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# Japan's Political Tsunami: What's Media Got to Do with It?

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## Abstract

This article reviews media-related aspects of the 2009 Japanese lower house elections, which saw the historic defeat of the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). Drawing mainly on Internet sources and on interviews with politicians and political journalists, the authors argue that the DPJ relied primarily on conventional media strategies and made only limited use of new media in their campaign. If the DPJ hopes permanently to transform Japan's political landscape, the party will need to prioritize the reform of outdated election campaign legislation and abolish "closed shop" reporters' clubs.

## Keywords

elections, new media, television news, reporters' clubs, Japan

Japan's August 30, 2009, lower house elections marked one of the most dramatic moments in the country's postwar political history. After ruling Japan almost continuously since 1955, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was ousted from power in a ballot-box landslide. The opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) took 308 seats to the LDP's 119, a near-exact reversal of the previous election results in 2005 (which had seen the LDP win 304 seats to the DPJ's 113). The LDP's share of the popular vote collapsed to 26.7 percent versus the DPJ's 42.4 percent. Voter turnout exceeded 69 percent, the highest for nearly two decades. For the first time, the Japanese public had given a clear mandate to an alternative administration. The LDP had presided over Japan's remarkable postwar reconstruction and transformation with amazing success but in recent decades had become mired in recurrent scandals and a sclerotic

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intimacy with bureaucratic and other vested interests. Among those vested interests was the media industry, dominated by the “Big 5” media groups (straddling print and electronic media) and national broadcaster NHK. While Japan’s society and economy have changed dramatically in the past three decades, media ownership remains locked in the “catch-up” era of large conglomerates and limited consumer choices.

What did media have to do with this massive popular swing to the DPJ? In some senses, Japan had been here before. In the early 1990s, disaffected LDP members, informally led by their dynamic, arrogant, and controversial “shadow shogun” Ichiro Ozawa, defected to form new parties, capitalizing on a mood of public frustration with LDP corruption scandals. Under pressure to institute political reforms, then-Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa called a snap election in 1993, only to see the LDP lose control to an ad hoc, unstable seven-party coalition for the best part of a year. Newly assertive electronic media played some part in Miyazawa’s downfall, especially TV Asahi programs *News Station* and *Sunday Project*, which pioneered more challenging political interview styles (see, for example, Farley 1996: 143–97; McCargo 2003: 50–76). Previously, most LDP politicians had been faceless middle-aged men who only gave broadcast interviews if they could approve the questions in advance. They were elected through a reliance on network-based support organizations known as *koenkai*—a kind of informal, loyalty-oriented constituency association—and did not depend on maintaining a public profile to win votes. They deployed carefully groomed inner circles of journalists organized into special *kisha* (reporters’) clubs and dominated by the print media to convey their messages to the world.

## Koizumi and the Rise of Personalized Anti-LDP Politics

While the political upheavals of 1993 to 1994 did undermine the standing of the LDP, there was no decisive break with the political communication strategies of the past until the premiership of Junichiro Koizumi (2001–2006). A self-proclaimed maverick, Koizumi was a master of the daytime TV “wideshow” format,<sup>1</sup> wowing housewives with his leonine hairstyle, good looks, and willingness to talk about his passion for Elvis Presley.<sup>2</sup> Koizumi also proved adept in the use of new media, producing a hugely popular weekly e-newsletter promoting his image and activities. Koizumi announced his determination to slaughter the “sacred cows” of the LDP and used a series of political marketing strategies to enlist public support that he could use to resist opponents within his party. The success of his winning formula was seen in the LDP’s very strong performance in the 2005 general election (the party’s best result since 1986). The irony of Koizumi’s success in that election, however, was that he had campaigned on a platform of “smashing the LDP”—he won the 2005 campaign as an “anti-LDP” LDP leader. By doing so, he arguably paved the way for the opposition to win the next election.

