

Article

Revitalization Journalism in Rural Japanese Newspapers: A Case Study of the *Tōonippō* Newspaper and Aomori Prefecture

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This research examines a local Japanese newspaper, focusing on how the functions of providing for information, correlation, continuity and mobilization in response to both declining readership and the depressed economy may be contributing to the emergence of a new journalistic genre which I call revitalization journalism. The research highlights how content that is informational and educational, and provides for local identity-affirmation, local boosterism and direct local business promotion, is being presented as ‘news’ content within long-running columns in a local newspaper in rural Japan. The findings are particularly noteworthy in the print media environment of Japan, where national-level and local-level newspapers compete for the same readers and therefore have to clearly differentiate themselves from one another. In addition, the now-completed Heisei municipal mergers have created economic uncertainty in many rural areas, a circumstance that furthers the contemporary relevance of the research. The paper concludes that this local newspaper may be establishing its local function by not only focusing on local circumstances, but also offering content that makes a clear contribution to the future of its host area.

Keywords: journalism, local newspaper, revitalization

1. Introduction

This research originated in the combination of a long term and ongoing analytical review of a local newspaper in rural Japan and the current economic recession and government decentralization that is taking place throughout Japan, but which is affecting rural areas particularly hard.¹ While this long term analysis of the local newspaper has offered various viewpoints, the content of the present research will argue that in the case study examined, there is a clear orientation in some content toward local revitalization, meaning that the local newspaper can be viewed as being an agent of change in the community through the presentation of this content as news. This is seen as the newspaper is producing numerous specifically topical and long-running columns which while inherently informational, educational, identity-affirming and reflect local boosterism, also indirectly and directly serve to cultivate local economic revitalization.

2. The Role of the Local Newspaper

Newspapers are a ritualistic part of everyday life for most people, such that the ‘take for granted’

1 See Rausch, *A Year with the Local Newspaper*; ‘The Role of the Local Newspaper’; ‘Collective Identity Creation and Local Revitalization in Rural Japan’; ‘Media Representation of Volunteerism and the Nonprofit Sector in Rural Japan’.

fundamental functions that they fulfill are often overlooked in ordinary consumption. In the broadest terms and at the most basic level, newspapers function to inform the public of current events as they unfold: in other words, to provide the reader with the 'news.' On such a generalized level, the dominant variables that dictate both production and consumption are temporal, geographical and thematic: that which is current or timely, that which is relevant, whether national, regional or local, to the locale, and that which is meaningful for the reader. However, the implications of contemporary newspaper consumption go much deeper, as McQuail detailed in providing a list of five specific newspaper functions:

1. being informative – providing information about current events;
2. being correlative – explaining, interpreting and commenting on the meaning of these events;
3. ensuring continuity – representing the dominant culture while simultaneously recognizing and legitimizing new cultural developments;
4. providing entertainment – providing amusement, diversion, relaxation and release of social tension; and
5. acting to mobilize – campaigning for societal objectives in areas of politics, war, economic development, work and sometimes religion.²

Mirroring this generalized view is the case for a local newspaper. Ray alluded to local the function of local media as a source of local news and information that satisfy resident's information needs specific to their community.³ This is described as including the distribution of information about local happenings and community events, as well as providing analytical reporting that informs residents as to the state of their community. On a more active level and based on the contribution they provide to a public discourse on local issues, local newspapers constitute one of the most important social infrastructures facilitating individual and collective actions, a reflection of the practice of civic journalism that often operates in a small market newspaper environment.⁴

The multitude of often times overlapping, sometimes competing functions outlined above manifest themselves in various newspaper forms and formats, which serve to balance the respective priorities of producer and consumer. The assessment of the product this produces comes in part in judgments regarding the quantity of these elements and in part in judgments of the quality of these elements. Quantity measures are based on quantifiable measures and the distributions of form and content. The suitable measures include, for example, the balance of news articles versus editorial contributions, the balance of international, national and local focus, or on thematic orientation of the content, for example, governance, business, sports, or lifestyle. Quality is a more difficult component to measure, as Picard highlighted in outlining how newspaper quality is an amorphous and problematic concept; a good newspaper is ultimately something judged on highly subjective criteria.⁵ That said, in general, the traditional factors that have contributed to readers rating a newspaper positively include their perception of the newspaper fulfilling the role of watchdog over government and the newspaper focusing on both the civic the and personal interests of the readers, all while helping the readers feel smarter.⁶ Expanding on this, Kim and Meyer broadly identified five factors as the basis of a newspaper quality measurement

2 McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory*, 29–47.

3 Ray, 'Technological Change and Associational Life.

4 Jeffries, et al., 'Newspaper Reading'; Wilkins, 'The Role of the Media'; McLeod, et al., 'Community, Communication, and Participation'.

