

Media Harassment in Japan: An Interactionist Approach¹

Tsukasa Kuwabara²

Professor at Kagoshima University

1. Starting from a “vague pain”

In August 1981, when I was a sixth-grader, two classmates forcibly pulled down my bathing suit while I was swimming and removed it, leaving me stark naked.

In July 2001, when I was suffering from diarrhea, someone suddenly opened the cubicle door while I was doing my business at a unisex public restroom (Japanese style) within a Japan Railways train car, exposing my derriere to the public. The person who had mistakenly opened the door was a lady about 70 years old.

Both of these incidents have left me with emotional scars that cannot be erased. In the past, I have attempted to verbalize and externalize these two incidents.³ However, I thought there was a strong possibility that others might perceive these events as “not a big deal” based on their “common sense.” In any case, I find that I cannot properly deal with the aforementioned emotional scars unless I somehow transform my experience into a medium known as language and drive it outside my heart. By doing so, I cause my experience to have a solid existence in the “world of reality out there,” in a format that can be understood by an indefinite number of others. Furthermore, if I do not perform such an act of setting forth⁴ my experience in the realm of this world of reality (in other words, defining it), I will not be able to actively assert my emotional scars when interacting with others. Shameful events themselves are difficult to describe. However, recounting the details of emotional scars caused by such events is even more difficult. Even though these events are impossible to verbalize unless

¹ This paper is the English version of the following paper: Kuwabara, T., (2012), Clarifying the Concept of “Harm Caused by Media Reporting” [= <https://web.archive.org/web/20160304105240/http://jairo.nii.ac.jp/0016/00010644>].

² <https://megalodon.jp/ref/2020-0404-1044-36/https://web.archive.org/443/web/20200404014402/https://warp.da.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/11454418/ecowww.leh.kagoshima-u.ac.jp/staff/kuwabara/>

³ Kuwabara, T., . The Errata of “Introduction to a sociological perspective of Symbolic Interactionism(3) (The Summary of a doctoral dissertation, Tohoku University)” *KEIZAIGAKU-RONSHU~ OF KAGOSHIMA UNIVERSITY* (No.54) et al.. *Discussion Papers In Economics and Sociology* (0701). 2017-10-04. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200201032332/https://sites.google.com/site/20120430prfphd/home/the-errata-of-introduction-to-a-sociological-perspective-of-symbolic-interactionism-3-the-summary-of-a-doctoral-dissertation-tohoku-university-keizaigaku-ronshu-of-kagoshima-university-no-54-et-al-discussion-papers-in-economics-and-sociology-issn-1347-085x-no-0701>. Accessed: 2017-10-04. (Archived by <https://megalodon.jp/ref/2020-0404-1347-46/archive.ph/4lc5C>).

Kuwabara, T., . No. 0501, 0601, 0701: Collection In One Volume Edition. *Discussion Papers In Economics and Sociology* (0902). 2017-10-04. URL:<https://web.archive.org/web/20171004051328/http://www.pecep.us/cf31a989>. Accessed: 2017-10-04. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6txEzBiXL>).

⁴ or “fixing firmly”

feelings of shame are pushed forward, one feels compelled to choose language that conceals and tones down (or denies) such feelings of shame. Because of this, the details depicted tend to become vague. I have been carrying such vague pain around with me all this time.

One day, a person who had a similar vague feeling of pain consulted me.

This man explained that while he had been bathing at a public bath house in Kagoshima City, a newspaper photographer suddenly had entered the venue. The photographer had bowed and immediately had started snapping photos. The man recounted having the following feelings: “If this happened to a woman, it would be understandable to be concerned about this. But I felt embarrassed being concerned about such an event.” I felt that this person was carefully selecting—or forcing out—his words while discerning how he himself appeared in my eyes (i.e., assessing *one’s own identity as viewed by the other person*⁵). Although I was experiencing tremendous difficulty when it came to defining my own experience, it was surprisingly easy to verbalize (define) what had happened to others, disclosing their experience to the real world out there in a form that is (or I think that is) understandable to an indefinite number of other people.⁶

Based on my own perspective, or on the perspective of a person who suffers from an emotional scar described above, the experience of the aforementioned man seems to be strongly intertwined with two types of “obviousness.” The first type stipulates that “men are beings who do not (or should not) feel a sense of sexual embarrassment” (this is an obviousness that I also share, wonder about, and am attempting to deconstruct). The other type deals with “the freedom of reporting and interviewing by the mass media.” I am not so skillful as to be able to concentrate on two different things simultaneously, and even if I can effectively verbalize or define things concerning other people, I still struggle to properly define things pertaining to myself (though this problem may not be unique to me).