Koizumi left office the following year, having raised the bar in terms of public expectations concerning the ability of Japan’s leaders to communicate with voters. He was followed in rapid succession by three ill-fated LDP premiers: Shinzo Abe (b. 1954), Yasuo Fukuda (b. 1936), and Taro Aso (b. 1940). All were bluebloods from Japan’s elite political class; Fukuda was the son of a former prime minister (Fukuda),

while Abe and Aso were grandsons of ex-premiers (Kishi and Yoshida). None was able to achieve anything resembling Koizumi's rapport with the public; rather, just as the smooth-talking Tony Blair made the tongue-tied premiership of his successor Gordon Brown almost intolerable to the British public ear, so Japanese voters accustomed to Koizumi became increasingly alienated by the gaffes of successive LDP PMs.

This process peaked during Taro Aso's term of office. Dubbed the "millionaire slumdog" by one Japanese commentator,<sup>3</sup> Aso was initially popular because of his accessible way of speaking and his youthful enthusiasm for *manga* and animation. He began the LDP election campaign in the Akihabara electronics district of Tokyo, in a calculated attempt to appeal to Japan's many *otaku* people—"geeks" with an obsessive passion for cartoons or techy pastimes. On the plus side, Aso's fondness for Japanese *manga* comics (of which he had a huge collection) helped him to connect with some male voters,<sup>4</sup> while his trademark sarcastic responses to reporters from major news organizations were calculated to play well with those who followed politics through Internet sources.<sup>5</sup> More negatively during his time as PM, Aso became notorious for his aloofness, the crudity of his language, and his constant misreading of *kanji* (the tricky Chinese characters at the heart of Japan's writing system). While his blunders could seem humanizing, these misreadings betrayed Aso's overreliance on notes prepared for him by bureaucrats, demonstrating that he was at heart a traditional LDP politician.<sup>6</sup> Coupled with his penchant for fine living—he frequented Tokyo's most high-class restaurants and bars almost nightly throughout his time in office and declined to move from his own luxury home into the official prime minister's residence—Aso's loucheness illustrated everything that seemed wrong with the long-ruling LDP. He became a byword for the arrogance of entrenched power; the media had a veritable field day over his ignorance of the price of instant noodles.<sup>7</sup> Aso's tough-guy-style self-presentation deeply alienated many women, as well as elderly people who were incensed by some of his insensitive remarks, not to mention younger people who had gone through a long decade of recession during the 1990s and now faced much less secure economic futures than their parents' generation. For all these reasons, Aso became a major electoral liability for the LDP in 2009.

## **The DPJ Campaign: Strong Manifesto, Attractive Candidates, and Not Being the LDP**

The failure of the LDP to build on Koizumi's legacy of media-savviness handed the perfect opportunity to the opposition DPJ. During the 1990s and early 2000s the opposition had been rather fragmented and incoherent, but by 2003 the most plausible challengers to LDP dominance had united in the DPJ. While the DPJ is often characterized as social democratic, its members come from a wide range of political backgrounds, and party policies are eclectic. A major theme of the party is the need to empower politicians and voters while reducing the traditional dominance of the bureaucracy. This campaign theme was calculated to place maximum pressure on the incumbent LDP: In effect, the DPJ was more easily defined by what it opposed—LDP rule—than by what the party proposed to do in office.

In the wake of the LDP's strong 2005 lower house election results, the DPJ faced a mountain to climb in ousting the party from power. Given the increasing salience of valence issues in Japan, and the growing importance of marketing approaches emphasizing prospective prime ministerial candidates, how did the DPJ rise to the challenge? For former LDP financial services minister Tastuya Ito, one of many party grandees who lost their seats in the 2009 election, the election result reflected a widespread feeling of popular repulsion for the LDP.<sup>8</sup> The ruling party surrendered control of its media image through poor management and public relations. Ito argued that instead of countering negative perceptions about the party, the LDP waged a conventional, orthodox election campaign that failed to capture the public imagination. By contrast, the DPJ was very successful on three fronts: creating a manifesto, selecting attractive candidates, and blaming the LDP for all of Japan's woes.

First, the opposition popularized the idea of an election manifesto, something that had not been a prominent feature of previous campaigns. The DPJ's glossy twenty-three page manifesto, full of pictures of recently appointed leader Yukio Hatoyama (ironically, himself a prime ministerial grandson and fully paid-up member of Japan's elite political class), crafted an image of the party as concerned about children, the elderly, and the disadvantaged, taking advantage of the LDP's aloof and uncaring face under Aso.<sup>9</sup> Their campaign focus on social issues worked well in a nation that had seen older notions of lifetime employment and an implicit social contract between the state and the workforce seriously eroded. The DPJ made a series of specific manifesto promises, including the pledge to provide every family with a monthly cash handout of 26,000 yen (around \$260) per child.