5 Picard, 'Commercialism and Newspaper Quality', 56–60.

6 McCauley and Nesbitt, 'Key Newspaper Experiences'.

system: ease of use, local relativism, editorial vigor, news quantity and news interpretation.⁷ However, Maguire described how newspaper measures of quality differed fundamentally from the measures common to other industries, in that the needs of the customer, the basis for quality indexes in most industries, are often less important in the newspaper industry than considerations of the views of the editors and journalists as to what constitutes quality.⁸ Fleming and Steffans counter this by stressing that editors and journalists must be aware of the reality that it is readers that determine the fate of a newspaper.⁹ If readers perceive local newspapers to be trustworthy, to provide sufficient background and depth to issues, and to understand the community in which they operate, care about the readers of that community and provide something of value to these readers, it is likely that the newspaper will have a viable and sustainable readership.

3. Local Newspapers in Japan

With an advanced political and economic system, an information-based society and First Amendment-type freedom of expression, the social circumstance surrounding newspapers in Japan mirrors that of most Western democracies. However, every setting reflects its own national to local hierarchy of newspapers. In the case of Japan, a three to four-layer hierarchy can be seen. This consists of a national level, comprised of several distinct national newspapers, followed by the regional, or block newspapers, which may cover a multi-prefectural region, then the prefectural and sub-prefectural newspapers, which serve a prefecture or a part of a prefecture, and lastly, weeklies and other specialized non-daily newspapers. The primary distinction between the national, regional and prefectural and sub-prefectural level newspapers is the geographical extent of coverage they aim for, with implications for the depth of local coverage they achieve.

Over the course of extensive research on Japanese newspapers, Cho found that most Japanese newspaper readers clearly distinguish between the national and local (prefectural) dailies, with the local newspaper management attempting to provide the local newspaper as a substitute rather than a complement to the newspapers offered at the national level.¹⁰ This is most often accomplished by changing the content distribution of the local newspaper, focusing, somewhat counter-intuitively, on national and international news at the expense of local news in highly competitive markets. Cho concluded this strategy is adopted as a function of the market saturation that characterizes Japanese media markets. On the one hand, increasing national and international content in a local newspaper would present it as a possible competitor to the national daily, one worthy of consideration as the newspaper of choice. On the other hand, increasing the local content of a local newspaper would relegate it to being a complement to the national dailies, possibly an un-necessary complement, thereby possibly resulting in decreased readership. However, in more recent research, Cho also found that newspaper ownership had an effect on the human and budget allocations and expectations of local newspapers.¹¹ As non-business-oriented ownership forms did not reduce non-advertising space in the newspaper and human resources allocation to the level that business-oriented ownership did, the conclusion of the research was that some local newspapers utilize a goal structure that includes elements outside pure profit maximization. This implies the possibility of some alternative operating model for such newspapers. As for what functions local newspapers are, Hayashi and Kobayashi identify the following categories manifest in community media in Japan:

7 Kim and Meyer, 'Survey Yields Five Factors of Newspaper Quality'.

8 Maguire, 'Changes in Ownership Affect Quality of Oshkosh Paper', 76–78.

9 Fleming and Steffans, 'Understanding Readers of Local Newspapers', 18.

10 Cho, 'The Effect of Competition'.

11 Cho, 'The Impact of Ownership'.

- (1) to provide information as knowledge;
- (2) to oversee the community environment;
- (3) to mobilize citizen action;
- (4) to establish networks for community members;
- (5) to establish community identity;
- (6) to create new value and culture;
- (7) to transform individual experiences into community experiences.¹²

Reflecting the reality of practice, research by Yamaguchi revealed that the 50 responding staff members at a local newspaper in southern Japan recognized local issues in the character of functions they accomplished (see Table 1).¹³ As shown, as for what the newspaper accomplishes, such traditional news objectives as ensuring news accuracy, news timeliness, and news interest as well as providing a check on government and politicians were confirmed. The results also pointed to other functions, such as providing a discussion of local issues, presenting opinion, and contributing to local revitalization. Also notable was the response regarding the function of explaining difficult issues and increasing readers' knowledge.

