II •Gender Issues 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.
	[SESSION 6] Guest speaker : Shiroy Ito •Gender issues 2: Japan's #MeToo movement Journalist Shiroy Ito will talk about her experience as a woman in the media and 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.