Second, the DPJ made concerted efforts to select young, fresh-looking candidates and to ensure that they had constant media exposure, especially on TV. This provided a sharp contrast with the old and tired faces that still dominated the LDP ticket. Remarkable successes were achieved by the so-called "Princess Corps" of women candidates, who won a record fifty-four seats, forty of them for the DPJ. This success paralleled Koizumi's "female ninja" strategy in 2005, when the LDP boosted the number of women Diet members from nine to twenty-six.<sup>10</sup> But during the 2009 election campaign the DPJ's use of women candidates—dubbed "Ozawa's girls"—was criticized by some as a cheap ploy.<sup>11</sup> DPJ upper house member Kuniko Tanioka, credited with grooming the "princesses" for election victory, explained the rationale as follows:

It was easy for the DPJ to win the men's vote in the 2007 [upper house] elections. But we weren't gaining a lot of votes from rural Japan and the DPJ was a very male-orientated party—women didn't vote for it. Our party leader, [Ichiro] Ozawa, wanted to overcome those two weaknesses by putting women in those areas. . . . He noticed people were sick and tired of the old boys' club and their attitude. He needed a clear contrast to rumors of LDP corruption, bureaucracy and dirty money. . . . Ozawa was experimenting in the 2007 election. In fact, at that time a woman candidate won over an ex-minister in Okayama—a cute woman fighting a big monster and the Japanese people liked that ideal. . . . It

was like a samurai princess fighting a big lord. In spite of being a woman, she was so brave to fight against this big evil thing.<sup>12</sup>

The irony is that despite criticizing the media for not taking women candidates sufficiently seriously, Tanioka also acknowledged that some of them were selected partly for their looks. And for all the DPJ rhetoric about empowering women, the new administration appointed only two female ministers.<sup>13</sup> As a new party with relatively little history or cumbersome political baggage, it was relatively easy for the DPJ to put up fresh-faced, younger candidates from a variety of backgrounds, so wrong-footing the LDP.<sup>14</sup>

A third element in the election outcome was the way in which the DPJ was able successfully to exploit widespread political dissatisfaction among the Japanese public, a theme that was highlighted in Hatoyama's statement of principles issued right after he became prime minister:

I have taken the view that the recent general election was not a triumph for only the DPJ and its allied parties. Rather, the public's unbearable distrust of politics, their dismay at the dysfunction of conventional politics and the government as well as their pronounced anger at this situation, were reflected in the high voter turnout rate and led to a change of government.<sup>15</sup>

While Hatoyama put a positive spin on the situation, arguing that his government was aiming to create a "new nation" based on shared ideals, DPJ House of Councillors member Shin-kun Haku suggested that the election results reflected an explosion of frustration against the LDP's outmoded politics, and especially the party's widespread practice of inherited parliamentary seats, passed down from father to son.<sup>16</sup> Haku argued that the very same voters who had supported Koizumi's plans to reform the LDP in 2005 rallied around the DPJ's calls for "regime change" (*seiken kotai*) in 2009.

Nevertheless, veteran *Asahi Shimbun* political journalist Hiroshi Hoshi argued that the DPJ's approach to the campaign did not really amount to a particular media strategy.<sup>17</sup> From Hoshi's perspective, the DPJ was trying to avoid the impression of succumbing to the kind of hyped-up, media-focused election campaign waged by Koizumi in 2005. Most Japanese print journalists regard the idea of a media-driven election campaign with a certain disdain, preferring to argue that elections were fought on substantive political issues. While offering a well-informed view based on considerable inside knowledge, Hoshi tends to play down the very real salience of political marketing techniques in helping shape Japanese electoral outcomes. But a comparable view was expressed by Tobias Harris, an influential American commentator on Japanese politics and a former DPJ aide. Harris argued that the DPJ "has been generally poor at political communications" and went on to say,