Table 1 What does the local newspaper accomplish?^a (%)

	accomplish	somewhat accomplish	accomplish total	not accomplish
Ensure news accuracy	44	56	100	0
Provide discussion on local issues	38	60	98	2
Provide news quickly	30	64	94	6
Present local residents' opinions	28	60	88	12
Make news interesting	10	76	86	14
Check politicians/gov't officials	14	72	86	14
Contribute to local revitalization	16	68	84	12
Provide a check on government	16	66	82	18
Explain difficult issues	6	74	80	20
Increase readers' knowledge	4	64	68	32
Push newspaper agenda on issues	6	60	66	34
Check on powerful industries	2	44	46	52
Provide relaxation	4	42	46	52

^a from Yamaguchi, '*Chihoshi no news seisan katei*'.

Assessments of Japanese newspapers seem to confirm these characteristics. Beniger and Westney asserted that the print media Japanese consume is predominantly designed to increase knowledge and enhance skills.¹⁴ Takekawa concluded that while Japanese newspapers tend toward fact-centered and highly descriptive news coverage, with basic facts dominating the initial presentation of a news article,

12 Hayashi, '*Chiiki media shōshi*', 29–54; Kobayashi, '*Community governance to chiiki media*'.

13 Yamaguchi, '*Chihoshi no news seisan katei*'.

14 Beniger and Westney, '*Japanese and U.S. Media*'.

elaboration on issues also emerges, in the form of reactions by political leaders, business leaders and the general public.¹⁵ This elaboration is usually carried in the same issue, but in different sections, such as political affairs, business and economy and community affairs.

Evaluating all these separate pieces of research together in a combinative progression may signal the emergence of a new paradigm for local newspaper management in Japan, one in which there may be a shift from viewing the potential of the local newspaper as a substitute for the national newspaper toward viewing the local newspaper as a necessary component in the local news media-scape. Such foresight on the part of management may be prudent, as indications are that even the high levels of readership in Japan will not support the newspaper industry at present levels in the future.¹⁶ It is against this background that the research theme of this paper emerges: a case study of a local Japanese newspaper examining how the various functions identified above — McQuail's information, correlation, continuity and mobilization, together Hayashi and Kobayashi's knowledge, community, identity and value — are accomplished. The present research aims to illuminate the character of these dimensions in a case study examination of a rural Japanese newspaper that will focus on functions operationalized in the following forms: (1) issue education, the function of which is to educate the readership regarding issues of importance to the area; (2) local identity affirmation, the function of which is to create a feeling of capability among local residents of a peripheral rural place; and (3) local business promotion, the function of which is to contribute to local revitalization.

4. A Revitalization Function in a Rural Japanese Newspaper

The present case study focuses on the *Tōōnippō* newspaper, the defacto prefectural newspaper of Aomori Prefecture, located in northern Japan. Aomori Prefecture is a rural prefecture, located at the northernmost end of Honshu Island and far from the large urban areas of Japan. The prefecture is, like many other rural Japanese areas, also highly dependent on primary industries and experiencing economic and population decline. The recent national decentralization policy directed by the Japanese national government manifest in the Heisei municipal mergers has exacerbated the declining economic situation of the area overall in terms of central finance support while at the same time prefectural agriculture and businesses are forced to compete in increasingly competitive domestic and global markets. Previous research on the role of the local newspaper in local revitalization has been undertaken, research that focused on the same area, Aomori Prefecture, and used the same newspaper, the *Tōōnippō*.¹⁷ This previous research, however, utilized the notion of social representation to examine how the representation of cultural markers and cultural commodities in the local newspaper contributes to the formation and strengthening of local identity, thereby contributing in a clearly indirect manner to local revitalization.

