

Exploring Cultural Differences in Journalism through *Tokyo Vice*

by Adrian Ma



Figure 1: In this image from *Tokyo Vice*, the characters Detective Katagiri and Jake Adelstein discuss a crime they're both investigating for their respective institutions. The pair can be seen as embodying a central tension between American journalism's adversarial instincts and the Japanese emphasis on patience, procedure and relationship-building. As Jake learns, pursuing accountability without understanding the surrounding cultural context can jeopardize the trust and access on which reporting depends.

Still from *Tokyo Vice*. Courtesy of HBO Max.

Abstract

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to compare Japanese and American journalism approaches, analyze how cultural values influence media practices, and evaluate the strengths and limitations of different journalism traditions in democratic societies.

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Introduction

Have you ever wondered why news coverage of the same event can look so different depending on which country's media you're reading? The HBO crime series *Tokyo Vice* offers a fascinating window into this question by following Jake Adelstein, a talented but inexperienced American journalist starting a new job at a major Japanese newspaper in the 1990s. In one of the show's first scenes, Jake is taking part in the newsroom orientation with his fellow trainees. His supervising editor, Emi, holds up a stack of newspaper clippings and declares: "These are examples of articles. Memorize their format. This is the only format you will use." She explains the rigid story structure: first the lead paragraph, then answer "Who, Where, When, What," followed by three paragraphs of detail. When Jake asks about the "why"—the core question at the heart of American journalism—she responds matter-of-factly: "Only at the end, if there's room."

Another trainee asks: "How often is there room?"

Her answer: "Probably never."

The show is a dramatization of the real-life Jake Adelstein's memoir about his time working as a crime reporter in Tokyo. And though the series takes creative liberties, it does highlight some fundamental tensions between the two different journalism traditions of two different democratic countries.

These differences become apparent from Jake's first day at the fictional *Meicho Shimbun*. Jake's struggles aren't just about language barriers or workplace etiquette—they reflect deeper philosophical contrasts about the role of the press in society, the relationship between journalists and institutions, and how democracy itself should function. As media scholars have noted, Western journalism tends to emphasize interpretive reporting that provides context and analysis (the "why"), while Japanese journalism has long prioritized sticking to the facts and operating within longheld cultural frameworks.¹ And where American media culture has often idealized the maverick reporter who does whatever they can to get the story, Japanese newsrooms more value the team player who works within established systems to gather reliable information.

News Reporting through Consensus: The Kisha Club System

Japan's news industry operates through a unique system called *kisha clubs*—permanent press offices inside government agencies, police departments, and corporations where information flow is carefully managed. These function as exclusive media associations where only established newspapers and broadcasters receive membership. Press scholar Laurie Freeman characterizes these clubs as "information cartels," noting that they historically have limited access for freelance journalists and foreign correspondents.²

Tokyo Vice depicts this system during police press conferences where officials read prepared statements, distribute identical briefing materials, and rarely answer follow-up questions. When reporters attempt additional queries, officials often end conferences abruptly. This contrasts sharply with the American conception of press conferences as adversarial forums where reporters aggressively compete to ask challenging questions.



Figure 2: During his orientation at the Meicho Shimbun, Jake Adelstein immediately takes issue with the newsroom's rigid reporting formula, which emphasizes a standardized approach, hierarchy and institutional consensus versus taking initiative and searching for more independent sources. Still from *Tokyo Vice*. Courtesy of HBO Max.

This structural difference reflects the cultural framework known as *wa* (harmony), which permeates Japanese society from corporate boardrooms to newspaper editorial meetings.³ In newsrooms, this translates to journalism that serves to *inform* rather than *challenge* authority, presenting facts clearly while allowing readers to draw their own conclusions rather than having reporters interpret events for them.⁴ The kisha club system can have advantages: reporters may be able to gain information quickly and consistently from institutional sources, which can be especially helpful in times of crisis. It can also function as a collective, in which a group of media outlets can nudge the government for more information or transparency. But by and large, the emphasis of the kisha club system is on stability and consensus-building, where collective harmony often takes precedence over competition.

The Adversarial Tradition: Democracy's Watchdog

In contrast to this, American journalism culture often inspires reporters to see themselves as watchdogs. Journalists learn to criticize those in power, ask tough questions, and provide analysis and context to help audiences understand complex issues. Many U.S. news organizations encourage reporters to develop independent sources, pursue original angles, and compete for scoops. This adversarial tradition reflects distinctly liberal democratic values, such as skepticism of authority and a preference for individual autonomy, that have shaped American news culture.⁵

When Jake's editors constantly remove his adjectives and descriptive language, insisting on repeating the official story, his frustration reflects this cultural tension. Where his Japanese colleagues tend to follow official channels and accept limited access, Jake's instinct is to dig deeper, cultivate sources independently, and pursue stories regardless of institutional approval.