The DPJ has had so much help from the LDP over the past several years that it has had to do relatively little communicating of its own in order to put itself in a position to win.<sup>18</sup>

One view argues that the Japanese media presented election news in ways that strongly favored the DPJ; even national broadcaster NHK began contrasting Aso's aggressive phrases with "a calmer, more rational sounding Hatoyama."<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, some elements of the Japanese media held absolutely no brief for the DPJ. The conservative business newspaper group Fujisankei issued a Twitter message on the night of the election, declaring, "*Sankei Shimbun* is going into opposition for the first time."<sup>20</sup> While officially newspapers do not endorse political parties in Japan, it was an open secret that the new government was welcomed by the Asahi group—which had shifted its allegiance from the old Japan Socialist Party to the DPJ—and the smaller Mainichi group, but not by the Yomiuri group (long-time allies of the LDP), *Nihon Keizei Shimbun*, and *Sankei Shimbun*.

### Media Trends: Indifferent to the New, Still with the Old?

While the rise of the new-look DPJ and the overthrow of the fusty LDP might suggest that new media—Web sites, blogs, Twitter, and the rest—fuelled Obama-style electoral changes in Japan, the reality is rather different. Although a high-tech society in terms of IT hardware, animation, and video games, Japan has a much lower penetration of PC Internet use than might be expected. Partly because of long commutes and cramped apartments, many young voters access technologies from their cell phones rather than laptops or PCs.<sup>21</sup> Mobile phone news Web sites mainly report information from mainstream news organizations; newspapers are still the most authoritative news sources and television the most popular.<sup>22</sup> One major change wrought by the rise of mobile phone news has been declining circulations for the Japanese newsmagazine sector. Yet so far, there is no well-established cadre of political bloggers who have gained credibility and public acceptance. Blogs are still considered rather "fishy" in Japan, as the natural habitat of scandal-mongering and overblown claims. Political commentary on Japan's most popular blogsite, Ameba, for example, is quite hard to find; one exception features anti-DPJ nationalist diatribes about China and Korea. Lots of similar blogs are the preserve of hard-line rightists.<sup>23</sup> Many ordinary Japanese view political bloggers with suspicion, regarding them as social "losers" unable to find proper journalistic jobs. In Japan's extremely hierarchical society, notions of status, clout, and editorial credibility remain much more salient than in the West.

Japan accounts for around 37 percent of the world's bloggers, yet most blogs are quite specialized, and few attract mass readerships. Tokyo also generates twice as many Twitter messages as any other city in the world. Most Japanese Internet users are reluctant to use international social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace, preferring to visit Japan-specific equivalents such as Mixi (<http://mixi.jp>). Real-time news blogging has not yet caught on. Web sites and blogs by Japanese politicians are typically extremely dull, showing images of boring-looking speeches and providing uninspiring catalogs of Diet members' daily activities. These Web sites reflect the fact that most Japanese politicians hardly use the Internet themselves; at the same time, lackluster political blogs parallel the inanity of much celebrity blogging in Japan,

where popular entertainment stars routinely post the most trivial details about their meals and pets. DPJ Diet member Ikuo Yamahana, who blogs himself, did not believe that political blogs created any “big waves” among Japan’s electorate.<sup>24</sup>

In 2009, the LDP tried to use Internet video technology for campaign purposes, while the DPJ experimented with mobile phone games and other content. Some politicians posted video clips at Nico Nico Douga, or “Nico-Dou” ([www.nicovideo.jp](http://www.nicovideo.jp)), a Japanese variant on YouTube. Some of these moves were counterproductive: Negative online campaigning by the LDP actually alienated some younger voters, who found the attacks ugly and childish.<sup>25</sup> Attempts to mimic Western campaign techniques simply backfired when tried out on Japanese voters. Another new development was the creation of a political donation site known as Love Japan, by the leading Internet company Rakuten.<sup>26</sup> More than seventy politicians, including forty from the DPJ, registered at the site to receive credit card donations (minimum donation 1,000 yen, or around \$10) from individual supporters. Such innovations mark the tentative beginnings of a new role for electronic media in politics. For now, however, the extremely restrictive Public Offices Election Law tightly limits activities that could be construed as election campaigning, including barring candidates from using blogs, Twitter, or other electronic media during election campaigns. Some politicians sought to circumvent the law by resorting to pseudo-campaign activities that did not constitute real electioneering.<sup>27</sup> While in opposition, the DPJ had pledged to amend these election laws, arguing that they were biased in favor of the incumbent LDP. Legislative changes coupled with greater social acceptability of political blogging could gradually open up new modes of campaigning in future.