Methodology

The methodology for this research was fairly straightforward and based on a grounded theory approach. A continuous review of the *Tōōnippō* newspaper as part of a larger research project, which included 15 local newspapers throughout Japan and highlighted the presence of the columns to be focused on, of which it was noted many were related to revitalization.¹⁸ A closer reading and group analysis suggested the educational, identity-affirming, and business promotional characteristics of these

15 Takekawa, 'A Japanese Style of News Framing'.

16 Perez, 'How Japanese Newspapers are Trying'; *Nihon Shinbun Kyōkai*, 'Japanese newspapers look for new ways'.

17 Rausch, 'Collective Identity and Local Revitalization'.

18 The newspapers are: Chunichi Shimbun, Hokkaido Shimbun, Shizuoka Shimbun, Chugoku Shimbun, Nihshi-

revitalization-related columns.¹⁹ The columns were tracked and collected over the course of a nine-month period (October 2009 to June 2010), with columns collected within two two-week periods (February 14 to 27 and June 6 to 19) used to measure the longevity and frequency of the columns. The emergence of these revitalization-related columns in the *Tōonippō* prior to the research period, and the subsequent focus that this research directs to them, highlights an important distinction between Rausch's previous research and the present research. The newspaper representation that the earlier research pointed to was seen in standard newspaper articles and consisted of representations of community involvement with cultural markers, the creation and re-creation of cultural markers that was realized through their representation, and references to the importance of cultural commodities-related infrastructure in local revitalization. The present research is based solely on an analysis of the characteristics of the revitalization-related columns examined over the research period.

The Tōonippō Newspaper

The *Tōonippō* Newspaper was established in 1888 and came to be the prefectural newspaper under the 1941 national policy of 'one prefecture – one newspaper,' through which the then five local newspapers of the area were merged under the *Tōonippō* masthead. The newspaper presently prints 260,000 copies of morning-evening editions per day, which accounts for 54 percent of newspaper circulation in the prefecture, employs 400 workers and has 15 branch offices throughout the prefecture together with offices in Tokyo and Osaka.²⁰ The *Tōonippō* ranks as the 38th most popular newspaper in Japan, behind the big five national newspapers and the big three national sports newspapers, as well as regional newspapers serving larger urban centers.²¹ In addition to competition from the national newspapers described above, the western half of the prefecture is served by the *Mutsu Shimpo*, a highly local newspaper that does not present much competition for the prefectural *Tōonippō*. Ikawa reported on data by the Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association that indicates the high level of prefectural and local newspaper readership in Aomori.²² The data shows Aomori Prefectural readership of the national-level Yomiuri Shimbun Newspaper at 7.2 percent (national average: 17.4%) and the national-level Asahi Shimbun Newspaper at 6.3 percent (national average: 14.5%). This is contrasted by readership of the two local newspapers, the *Tōonippō* and the *Mustu Shimpo*, at 50.9 percent and 19.5 percent respectively (national average for local newspaper: 44.3%). In local research unrelated to this project but which was centered on urban areas of the prefecture, the readership level of the *Tōonippō* was reported to be at 67 percent and the *Mustu Shimpo* at 27 percent, whereas the Yomiuri and Asahi were reported at 14 and 17 percent, respectively. Coverage of Aomori Prefectural issues by the *Tōonippō* was rated as very sufficient or sufficient by 64 percent of respondents and very accurate or accurate by 51 percent.²³

The layout of the *Tōonippō* is clear and consistent. The paper is usually 24 to 28 pages for the daily morning edition and eight for the evening. The front page includes a mix of significant international

Nippo Shimbun, Kahoku Shimbun, Shimotsuke Shimbun, Jomo Times, Fukushima Minpo, Toonippo Shimbun, Tokushima Shimbun, Saga Shimbun, Fukui Shimbun, Ibaraki Shimbun, Fukushima Minyu.

19 The 'group analysis' consisted of from 4 to 9 Japanese university students as 'readers,' who, after being informed as to the notions and objectives of the research, read and assessed the columns, categorizing and describing the character of the content.

20 *Tōonippō*, homepage.

21 *Yomiuri Shimbun*, *Asahi Shimbun*, *The Japan Times*, *Mainichi Shimbun*, *Nihon Kesai Shimbun*; the three sports are: *Sankei Sports*, *Nikkan Sports* and *Sports Nippon*. Following this are the regional and prefectural newspapers. From *Newspapers in Japan*, 2010 Ranking, www.4imn.com/jp (24 February 2010).