The series reveals how these different approaches create distinct advantages and vulnerabilities that extend beyond individual career concerns. The Japanese news system provides stable, reliable information



Figure 3: Emi Maruyama's character highlights the structural pressures facing Japanese reporters working within the *kisha club* system. By showing how editorial decisions are shaped by the need to preserve institutional relationships, the series invites discussion of self-censorship, access journalism and the trade-offs between stability and press independence. Still from *Tokyo Vice*. Courtesy of HBO Max.

while maintaining crucial access to official sources. Reporters can count on regular briefings and institutional cooperation, creating predictable information flow that serves readers' basic need to understand current events. The system may also mitigate some of the sensationalism or accusations of reporter bias that can plague more competitive media environments, like in the U.S.

However, this stability comes at significant cost to a truly free press. Despite clear evidence of corruption, loan shark schemes targeting vulnerable citizens, and abuse of power reaching government's highest levels, the *Meicho* editors sometimes engage in self-censorship, holding back on certain investigations and refusing to publish certain stories or details that would likely impede future access.

Jake's American adversarial approach demonstrates both the power and perils of confrontational journalism. His willingness to press officials and challenge institutional narratives leads to breakthrough reporting that exposes genuine corruption and serves the public interest. When he discovers connections between seemingly unrelated deaths, his instinct to dig deeper reflects the best of American investigative tradition.

But the series also shows how this approach can backfire when applied without cultural sensitivity. In several instances, Jake inadvertently disrespects potential sources by asking questions in a very direct and blunt manner, which is untoward in a society that so heavily values privacy and respect. He repeatedly goes behind his supervisor's wishes to pursue his own investigating work, which violates the strict chain of command of Japanese workplaces. In one pivotal scene, Jake aggressively pursues a drug tip at the airport, despite warnings from his police contact, Detective Katagiri, about the importance of patience and observing proper procedure. When the investigation turns up nothing, Jake finds himself completely cut off from police cooperation, illustrating how this mentality of relentless pursuit can be counterproductive in cultures that value long-term relationship building over immediate gratification.

At his heart, Jake is an investigative reporter who believes the story needs to come first, even as though relationships are damaged as a consequence. However, over the course of the series, he does learn the value of working within the Japanese cultural context. He works to build reciprocal relationships with sources and his fellow *Meicho* journalists and better understands the patience required to do so. And the

show also demonstrates that Jake's Japanese colleagues recognize the limitations of their media system and their desire to tell important stories, despite the tension they may cause. Most notably, Jake's supervisor editor Emi, frustrated with her bosses vetoing the publication of a major investigation about a Japanese politician accepting illegal campaign donations from a Yakuza crime boss, takes the story to a weekly news publication more comfortable with rocking the boat.

Ultimately, *Tokyo Vice* doesn't make a definitive argument that either journalistic tradition is inherently superior, rather illustrating how both have their strengths, weaknesses, and complexities. Each approach reflects different cultural values about relationships between institutions, the press, and the public. Research comparing journalism across cultures confirms that both nations have historically maintained robust democratic systems while practicing fundamentally different approaches to press freedom and news reporting.⁶ What's interesting to note, however, is that public trust in mass media in Japan is much higher when compared to the U.S. A recent survey indicates that nearly 70 percent of Japanese people were either "very or moderately trusting" of the news.⁷ This is in stark contrast to the U.S., where public trust in mass media has been declining significantly for decades. Research by the Gallup analytics company shows that Americans with a "great deal or fair amount" of trust in the mass media to fairly report the news went from 72 percent of respondents in 1976 to just 31 percent of respondents in 2024.⁸ Much of this can be attributed to American society's increased levels of hyperpartisanship, with Democratic and Republican respondents showing a deep gap in media trust. This suggests that while Japanese news media has its issues with self-censorship, overreliance on institutional sources, and lack of diversity in coverage, the focus on building consensus and harmony has buttressed the public's confidence in their journalism. Meanwhile, American journalism has its long-held traditions of wanting to hold those in power accountable for their actions and competing for exclusive scoops, but is clearly facing a widespread loss of credibility amongst their public.

These tensions offer crucial insights that extend well beyond the specific Japan-U.S. comparison. The show reminds us that a free press and access to information are critical to the functioning of democracy and that reporters play a vital role. But the news media doesn't exist in a vacuum—just like no two countries are the same, the journalism practiced in these places are shaped significantly by unique cultural, social and historical contexts. If anything, *Tokyo Vice* could make a strong case that the most effective journalistic approach is a balance of the two traditions. This might combine the American tradition's commitment to investigative rigor and accountability with the Japanese emphasis on relationship-building and institutional respect. This would mean pursuing tough questions and exposing wrongdoing while cultivating sources through patient, incremental trust-building rather than confrontational tactics. Rather than viewing sources as adversaries to be conquered, a more balanced model treats them as potential partners in serving the public interest, using consensus-building skills to create space for meaningful transparency while respecting the cultural contexts in which journalism operates.