The dominance of the “Big 5” newspaper groups in Japan was part-and-parcel of the LDP-led “1955 system,” which supported cozy and collusive relationships between the political and business elites. These newspaper groups now face a number of challenges. The first concerns declining profitability and reduced circulations: in developments that parallel changes in Europe and North America, more and more Japanese are reading news primarily on their cell phones and are canceling their long-standing print subscriptions. The DPJ came to power pledging to abolish the *kisha* club system and open up press conferences to foreigners, freelancers, and new media. In practice, their attempts to liberalize the reporters’ clubs have met with limited success. Shizuka Kamei, minister of financial services, was quickly forced to hold two separate back-to-back biweekly news conferences, a token formal meeting for the *kisha* club and a second, more relaxed Webcast for other journalists.<sup>28</sup> Japan’s major news media made little or no reference to the ongoing *kisha* club wars; the DPJ had only changed press access to four major ministries and agencies and did not immediately deliver on a campaign pledge to open up the prime minister’s press conferences. Writing in the outspoken biweekly news magazine *SPIO*, Uesugi Takashi declared that the system was at the root of the lack of effective competition in the Japanese media: “Without opening up the *kisha* club system, there is no future for Japanese journalism.”<sup>29</sup> Freelance writer Yu Terawasa has argued that the DPJ is quietly renegeing on its promises to break open the *kisha* clubs, revealing the continuing stranglehold on power and information exercised



by the bureaucracy.<sup>30</sup> An acid test for the new government was how far the DPJ could progress with dismantling both the reporters' clubs and the closed-door political culture they epitomized.

As Shin-kun Haku persuasively argues, despite recent technological innovations, Japan remains largely an "analog" society, where personal contacts and connections trump other forms of campaigning.<sup>31</sup> In terms of media, television remains the key campaign ground. The DPJ has been able to exploit the wide-show daytime TV programming that Koizumi had previously made his own. But if the DPJ hopes to retain power beyond its present parliamentary term, the new government needs to press ahead with media reforms including revision of the election laws and a ruthless purge of the *kisha* clubs. As Columbia University's Gerald Curtis has pointed out, the strong LDP showing in 2005 and correspondingly impressive DPJ performance in 2009 illustrates that neither party has a robust political base.<sup>32</sup> Valence issues, media strategies, and new modes of campaigning could sway voters decisively next time—and unless the DPJ gets a firm grip, the possibility of a rapid reversion to LDP rule remains very real.

The Japanese case may give pause for thought to those who see the inexorable rise of new media as central to electoral outcomes and the birth of alternative regimes. The DPJ ousted the LDP partly through the use of mainstream media, especially television. But blogging and the Internet played little role in the LDP's defeat: The world remains rather more analog than many media specialists would like to believe. Even in apparently high-tech societies such as Japan, most people still cast their ballots for old-fashioned, low-tech reasons, such as disappointment with uninspiring incumbents, the emergence of more attractive and sympathetic candidates, and a well-crafted election manifesto advocating a specific program of positive policy changes. Further research is urgently needed on Japan's fast-changing political blogosphere, while those working on other political systems might be wary of letting their personal enthusiasm for new media drive their arguments and conclusions.

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### **Notes**

1. According to an online survey, 65.9 percent of respondents cited talk shows as a source of information for decisions concerning politics. This compared with 50.5 percent for commercial TV news broadcasts, 49 percent for NHK TV news, and 22.5 percent for NHK's

political affairs programs (*Nikkei Sangyo Shimbun*, Oct. 9, 2003, cited in “Japan—Media Environment Open, State Looms Large,” Open Source Center, Media Aid, Aug. 18, 2009, <http://www.fas.org/irp/dni/osc/japan-media.pdf> (accessed Jan. 6, 2010). Rudimentary translations of all Japanese Web sites cited in this article may be obtained via the Google Toolbar. Japanese names have been given here Western-style (family name second) rather than Japanese-style (family name first).