22 Ikawa, 'Chihoshi no kihonteki wakugumi', 66.

23 Rausch, 'The Role of the Local Newspaper', 104.

stories, national news and important local stories. Although the specific layout and number of pages may vary, in general, the first several inner pages (pages 2–6) are given over to comprehensive news of national political, economic and business news, followed by an opinion page, an international news page, which is usually followed by a two page lifestyle spread. Sports follows for three to four pages, after which comes four to six pages of local news, with several full pages of advertising interspersed along with radio and television programming. The examples of content that are the focus of this case study are found in the following examples of series columns, essentially long-running columns that are carried on a regular basis in the same place within the newspaper each time. While there are numerous and seemingly daily articles that take up similar content, the premise is that these articles are offered as newsworthy content, rather than being related to non-news-related objectives which are framed by education or revitalization as in the columns. Although categorized by combinations of functions including informational, educational, supportive of local businesses and related to local economic revitalization, what is common to the columns introduced below is that they constitute a notable component of what are otherwise news sections of the *Tōōnippō* newspaper.

The Column Categories and Column Contents

Below are the columns categorized by combinative function, with a description and a sample column. A post April re-formatting of the *Tōōnippō* newspaper yielded a change in some of the columns and the discontinuation of some columns with new substitutions established. All content based on the original in the *Tōōnippō* (e.g. column titles and specific column themes) was translated into English by the author; full descriptive data for the columns are provided below in Table 2.

Informational and Local Revitalization

Column Title: *Prefectural City Diary*

A series column which provides an example of an informational role combined with local revitalization, as the primary objective of the column is the dissemination of information about the policies and activities undertaken by local government and various local organizations that contribute to local revitalization. Column sample: 'Hiroaki City Mid-Dotemachi Street Environmental Reform – Taking a Soft Approach' (Contributor: Director, Renaissance Avenue Shopping Area Managing Director; 18 February 2010, column #146).

Summary: This category constitutes a purely news-oriented column that reports on various administrative activities related to revitalization.

Informational - Educational and Local Revitalization

Column Title: *Mr. Miura's 'Don't Lose, Aomori Enterprises'*

A series column in which a business consultant expounds on the characteristics of successful business enterprises throughout Japan. Column samples: 'Conquering Inventions takes Both Hands – the soul of manufacturing' (16 October 2009); 'Withdrawing from a Losing Endeavor – the most difficult decision' (19 February 2010, column #97). With the April reformatting, this column was retitled *Mr. Miura's Aomori Management Instructional Cram School*.

Column Title: *Aomori Economy Seminar*

A series column in which readers are invited to submit questions which are then answered in detail. Column samples: 'Prefectural Residents and Asset Use – 70% avoid risky products' (12 July 2009); 'What is CSR Activity – the social responsibility of corporations' (18 October 2009); 'The Reality of

Prefectural Food Producers – decreases in aquacultural production’ (1 November 2009); ‘The Economic Benefits of Attracting Businesses – major contributions to employment and production’ (14 February 2010, column #90). Common to the columns are graphs and tables.

Column Title: *The Big Debate – Reforming Agriculture*

A series column that ran for one month (30 October 2009 to 28 November 2009) that featured prominent academics, business leaders, politicians, and community organization leaders speaking on the theme of reforming local agriculture (front page, one-quarter page).

Column Title: *Step Up Aomori Tourism*

A series column begun with the reformatting of the paper, the aim of which is to educate prefectural residents about their own prefecture and its tourism potential in preparation for the completion of the Shinkansen High Speed train connecting Aomori with Tokyo that was completed in December of 2010 (the year of the research). At one-quarter of page 4, the *Step Up Aomori Tourism* column is one of the largest columns. Column samples: ‘For Aomori, here is the Point: Most popular tourist goods’ (13 June 2010, column #11), ‘Telling a Story: Aomori’s Food Culture’ (27 June 2010, column #13)

Column Title: *On the Frontlines of Aomori Fisheries*

A series column begun with the reformatting of the paper, the aim of which is to educate residents about the prefectural fishing industry, and includes data-based information, new developments in the industry and the business side of the fishing industry. Column sample : ‘PR a Big Hit: Dried Marine Products’ (2 April 2010, column #1), ‘Eco Fish Boxes: Water Resistant’ (7 May 2010, column #6).