Thus, I have decided to focus my attention concerning this issue on the latter type of obviousness, the one that does not involve me—that is, the freedom of reporting and interviewing by the mass media. I have actively engaged in deconstructing this obviousness. My discussion with the man described above became an impetus drawing my attention to the phenomenon of *harm caused by media reporting* (also known as “trial by media”).

2. “Serving” and “a platter”

I have been engaged in study related to Herbert Blumer’s theory on Symbolic Interactionism since

⁵ Cf. Kuwabara, T., and K. Yamaguchi, 2013, An Introduction to the Sociological Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism, *The Joint Journal of the National Universities in Kyushu, Education and Humanities*, 1(1) [= <http://archive.ph/ErX12>], p. 5.

⁶ <http://archive.ph/mso17#selection-1379.0-1379.142>
<https://web.archive.org/web/20171118072547/https://megalodon.jp/ref/2012-0918-1705-27/liveweb.archive.org/http://www.geocities.jp/issn03890104no57/DPno0701Reflected/anti-humanrights.htm>

1994.⁷ In 1971, Blumer published a paper titled “Social Problems as Collective Behavior,”⁸ and we translated it into Japanese in 2006.⁹ Blumer made the following statement at the beginning of the paper:

My thesis is that social problems are fundamentally products of a process of collective definition instead of existing independently as a set of objective social arrangements with an intrinsic makeup.

Blumer was not intending to say that objective social arrangements are of no concern in the formation of social problems.¹⁰ Instead, he stated that even if many people are tormented by such “objective social arrangements,” these social arrangements or conditions will not become a social problem unless not only those people but others as well come to consider them as a social problem.

Many “objective social arrangements” in Japan have passed through the process described by Blumer. Sexual harassment is a clear example. Before the point at which events involving “a type of social behavior, performed by men toward women, that has a high likelihood of causing emotional damage to women beyond simple discomfort as a general rule” were given the *name*¹¹ of “sexual harassment” and constructed as social problems, they were viewed as essentially a non-issue. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that until that time, “common sense” had dictated that women who viewed such events as problems were themselves the problems. Even if one wanted to turn such events into an issue of concern, there was no suitable language—or “name” — available by means of which to do so.

Yoshiko Miya, in the foreword to her book *Sexual Harassment: The New Edition* (Asahi Bunko, 1999), described such circumstances prior to the 1980s in the following manner:

“Sexual harassment” has been described as an old, yet also a new problem. Although the term itself seems like something new, the phenomenon itself has existed from olden days. (new paragraph/omission)

The phenomena that exist around us would be seen as non-existent if there were no language to scoop up such phenomena. Thus, to describe a phenomenon, a new language or a “serving” of a concept will become necessary.

The term “sexual harassment” was indeed this new “serving.”

⁷ Kuwabara, T., 2019, “Symbolic Interactionism Notes” Web Release, *Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Kagoshima University, 93: 33-39.

Kuwabara, T., 2011, Book Review: *Introduction to the “Sociology of Self”* by Mamoru Funatsu, *The Book Review Press*, 3019 [<https://web.archive.org/web/20141109085850/http://www.geocities.jp/ptk20120118/Comment-on-Mamoru-Funatsu.pdf>].

Kuwabara, T., and K. Yamaguchi, 2013, op. cit. pp.1-11.

⁸ <https://www.jstor.com/stable/799797>

⁹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20160404203553/http://ci.nii.ac.jp/naid/120001394128/en/>

¹⁰ <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/naid/40019193469>

¹¹ On the importance of “name” or “naming” in the formation of “objects,” see the following: Strauss, A. L., 1959, *Mirrors and Masks*, Free Press.

In order to serve it, a “platter” on which it could be served was also needed. However, the fact that a platter known as “the era,” as well as another platter known as “awareness of human rights”—in particular, the rights of women—had been prepared played a large role (new paragraph/omission).

Although through the 1980s, we concentrated on the task of listening to female victims, the women who recounted their suffering feared being identified as an involved party more than anything. They were cautious regarding the process of being interviewed and, even if they agreed to an interview, they did not express their true feelings easily. To begin with, the task of verbalizing the experience they had gone through was fraught with difficulty. Often described as a “second rape,” raising issues involving sex required the victim to prove to the people around her that she was 100% a victim. Back in the 1980s, there were many Japanese lawyers who, despite being specialists in law, were completely ignorant about sexual harassment. Therefore, they had to start by obtaining Western works and studying them.