Notes

¹ Susana Salgado and Jesper Strömbäck, "Interpretive journalism: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings," *Journalism* 13, no. 2 (2011): 144–161; E. A. Thomson, P. R. R. White, and Philip Kitley, "'Objectivity' and 'hard news' reporting across cultures: Comparing the news report in English, French, Japanese and Indonesian journalism," *Journalism Studies* 9, no. 2 (2008): 212–228.

² Laurie Anne Freeman, *Closing the Shop: Information Cartels and Japan's Mass Media* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 45–67.

³ S. Kawaguchi, "The effect of cultural norms on group decision-making in Japanese corporations," *Frontiers in Management Science* 3, no. 5 (2024): 70–75.

⁴ William de Lange, *A History of Japanese Journalism* (Brighton: Japan Library, 1998), 156–189.

⁵ Matthew Pressman, *On Press: The Liberal Values That Shaped the News* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 78–102.

⁶ K. D. Gonzalez, “Japan and the U.S.: Two free nations, two versions of free press” (undergraduate research paper, Minnesota State University, Mankato, n.d.), 12–18.

⁷ “Survey Finds Nearly 70% of People in Japan Trust Mass Media,” *Japan Times*, June 11, 2025, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/06/11/japan/mass-media-trusted-survey>

⁸ Megan Brennan, “Americans’ Trust in Media Remains at Trend Low,” Gallup, October 2, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/651977/americans-trust-media-remains-trend-low.aspx>

Educational Applications and Classroom Exercises

For educators, *Tokyo Vice* provides an engaging, accessible entry point for examining complex questions about journalism, democracy, and cultural competence. Students can explore how different approaches to journalism reflect broader societal values about authority, individualism, and social responsibility.

Activity#1: Editorial Board Crisis Simulation: The Miller Manufacturing Dilemma

The Scenario: Students role-play as senior editors at *The Valley Herald*, a small-town newspaper serving a community of 20,000. One of your reporters has uncovered evidence that Robert Miller, CEO of Miller Manufacturing—the town’s second-largest employer with 400 workers—has been using company funds to pay his gambling losses at local casinos, totaling \$75,000.

The Evidence: Financial documents show Miller has systematically transferred money from the company’s employee health insurance fund to cover personal debts. He’s been making minimum payments to keep the insurance active, but the fund is nearly depleted. Miller has also taken out secret loans against company property without board approval.

The Stakes

- Miller Manufacturing employs 400 people in a town where unemployment is already very high at 11 percent
- The company provides health insurance for employees and their families (roughly 1,200 people in total)
- Your newspaper gets \$25,000 annually in advertising from Miller Manufacturing (15% of your revenue)
- If the story breaks, the company will likely face investigation, possible bankruptcy, and plant closure
- Employees and their families currently have no idea their health insurance fund has been compromised

The Twist: Miller approaches your editor-in-chief privately, admitting his gambling problem and promising to enter rehabilitation and repay the money within six months if you hold the story. He claims going public now would destroy not just him, but hundreds of innocent families.

Discussion Questions

- What is journalism’s primary obligation in this situation?
- How do you weigh harm to individuals versus the public’s right to know?
- Should Miller’s promise to “make things right” influence your decision?

- How might economic pressure from losing advertising affect your choice?
- Would your decision differ if this involved public funds rather than private company money?

This scenario forces students to grapple with the core tensions between accountability journalism and community impact.

Activity#2: Cross-Cultural News Analysis

Students examine recent coverage of identical international news stories from both Japanese and American media outlets. Working in pairs, they identify specific examples of adversarial versus consensus approaches in the reporting, analyze which approach better serves the public interest in particular cases, and present findings using concepts from *Tokyo Vice*. This exercise helps students recognize cultural patterns in real-world journalism while developing critical media literacy skills.

Discussion Prompts for Student Engagement

Understanding Cultural Differences: What is the *kisha club* system, and how does it reflect broader Japanese cultural values about consensus and harmony? How does this contrast with American journalism's adversarial tradition?

Analyzing Institutional Pressures: When *Tokyo Vice* shows important investigations being shelved to maintain institutional relationships, what does this reveal about tensions between press freedom and economic survival? How might this tension affect journalism in both cultures?

Evaluating Cross-Cultural Effectiveness: Jake's aggressive American approach sometimes destroys the very source relationships that make ongoing reporting possible. How does this illustrate both strengths and limitations of adversarial journalism when applied across cultural boundaries?

Applying to Current Events: How do these different approaches to journalism reflect broader cultural values about authority, individualism, and social responsibility? In our interconnected world, how should journalists adapt their methods when reporting across cultural boundaries?

Synthesizing Perspectives: If you were designing a journalism system for a new democracy, what elements from each culture would you include and why? Is there a way to balance investigative vigor with institutional access?

The show's focus on economic pressures and institutional constraints also offers opportunities to discuss how media organizations balance editorial independence with financial survival—a tension that affects journalism worldwide regardless of cultural context. By examining Jake's experiences, students can develop a more sophisticated understanding of how journalism functions in different democratic systems and why cultural sensitivity matters in an increasingly interconnected world.