Column Title: *Selling Aomori: Fight for Direct Sales*

A series column begun with the reformatting of the paper, the aim of which is to educate residents about the ‘local products direct sales’ industry, and includes data-based information, new developments in the industry and business aspects of the direct-sales industry. Column samples: ‘Showing your heart with a smile: Gaining customers joy’ (19 June 2010, column #12), ‘Improving product quality through understanding’ (31 July 2010, column #18).

Summary: The examples in this category portray a combinative informational-educational function directed to the local objective of revitalization. These columns offer informed descriptions, abundant detail with accompanying data, and well-defended opinions regarding the local economy and the future of agriculture, aquaculture and tourism, important foundations to the local economy.

Self-Affirmation and Boosterism

Column Title: *Challenge Aomori Enterprise*

A series column which introduces a local business and includes an interview with a representative of the business. Column samples: ‘Bunako Lacquerware Production (Hirosaki City): Advancing Interior Design, Expanding to Overseas Sales Routes’ (23 October 2007, number 30); ‘Tsugaru Miso (fermented bean paste) and Shoyu (soy sauce) (Owani Town): brewing activity in with enthusiasm, on-going for 100 years’ (16 February 2010); ‘Local Flavor Story: canning local taste, the importance of the company history’ (23 February 2010, column #143).

Column Title: *Notable Aomori Technology and Research*

A series column which introduces local research and technology. Column samples include: ‘Physics

Barometer Provides Direct Estimates – Hachinohe Technical School Engineering’ (17 October 2009); ‘Scallop Residue as Pig Feed – Prefectural Products Research Center’ (27 February 2010, column #98). Many of the columns are produced by various prefectural and municipal research centers. With the reformatting of the paper, this column became *Prefectural Ecology Technology*.

Summary: The two examples of this category represent a self-affirmation function, in the representation of the innovative and valuable local progress that is being made, accompanied by a civic booster function, in the introduction of local businesses in which interviews are included.

Local Business Promotion

Column Title: *Fly Aomori Brands*

A series column introducing prefectural brand foods and products. Column samples: ‘Nanbu Double Weaving – The Power of Hands on Experience’ (Nanbu District; 21 October 2009), ‘Aomori Prefecture HIBA Products – Enlarging the Cycle of Wood, Technique, Craftsperson’ (Contributor: Aomori Prefectural Products Technological Center; 18 November 2009), ‘Tsuruta Town Steuben Grapes – Research Improves Storage Capability’ (Contributor: Managing Director, Tsugaru Grape Company; 17 February 2010), ‘Local Taste shipped Nationwide – Towada City Bara Grilled Meat’ (Contributor: Towada City Bara Meat Publicity Director; 24 February 2010, column #97).

Column Title: *This Good and That Service*

A series column introducing locally-produced products and local services. Columns sample: ‘Kunet (product name) – An Easy to Grasp Stair Rail (department store name; 27 February 2010, column #558).

Column Title: *Aomori Restaurant Note*

A series column introducing local restaurants. Columns include a photo of a representative meal, a photo of the owner/manager a detailed description of the restaurant theme and specialties, and contact information and a map.

Column Title: *Prefectural Businesses to Notice*

A series column begun with the reformatting of the paper, the aim of which is to present local business enterprises in the newspaper, and includes information about the enterprise along with contact information. Column sample: ‘Activating Local Food Production, Tsugaru Strait Salt’ (12 August 2010, column #18).

Summary: The columns of this category represent clear promotion of local businesses. Although similar to boosterism and self-affirmation, these differ on the basis of the promotional element: while these columns are informational, there is an underlying emphasis on local consumption by local consumers.

Summary of Findings

As Table 2 shows, over the two two-week periods, series columns incorporating the elements of information and education in combination with local revitalization, together with themes of local identity-affirmation and boosterism as well as direct local business promotion, were relatively common and increased between the two periods. For the February 2010 period, the columns were presented as news content in the *Tōōnippō* seven out of fourteen days. For the June 2010 period, after the reformatting of the newspaper, the columns appeared 12 out of 14 days. In both periods, the size and placement of the columns was relatively prominent, being, at minimum one-sixth of a page and on the Economics and

Business page (page 4) of the newspaper. The table also affirms that this trend has been ongoing for several years, as all but one of the column series in the February set has continued for over 90 columns, with two over 140, one over 300 and another counting more than 550 columns.

