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MEDIATISED IMAGES OF JAPAN IN EUROPE:
THROUGH THE MEDIA KALEIDOSCOPE

MUTUAL IMAGES

ISSUE 6 – SPRING 2019

MUTUAL IMAGES

A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

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EDITED BY

MARCO PELLITTERI & CHRISTOPHER J. HAYES

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Bullshit journalism and Japan: English-language news media, Japanese higher education policy, and Frankfurt's theory of "Bullshit"

Kenn NAKATA STEFFENSEN | Independent researcher, Ireland

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ABSTRACT

The last sentence in Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale There is no doubt about it reads: 'It got into the papers, it was printed; and there is no doubt about it, one little feather may easily grow into five hens.' In September 2015 a process very similar to the rumour-mill in Andersen's satire swept across the internet. An inaccurate—and on inspection highly implausible—report was picked up and amplified by several British and US news organisations. Thus, an improbable suggestion about the Japanese government's decision to effectively abolish the social sciences and humanities quickly became established as a morally reprehensible truth. Once the 'facts' of the matter were reported by authoritative English-language media organisations, the outrage spread to other languages, and an online petition was launched to make the government 'reconsider' a decision it had not taken. In light of the 'misunderstandings' that had circulated in the foreign press, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology eventually felt compelled to issue a statement, in English, to clarify that it had no intention of closing social science and humanities faculties.

What transpired in these transactions between Times Higher Education, Bloomberg, the Wall Street Journal, Time, the Guardian, and other news outlets is of more than passing anecdotal interest. Consideration of the case offers insights into the dominant role of the English-using media in constituting Japan and Asia as an object of Western knowledge and of the part played in this by what Harry Frankfurt theorised as the sociolinguistic phenomenon of "bullshit". The Times Higher Education article and the ones that followed were all examples of the "bullshit" that arguably increasingly proliferates in both journalistic and academic discourse, especially when "circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about" (Frankfurt, 2005: 63). It would appear that the kind of "bullshit journalism" represented by the global media storm in question is more likely to be produced when the West reports about 'the rest'. The paper uses the case of the purported existential threat to the social sciences and humanities in Japan to discuss wider arguments about the role of 'bullshit' in journalistic and academic knowledge production and dissemination about the non-Western world.

KEYWORDS

Journalism; Japan; Truth; Eurocentrism; Anglosphere; Education; Politics; Epistemology; Mediascapes; Global Cultural Flows.

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*The hen who had lost the loose little feather naturally did not recognise her own story, and being a respectable hen, said:
"I despise those fowls; but there are more of that kind.
Such things ought not to be concealed, and I will do my best to get the story into the papers, so that it becomes known*

*throughout the land; the hens have richly
deserved it, and their family too."*

*It got into the papers, it was printed; and there is
no doubt about it, one little feather may
easily grow into five hens.*

Hans Christian Andersen, *There is no doubt about it* (1852)

Introduction

It may seem frivolous to label the work of well-meaning journalists as “bullshit”, but the phenomenon that Harry Frankfurt applied this designation to poses a very real and serious problem in Western journalistic and academic discourse about Japan and the non-Western world as such. His theory of bullshit (Frankfurt, 2005) is thus helpful when trying to understand the images of Japan produced by the Western news media led by the dominant US and British news organisations. In addition, news reporting on Japan is embedded in the wider discursive formation of what Edward Said called Orientalism, and what Stuart Hall called the discourse of “the West and the rest”, as well as within Western-dominated global “mediascapes” and “ideoscapes” (Said, 1978; Hall, 1996: 188-189; Appadurai, 1990). It must be stressed that the term “bullshit” is employed as an ideal type and hermeneutical device, not used in its everyday pejorative sense to pass moral judgement on the authors and publications discussed. Frankfurt’s theorisation of “bullshit” facilitates a contextually bounded interpretation of facts. As such, it is open to challenge in the face of new facts and through alternative interpretations of already known facts. In Popperian terms, the conjecture that some examples of writing fulfil Frankfurt’s criteria for “bullshit” is open to refutation (Popper, 1992) and may be superseded empirically or logically.