2. On June 30, 2006, just before Koizumi stepped down as prime minister, then–U.S. President George W. Bush took him on Air Force One for an official visit to Elvis’s Graceland mansion.
3. Noriko Hama, “Taro Aso: The Millionaire Slumdog,” openDemocracy, March 10, 2009, <http://www.opendemocracy.net> (accessed Jan. 6, 2010).
4. See Reiji Yoshida, “Manga Fans Have Been Won Over but What about the Rest of Japan?” *The Japan Times*, Sep. 23, 2008, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20080923a6.html>.
5. For a discussion of 2channel, see Lisa Katayama, “2-Channel Gives Japan’s Famously Quiet People a Mighty Voice,” *Wired*, Apr. 19, 2007, <http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/2007/04/2channel> (accessed Jan. 6, 2010).
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9. For an English translation of the manifesto, which lacks the images, see <http://www.dpj.or.jp/english/manifesto/manifesto2009.pdf> (accessed Jan. 6, 2010). For a PDF version in Japanese including images, see [http://www.dpj.or.jp/special/manifesto2009/pdf/manifesto\\_2009.pdf](http://www.dpj.or.jp/special/manifesto2009/pdf/manifesto_2009.pdf) (accessed Jan. 6, 2010).
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12. Catherine Makino, “Japan’s ‘Princess Corps’ Cracks the Glass Ceiling,” Inter Press Service, *Asia Times Online*, Sep. 11, 2009, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Japan/KI11Dh01.html> (accessed Jan. 6, 2010).
13. These were Keiko Chiba, minister of justice, and Mizuho Fukushima, minister of state for consumer affairs, food safety, social affairs and gender equality.
14. Ikuo Yamahana, DPJ House of Representatives member, interview, Dec. 7, 2009.
15. “Basic Principles of the Hatoyama Government,” statement issued Sep. 16, 2009, [http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/hatoyama/statement/200909/16principles\\_e.html](http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/hatoyama/statement/200909/16principles_e.html) (accessed Jan. 6, 2010).
16. Interview with Shin-kun Haku, DPJ Upper House member, Dec. 11, 2009. (Haku’s Web site may be viewed at <http://www.haku-s.net/index.html> [accessed Jan. 6, 2010]).
17. Hiroshi Hoshi, telephone interview, Nov. 30, 2009.
18. Tobias Harris, “The DPJ Needs to Hone Its Message,” *Inside Japan*, Aug. 5, 2009, <http://www.observingsjapan.com/2009/08/dpj-needs-to-hone-its-message.html> (accessed Jan. 6, 2010).

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21. One 2008 survey suggested that 59.5 percent of young adults access news through their phones and just under 50 percent from computers. Around 70 percent of Japanese mobile phone contracts allow Web site viewing. See *Japan—Media Environment Open* (2009), 40, <http://www.fas.org/irp/dni/osc/japan-media.pdf> (accessed Jan. 6, 2010).
22. *Ibid.*, 37.
23. For a sample article titled "Finally, the Nation of Japan Has Been Hijacked by the Traitor, DPJ (South Korea, China, North Korea)!" see <http://ameblo.jp/zuymymk/entry-10408520562.html> (accessed Jan. 6, 2010). On the popular blog site Blogmura (<http://www.blogmura.com/>), blogs about dogs outnumber those about politics by more than a dozen to one.
24. Ikuo Yamahana, DPJ House of Representatives member, interview, Dec. 7, 2009.
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27. *Japan—Media Environment Open*, 56.
28. Martin Fackler, "New Leaders in Japan Seek to End Cosy Ties to Press Clubs," *New York Times*, Nov. 21, 2009.
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30. Telephone interview with Yu Terasawa, Dec. 9, 2009.
31. Interview with Shin-kun Haku, DPJ Upper House member, Dec. 11, 2009.
32. Cited in Peter Alford, "A Body Politic in Need of Life Support," *The Weekend Australian*, Sep. 5, 2009.

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