Table 2 Toonippo Newspaper Columns Quantitative Assessment

Date	Theme (column title)	Number ^a	Page ^b	Size ^c
Feb. 14	information + education + revitalization (<i>Aomori Economy Seminar</i>)	90	page 4	1/3
Feb. 19	information + education + revitalization (<i>Mr. Miura's 'Don't Lose Aomori'</i>)	97	page 4	1/6
Feb. 23	local business promotion (<i>Aomori Restaurant Note</i>)	143	page 4	1/4
Feb. 23	affirmation + local boosterism (<i>Challenge: Aomori Enterprise</i>)	333	evening	1/6
Feb. 24	local business promotion (<i>Fly Aomori Brands</i>)	97	inside back	1/6
Feb. 25	informational + revitalization (<i>Prefectural City Diary</i>)	147	page 4	1/6
Feb. 27	affirmation + local boosterism (<i>Notable Aomori Technology - Research</i>)	98	page 4	1/6
Feb. 27	local business promotion (<i>This Good and That Service</i>)	558	page 4	1/6
Post April 2010 reformat of newspaper				
June 6, 13	information + education + revitalization (<i>Step up Aomori Tourism</i>)	10, 11	page 4	1/4
June 8, 15	affirmation + local boosterism (<i>Prefectural Ecology Technology</i>)	10, 11	page 4	1/6
June 9, 16	information + education + revitalization (<i>Mr. Miura's Aomori Mgmt Cram School</i>)	10, 11	page 4	1/6
June 10, 17	local business promotion (<i>Prefectural Businesses to Notice</i>)	9, 10	page 4	1/6
June 11, 18	information + education + revitalization (<i>On the Frontiers of Aomori Fisheries</i>)	11, 12	page 4	1/6
June 12, 19	information + education + revitalization (<i>Selling Aomori: Fight for Direct Sales</i>)	11, 12	page 4	1/6

^a number is the column sequence number as of the date (shown in the left column);

^b page is the page in the newspaper on which the column appears;

^c size is the size of the column relative to the size of the full page it appears on.

5. Discussion: Interpreting Multiple Functions in a Local Japanese Newspaper

Two principal notions contextualize the findings of this research. The first is that there are multiple roles that newspapers serve in their respective communities, subject to the direction of editors and journalists on the basis of varying degrees to responsiveness to readers' wishes and the character of the times which the community is experiencing. The second notion is that Japanese local newspapers have to negotiate these roles in a manner that ensures their survival either as an alternative to a national newspaper of choice or as a worthy complement to a national newspaper of choice. As established in the literature and pointed out in the opening section, a newspaper serves to be informative and correlative for issues and events, to ensure social continuity while also mobilizing the energy of the reading population, and finally to entertain, to which can be added serving an identity function and a cultural value function. The degree to which these functions are balanced or any one of the functions is prioritized and the manner in which any specific function is delivered to the reader are based on the negotiations, expressed explicitly or not, between the owners and managers, editors and journalists, and ardent readers and casual browsers that constitute the process of news selection and production in the

newspaper business. In the case of rural Japanese newspapers, given the competitive environment that accompanies the realm of reading in Japan in general, not to mention as related to the tension between dominant five national-level newspapers of Japan and the local newspapers of the regions of Japan, the priority has been to position themselves as alternatives to the national newspapers. This was seen as being attempted by delivering international and national news to the degree appropriate in combination with local news. At the same time, ownership that could be characterized as non-business oriented could be seen as taking a self-sacrificing posture in terms of their position in the local community, which means that such newspapers have flexibility in terms of how they position themselves vis-à-vis the national newspaper and in regard to local news reporting. Furthermore, local newspaper staff were seen as prioritizing coverage of local themes at the same level as other 'news'-related priorities, such as accuracy, timeliness and reader interest, an additional indication of an emergence of local focus in local newspaper management.

The aim of this research was to consider how local Japanese newspapers may be simultaneously fashioning a strategy for dealing with competition from the national newspapers and the inevitability of declining readership on the one hand, while responding to the economic circumstances of recession and depopulation that rural Japan now faces on the other. While allowing that newspapers educate readers as part of their correlative function, offer identity-affirmation as part of their continuity function, and promote local businesses as part of their mobilization function, and that these functions may be enhanced in the case for Japan in general and rural settings in particular, the present research aimed to examine how this was taking place in a rural Japanese newspaper.