Following the “era of labor pains,” as Miya put it, described above, the 1990s saw the social establishment of “sexual harassment” as an *object*¹²—that is, “the phenomenon itself” was established as a social problem—. Immediately after this event, various other types of social issues, such as academic harassment, power harassment, and alcohol related harassment, became successively framed under the broad umbrella of a superordinate category, “harassment.” The term “sexual harassment” thus not only established sexual harassment as a social problem but also served to expedite the turning of other previously “buried” and objective social arrangements or conditions into social problems.

What requirements must be met for an objective social arrangement to attain the status of a social problem? According to Blumer’s paper cited earlier, such objective social arrangements need to pass through five stages—or to clear five hurdles—along the way: the emergence of a social problem, the legitimation of the problem, the mobilization of action with regard to the problem, the formation of an official plan of action, and the transformation of the official plan in its empirical implementation (page 301/translated, page 45). The one thing that remains important through all five stages is that the social arrangement must “continue to be defined as a social problem.”

After that, what requirements must be met for a certain objective social arrangement to continue to be defined as a social problem within a society?

The cooperation of the mass media (for molding a “platter”): Blumer himself, albeit in simple form, pointed out the importance of mass media in his aforementioned paper (page 302/translated, page 47). The impact of the four types of mass media (TV, newspaper, radio, and magazines), especially that of TV and newspapers,¹³ remains substantial even in modern-day Japan, despite the Internet’s growing number of users and its extension into every crevice of society. No matter how much an objective social arrangement may be defined as a problem by online users, it is nearly

¹² Blumer, H. G., 1969, *Symbolic Interactionism*, Prentice-Hall, pp. 10-12.

¹³ In particular, “pseudo-environment composition ability” and “agenda setting ability.”

impossible for the arrangement to attain a status as a social problem without backing from TV or newspapers (hereinafter, “mass media”). Even though a great number of sites that view a certain objective social arrangement as a problem may pop up online, as their number increases, the likelihood that multitudes of people will access each site decreases inversely. And even if many people access each site, should these people fall into the state of pluralistic ignorance,¹⁴ such an objective social arrangement will not become a widely recognized issue within the general public. This means that it will not become established as a social concern or readily obvious as a social problem.

Language that contains an explicit definition (for “serving”): Even if one decides to define a certain objective social arrangement as a social problem and to make claims concerning it,¹⁵ a language appropriate for representing this arrangement will be indispensable in most cases. It is even more favorable if this language has a *signified*¹⁶ that has been explicitly defined and a *signifier*¹⁷ which can be easily spread among other people. A language possessing a moniker that is easy to use when mentioning the said arrangement (i.e., the ease by which an image can be conjured up from the moniker) and possessing at the same time the clarity of the specification of the concept will become powerful tools when one is seeking to turn a certain arrangement or condition into a social problem.

3. The difficulty of “harm caused by media reporting”

The first time I saw the term “harm caused by media reporting” (it might be permitted that we call it “media harassment” hereinafter in this paper) in the mass media was in a newspaper report in *Minami-Nippon Shimbun*¹⁸ on the Okinawa rape incident by American soldiers that took place on June 29, 2001. This “serving” was a perfect tool for me, as I was attempting to deconstruct the obviousness of the freedom of reporting and interviewing by the mass media. Initially, the mass media described the perpetrator of this harmful reporting—media harassment—as “a certain segment of the media.” They kept reporting the story as if they themselves (the TV and newspaper outlets) were outsiders. However, immediately after the (old) Protection of Human Rights Bill was submitted in 2002 to the Diet, the mass media were forced to report in such a way as to acknowledge that they themselves had been active perpetrators in order to protect their own rights and interest. Therefore, the mass media were forced to frequently use the term “media harassment” in their broadcasts and newspapers. During this period, the *object* of a social problem, referred to as “media scam,” was being formed. Ironically, the serving and the platter for media harassment were provided simultaneously by the perpetrators, the mass media themselves.

However, after the above-cited bill was abolished in October 2003, the term “media harassment”

¹⁴ <http://archive.ph/kfiQd#selection-4447.462-4447.484>

¹⁵ <http://archive.ph/IH7cW#selection-507.19-507.43>

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Signified_and_signifier

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Signified_and_signifier

¹⁸ <https://web.archive.org/web/20030603204607/http://373news.com:80/index.php>

disappeared rapidly, at least in the mass media. The terms “media harassment” and “media scrum” lost their platter, although the terms were again accompanied by a serving and a platter during the formation process of the Basic Plan for Crime Victims from February 2004 to December 2005.

