In order to gain the most intensive and complete understanding of Japanese journalism and the processes involved in new gathering and reporting in that country, the most logical point at which to begin seemed to be to learn how it evolved through history. William de Lange wrote a tremendously detailed chronological history of journalism in Japan, particularly with regards to newspapers. In the process of researching de Lange, I came across his LinkedIn profile, in which he says he was born in the Netherlands to Dutch and English parents and was led to Japan by his studies. He took an interest in traditional Japanese scrolls and wrote articles for the Japan Times Weekly. His Dutch roots create an important connection between his writing and Japan itself.

He writes in A History of Japanese Journalism that Japan was under heavy Dutch influences during the late 1500s to the mid 1800s. Japan’s government was very particular in who they let in and out of their borders, and in this sense only allowed the Dutch to maintain trading posts in their country. The reason stemmed from the negative impression the Spanish and Portuguese, who tried to spread the influence of Christianity upon the Japanese people. The Shogun was opposed to accepting one god as almighty; he saw it as a threat to his balance of power. The Dutch, after the Spaniards and Portuguese were essentially expelled from the country, focused on creating and sustaining entrepreneurial and economical relationships with the people of Japan. The Japanese people and the Japanese government began to rely on the Dutch as carriers of news from foreign countries, seeing as how the Japanese population did not branch out across the globe as the powerful European nations had done. This news, mostly of shipping and trading information, sparked an interest in some of the more scholarly Japanese. This interest led to the realization that Japan was most definitely “behind the times” in comparison to Western countries and that there was urgent need to connect with foreign places. But Japan would no open its borders so willingly. It was not until the United States and the Dutch began pressuring Japan into opening its border (the Americans claimed it was an interest of safety with regards to American whaling vessels that frequently found themselves shipwrecked off the coast of Japan). The way information traveled in Japan greatly hindered the government’s responsiveness to foreign demands and was an enormous factor in its instability:

“The Tokugawa Bakafu had had its time. After three centuries of absolute power, of which two-and-a-half in self imposed isolation, an institution which had once united a country torn by civil war through incisive action, had now become out of touch with the times, and had fallen victim to internal conflict. The Bakafu’s instability, and the ensuing bureaucratic paralysis were painfully exposed by the way information moved, or rather failed to move upwards through the echelons of a feudal system in decline” (15)
In 1858 Japan signed the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation, finally opening up its ports to foreign travelers and traders. Thus with the arrival of new foreigners came the demand for newspapers in their native tongue, seeing as how newspapers had grown to be very popular in Western countries long before the mid 1800s. This however, should not be understood as the first newspapers in Japan. Frank L. Martin, in *The Journalism of Japan* writes that the Japanese had been distributing information using newspaper-like means, such as printing on wooden planks since the middle of the eleventh century.

It wasn’t until the end of Japan’s isolation that Japanese newspapers in the Western style were first printed. Much like the beginning of newspapers in the United States, Japanese newspapers contained mostly shipping information and information from the government.

Newspaper editors and printers were careful about what they took from foreigners papers, which is where most of their news was obtained, for there was a good chance they could be reprimanded by the government. The government itself took part in some censoring of certain content contained in newspapers, more-so in those produced by native Japanese. Still, those in power understood the importance and effectiveness of newspapers in distributing information to the public:

> “Even though the number of people who had access to information carried by newspapers was still limited, it was the only means by which the authorities could reach the people except for the institutions which were under its direct control. A letter from the government which was sent to various publishers four years into the Meiji era bears testimony to the weight Japan’s new leaders attached to the newspaper as a medium through which it could educate the people:
> Newspaper publishers should make it their purpose to develop the knowledge of the people. The way in which this can be achieved, is by helping them overcome their stubbornness and narrow-mindedness, and showing them the way to civilization and enlightenment” (34)

The press grew mostly into an organ of the government, distributing political and institutional information to the public. De Lange signifies a transformation from this role during the strengthening of the Civil rights Movements, when political analyst began to write editorials for some of the papers. Of course, the government did not fancy the criticism it was receiving and enacted press laws, through which the government had the ability to convict journalist for their writing (just like the British had done, or at least tried, to certain Americans). Political papers grew in popularity as the Meiji period continued and the Japanese government issued more stringent press laws to try and control “radical” editors and printers. The political papers quickly evolved into partisan papers as well.