Building on Rausch's earlier research which noted how the same local newspaper, the *Tōonippō*, through various representations of cultural markers and cultural commodities, contributed to local identity, and thereby, the potential for local revitalization, the present research focused on long-running columns that were related to local revitalization. These were categorized as both directly and indirectly relating to revitalization as: informational, educational, contributing to identity-affirmation or boosterism, or through direct local business promotion. These were considered in terms of the numerical evidence of their history in the newspaper as well as their overall prominence in both placement as 'news' within the newspaper and visibility over two two-week periods. While the earlier research pointed to news content that represented local culture in a manner as contributing to revitalization, it would now appear that the *Tōonippō* is devoting notable news space, as well as increasing news space, directly to the theme, and the task, of revitalization. This manifests itself in columns informing and educating their readership about the local economy (the local economy seminar column) and its principal components (the focus on agriculture and local businesses), together with the policies of revitalization (the city diary of local policy) and good business practices (the successful business column). In addition, the paper is devoting news space to identity-affirmation and boosterism with columns introducing the friendly side of local businesses and the column detailing the success of local research and business. Finally, the newspaper is devoting news space to direct promotion of local businesses, through identification of local brands and through introducing businesses and restaurants outright.²⁴ Such revitalization-related columns present a clear, if not intentional, contrast to the social representation that was noted in the earlier research.

These findings are noteworthy not only in a confirmation of the functions of local newspapers in general. The functions inherent in newspaper content and presentation, whether large scale or local, have been identified elsewhere. Nor are they noteworthy only in a recognition of the intent of the local newspaper to contribute to its host area in response to the need for local economic revitalization. That

24 Rausch, 'Place Branding in Rural Japan'.

the fate of the newspaper is ultimately tied up with the fate of the local economy, for better or worse, and that management would adopt approaches to ensure the success of both is not surprising. Rather, the findings herein are noteworthy in an assessment of what is coming to constitute the ‘news’ of a newspaper in places where the definition, scope and form thereof can have important implications for all concerned, including the readers, the local businesses, and the newspaper itself. There are multiple formats and venues within the newspaper medium to achieve the informational, correlational, continuity and mobilization functions that constitute the broadest conception of a newspaper. The point of the present research is the continuation, if not intensification, of such practices. This is seen in the link to the earlier research, as well as in the changing character of these respective functions, as columns, with the content framed and presented in a form that mirrors ‘news.’

Interpretations of this shift in these revitalization-related functions to news content are many. In terms of the dynamics of the Japanese domestic newspaper market, to the degree that the *Tōonippō* newspaper is sufficiently secure in its local market to be able to counter Cho’s earlier assertion that it, as a local newspaper, must provide ample international and national news to compete with the national newspapers is to call into question that assumption, as with these columns, the *Tōonippō* appears to be increasing its focus on the local, whether or not at the expense of the national. In the competitive media market of Japan, where consumers have a multitude of options in terms of what to read, the question for local newspapers that may be answered in this examination of the *Tōonippō* is whether the turn to local issue education, local identity affirmation and local business promotion will secure not only the fortunes of the newspaper itself, but also the fortunes of the area. To the degree that the research findings reflect a newspaper management group or the editorial team that sees social value in educating local residents about local issues, affirming local identity and promoting local business, the function of the newspaper as a component in the local infrastructure of revitalization is confirmed. The local newspaper is a part of the community it serves and the management, business or editorial, is operating to serve that community. To the degree that the research findings reflect a local base of interested or informed readers who are seeking such education, affirmation and business information, the function of the newspaper as responding to the demand of its market is confirmed. If the customer is always right, the local newspaper in this case might be thankful for a well-intentioned customer — the business side of the production and presentation of news is to recognize and respond to the demands of the customer in a changing market; the fact that such response may contribute to local revitalization is so much the better. The social, if not societal functions of the local newspaper — being informative and correlative, ensuring continuity while stimulating mobilization — are not in question; what this research has shown is it is the character of these functions and their presentation as news that, while perhaps signaling a strategic shift vis-à-vis the local newspaper’s competition with the national newspapers, may signal as well a shift in this local Japanese newspaper away from Japan’s ‘news’ and more toward its community.

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