Despite having lost its platter, the serving of “media harassment” remains alive in various places other than the mass media. However, without its platter, media harassment no longer maintains its obviousness as a commonly known social problem.

Moreover, the serving of “media harassment” itself was problematic, because the definition of the concept was/is vague. In contrast, sexual harassment has a very detailed definition that stipulates exactly what actions, committed by what persons and in what settings, constitute the harassment. It also stipulates the types of relationship—in reality or in the eyes of victims—that may exist between the perpetrators and the victims. In contrast, media harassment is defined broadly as “a type of human-rights violation where people who are or were being reported on by the TV, newspapers, and magazines have their characters defamed or their privacy abused. It destroys their lives and isolates them from their neighbors and friends” (Kazuyuki Azusawa, *Trial by Media: Harmful Media Reporting*, Iwanami Shinsho, 2007, page 22).

Yoshiko Miya, in her previously mentioned work, states that her own mission is to “dig up phenomena that have been buried within a society and expose them to society” (ibid, page 4).

Many books, articles and papers have been written on media harassment.¹⁹ However, I have yet to come across a detailed and clear definition of the term. In a future paper, I intend to attempt a more specific clarification of *media harassment*. (To be continued.)

4. Bibliography

I would like to continue to expand and enhance this section.

***Organizations (those that traverse industries) dealing with human-rights violations by the media**

TV, radio: BPO (The Broadcasting Ethics and Program Improvement Organization)²⁰

Magazines: Magazine Human Rights Box²¹

Newspaper: None

***Organizations addressing media harassment**

LAMVIC (Lawyers’ Network for Media Victims damaged by news coverage)²²

¹⁹ https://scholar.google.co.jp/scholar?q=%E5%A0%B1%E9%81%93%E8%A2%AB%E5%AE%B3%E3%80%80%E5%AE%9F%E5%90%8D&btnG=&hl=ja&as_sdt=0%2C5

²⁰ <https://web.archive.org/web/20160313142445/http://www.bpo.gr.jp/>

²¹ https://web.archive.org/web/20150810005527/http://www.j-magazine.or.jp/opinion_001.html

²² <https://web.archive.org/web/20150810113956/http://lamvic.j-all.com/>

GoHoo (watchdog for accuracy in news reporting)²³

***Citizen groups that examine media harassment**

The Liaison Committee on Human Rights and Mass Media Conduct²⁴

The Association of Reporting and Human Rights²⁵

A Society for Researching Human Rights and Media Reporting (Sendai)²⁶

The Tokai Association That Examines Mass Media and Human Rights²⁷

The Association That Examines Mass Media in Kyoto (currently not in operation)

The Kitakawachi Association That Examines Broadcasting and Human Rights²⁸

The Kansai Society for Human Rights and Media Reporting²⁹

Fukuoka Association That Discusses Reporting (Representative: Hirofumi Uchida, professor at the Faculty of Law, Kyushu University)

***Major researchers, activists, and involved parties**

Yoshiyuki Kouno³⁰

Kenichi Asano³¹

Masanori Yamaguchi (Representative, The Liaison Committee on Human Rights and Mass Media Conduct)

Kazuyuki Azusawa³²

Minami Ooka³³

*** Related literatures, sites and memos³⁴**

²³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20150813001453/http://gohoo.org/>

²⁴ <https://web.archive.org/web/20150923022713/http://www.jca.apc.org/~jimporen/index.html>

²⁵ <https://archive.is/JgLZz#selection-9677.0-9677.29>

²⁶ <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/naid/40004395067>

²⁷ <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/naid/40004395068>

²⁸ <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA56717342>

²⁹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20090721054310/http://www.geocities.jp/citizenandmedia/>
<https://web.archive.org/web/20060219120620/http://www.geocities.jp:80/citizenandmedia/backnumbertop.htm>
https://web.archive.org/web/20130729025446/http://www.geocities.jp/shimin_media/

³⁰ <https://web.archive.org/web/20160505103701/http://www2k.biglobe.ne.jp/~ndskohno/>

³¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20140723122736/http://www1.doshisha.ac.jp/~kasano/>

³² <http://archive.vn/A8CL7#selection-2399.44-2399.84>

³³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20140817225330/http://www2.tky.3web.ne.jp/~norin/>

³⁴ <https://twilog.org/TK65802767/search?word=Media%20Harassment&ao=a>

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FACULTY of LAW, ECONOMICS and HUMANITIES
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