> “Two decades earlier, the Tokugawa Bakufu had realized how valuable newspapers could be as a medium for pro-Bakufu propaganda. A decade later the founding fathers had resorted to the newspaper as a tool for the edification of the masses. Now [1880s] the moment had come when the full political potential of newspapers could be put to the test” (51)

Political newspapers generated stiff competition between editors of other newspapers and the newspaper as a platform quickly grew into one that carried a great deal of public debate,
something that the government had always tried to suppress with press laws. Interestingly, this competition led to a new tendency for news companies to organize together, specifically in relation to reporting on the government (the government was distinctly cooperative with newspapers that it gave it support to). This, as de Lange writes was the initial germination of the press clubs of the Japanese press, which will be the focus of my directed readings and research. Press clubs in the early stages of their evolution were more like waiting rooms than the “club”-like character that modern press clubs take on. Journalists would wait in waiting rooms until an official would come speak with them and give them the information they sought. Soon, certain governmental agencies began setting up accommodations for the reporters waiting for information.

The government was still particular about to who it distributed information. Journalists that were allowed to attend certain political and governmental function received tickets that would allow them to communicate with official and attend diplomatic sessions. Reporters that received these tickets regularly formed a group, called the Press club with Access to the Diet (Gikai Deiri Kishadan). The way in which reporters could get information affected their relationship with their sources, which ended up evolving into a strange, perhaps corrupt media process with regards to journalism ethics, but that will be discussed later.

“Taken together, the behavior of journalists connected to the ministerial offices was largely dominated by a compromising stance towards the authorities in the hope to obtain first-hand information. Far from forming a basis from where journalists could put pressure on the authorities, the waiting rooms merely served to induce a fraternal atmosphere amongst a few privileged journalists awaiting their daily ration of news provided by the authorities” (87)

Soon after the Diet of Japan, which is the country’s bicameral legislature, was first convened in 1889, political members and officials quickly began to utilize members of the press as a means of getting information out to the public. These members of the Diet tended to target individual reporters rather than editors or an entire newspaper. Because they realized how useful reporters were, they began to encourage them to visit by providing accommodations for them.

“Okuma Shigenobu had been one of the first political leaders to accommodate journalists by encouraging them to visit party headquarters of the Kaishinto, and soon even the reception room of the president (Okuma) himself became a place where reporters could freely come and go. By the turn of the century, the interaction between journalists and party men closely approached what one could call a club-like atmosphere” (130)

De Lange cautions not to associate this with a “crafty plot on the side of the politicians to manipulate the press.” It was actually a result of a more progressive view on the relationship between politicians and journalist, one that emphasized a more democratic take on how the press could operate. However, there were certain leaders that had the intent on manipulating the press to shape public opinion about their leadership and role in the government, such as Prime Minister Katsura Taro, specifically during his second cabinet from 1908-1911.
During the time of and after World War I up until World War II, the Japanese government was going through an age of militarism, where many restrictions were placed on the press, and over time the punishments for challenging those laws became more severe and frequent. The military government was very much opposed to editors and reporters writing negatively of the government. Reporters and editors would be jailed, and papers could be suspended from printing or even banned from printing depending on the offense. A number of reporters would volunteer to go to jail in order to protect the printing capability of their newspaper. Even so, if a reporter or editor did not want to be jail or face other punishments, they would best report in a very non-critical way. This was seen to the greatest extent in the press clubs.

Seeing as how members of press clubs (clubs by this time had become attached to a number of different government offices and institutions) received certain perks and privileges, the incentive to criticize at the risk of losing those privileges was certainly insignificant to them. Since there was a lack of any guidelines regarding press clubs operations and relationships, particularly in terms of journalistic ethics, certain actions were taken, mostly by official sources to ensure journalists were reporting the way they wanted them to report. However, with the establishment of the Japan Newspaper Society, such questionable activities were put to an end and a more organized system of press club operation was enacted.

“As a result of the rigorous reorganization, an organ that had come to lead its own, albeit highly controversial, existence had been transformed into a disciplined relay machine for the dissemination of politically correct information. Within only a few months, the press clubs had been reduced to a government controlled organ relaying government announcements to a government controlled press; practically all news produced by press club journalists after 1943 had become the verbatim reproduction of what had been dictated by the authorities earlier in the day” (162)

That does not mean things had necessarily gotten any better in terms of the integrity of Japanese journalism as it progress through the twentieth century. Immediately after World War II the United States acted as militaristic guide for the reconstruction of the nation. The American occupants did away with the strict press laws and enacted a more democratic legislation towards freedom of the press. MacArthur’s reformation led to a reformation of Japanese journalism during the Potsdam conference. “…under clause ten of the Potsdam declaration, the Japanese government was required to ‘remove all obstacles to a revival of the democratic tendencies among the Japanese people’ and ‘establish freedom of speech, of religion and of thought, as well as respect for the fundamental human rights’” (167). MacArthur’s regime, however did not uphold this decree whenever criticism of the occupational forces was concerned. Almost in the same fashion as the Japanese government during and after World War I, the occupational forces censored any negative newswriting about them. This hypocritical stance on this so-called freedom further cemented the processes of and the presence of the press clubs. This had been done with the consolidation of press clubs and the laying out of guidelines to dissolve their extreme exclusivity. Reform of the press clubs went as such:
“a. Press conferences: no limitations whatsoever shall be imposed by press clubs or newspaper companies with respect to newspaper journalists or editors gathering news at conferences or press conferences at public institutions.
b. Press rooms: where there is a necessity for news gathering, public institutions are obliged to build press rooms, furnish them with telephones, tables, chairs, and the equipment necessary for the writing and relay of articles; and grant all newspaper companies free and costless use.
c. Press clubs. As an organization for social intercourse amongst interested journalists assigned to the various public institutions, press clubs are to refrain from any involvement in news gathering. (It is possible for more than one press club to be attached to a single government office). Press clubs are allowed to use part of the press room.
d. Grievance machinery: when grievances in relation to press rooms or press clubs are submitted to the Japan Newspaper Association, it will deliberate, and mediate a settlement” (177)

These guidelines were far from law however, and did little to put an end to regurgitated authority information. Using American journalism as the basis of comparison for Japanese news media, it become apparent that these press clubs do little to serve the Japanese public, other that relaying information from the mouths of the government.

American journalism prides itself as being a watchdog for the public and in most cases maintains a significant code of ethics to ensure that information is gathered and stories are told from as many sides as possible with the freedom to both criticize and praise whatever may be happening. When talking about Japanese press clubs, that idea is lost. The relationships that journalists maintain with government officials and politicians completely eradicate any sense of being watchdogs, because there is an extremely strong overbearing tendency for Japanese reporters to hold their tongues. They receive the privilege of secure jobs and nice accommodations as long as they maintain good relationships with their government sources. Of course, American journalists must also try and maintain good relationship with sources if they want to be able to continue using those sources for future news gathering. The distinct difference is that Japanese press clubs reporters maintain those relationship not on a strictly professional level, but on a highly intimate personal level. The style of reporting, which focuses less on legislation and government processes and more on the personalities of Diet members and other government officials, also affects this (this concept with be discussed in a later summary).

After World War II and the MacArthur occupation press club journalism has maintained this non-watchdog mode of operation. The occupation can partly be blamed for this outcome, but I believe it is the fault of the journalists/editors themselves and the efforts of the government to try to control the media, as they had been trying to do over the course of Japanese journalism history. Press clubs have received heavy criticism from certain Japanese journalists but they go mostly unheard – they should still be heeded however. De Lange, through a detailed examination of the history Japanese journalism places great significance and the analysis and possible abolishment of press clubs. To him, the press clubs are the last obstacle standing in the way for the news media in Japan to reach maturity, and I agree with him.