The following will first briefly – and admittedly relatively uncritically – introduce the notion of bullshit as developed by Frankfurt. Secondly, this will be followed by an outline of “the Times Higher Education affair” - a sequence of news reports on higher education policy measures in Japan that unfolded in the Western-language news media in September 2015, so named because of the key role played by an article in *Times Higher Education* (Grove, 2015). Thirdly, it will be argued that on the basis of the available evidence that these textual transactions can be considered “bullshit” in Frankfurt’s sense with far-reaching consequences, which were met by non-bullshitting responses by Japan-based Anglophone academics and journalists (Kingston, 2015a and

2015b, Harding, 2015, Steffensen, 2015), and by an exceptional statement in English by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2015b). Understanding the dynamics of the particular case requires an understanding of the unequal power relations at work between the Anglophone West and Japan and the pivotal agenda-setting role played by news organisations from the heartlands of the Anglosphere. That is to say that power and status in the global knowledge economy produce what becomes established as the truth about, in this case, higher education policy in Japan. This can only be grasped on the background of the last 200 years of global domination by English-speaking empires, which has had certain intellectually distorting effects not only for consumers of news about the non-Western world but also for academic knowledge and the truths it claims to uncover. The "Anglobalisation" that has taken place since around the end of the Napoleonic wars – and which may now have peaked and begun to decline – is only part of a longer history of the Western constitution of changing Asian others, which can be traced back at least to Books 3 and 7 of Aristotle's *Politics*, and thus to the very inception of comparative political theorising in the European tradition.¹

On the thorny matter of truth and Frankfurt's conceptual distinctions between truth, falsity and bullshit, this is an epistemological can of worms, which is better left unopened for present purposes. It should therefore be kept in mind that the question of what truth is and how to determine that something is true is *truly* complicated. Following Husserl, this question will be "bracketed" (*Einklammerung/Epoché*), i.e. judgement will provisionally be suspended in order to carry out the task at hand without ending up in infinite regress (Beyer, 2016; Husserl, 1995 [1913]).² Having set the question aside, we shall pragmatically proceed on the undeniably naïve operating assumption that truth is justified belief in correspondence with facts, and that we can

¹ For a concise overview of the genealogy of the idea of Oriental despotism and its Aristotelian roots, see Minuti 2015.

² This is in what Beyer calls the "local" or "weaker" sense of epoché: "Husserl actually draws upon two different versions of the epoché, which versions he does not separate as clearly as one might have hoped: the "universal epoché" on the one hand, and a weaker "local epoché" (as one could label it) on the other. The former version (as described in *Ideas*) seems to require the phenomenologist to put all his existence assumptions regarding the external world into brackets at once, at any point, whereas the weaker version merely requires him to bracket particular existence assumptions, depending on the respective "transcendental guide (Leitfaden)", i.e., on the issue to be clarified phenomenologically. This is supposed to enable the phenomenologist to make explicit his reasons for the bracketed existence assumptions, or for assumptions based upon them, such as, e.g., the presupposition that a given creature is a subject undergoing such-and-such an experience" (Beyer 2016: 5).

intersubjectively establish the truth or falsity of claims about the world by simple verification – if we check a claim against facts known to us, we can tell whether it is true or false. For now, we shall just assume that we can follow von Ranke in telling things “as they actually were”, take truth and falsity to be relatively uncomplicated matters and focus on how bullshit relates to the two.

The following presents a straightforward account of the arguments proposed by Frankfurt in his 2005 booklet *On Bullshit* in order to show what bullshit is and why it is such a problem. Without going into the critical reception of the theory, this exposition is merely for the purpose of introducing a useful perspective for making sense of what happened when *Times Higher Education* suggested in September 2015 that the Japanese government had decided to effectively abolish university research and education in the social sciences and humanities (Grove, 2015). The article instigated a global moral panic within an unequal and Eurocentric order of discourse where the English language and Anglo-American journalism occupy a privileged agenda-setting and truth-defining position. What transpired in this chain of text production in September 2015 is thus reminiscent of Hans Christian Andersen’s satirical fiction *There is no doubt about it*, where a rumour is amplified through a process of “Chinese whispers” and becomes unrecognisable when it returns to its point of origin.

Bullshit: What it is and why it matters

Frankfurt (2005) starts *On Bullshit* with the following observation,

One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share. But we tend to take the situation for granted. Most people are rather confident of their ability to recognize bullshit and to avoid being taken in by it. So the phenomenon has not aroused much deliberate concern, nor attracted much sustained inquiry.

In consequence, we have no clear understanding of what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, or what functions it serves. And we lack a conscientiously developed appreciation of what it means to us. In other words, we have no theory (Frankfurt 2005, 1).

Although phrased in different terms, the epistemological, ethical and political problems arising from the conflict between sophistic bullshit and philosophical truth is at least as old as Plato’s dialogue *The Apology of Socrates*. Bullshit is a near-universal human behaviour so culturally pervasive and commonplace that it tends to be ignored as an intellectual problem worth considering. It pervades modern culture and arguably does

so more than ever in an age where terms like “fake news”, “post-truth politics” and “alternative facts” are prominent in mainstream public discourse,³ hence the urgent need to theoretically constitute bullshit as an object of serious inquiry, to account for its ubiquity and its social, political, cultural and epistemic effects.

Bullshitting and lying are both forms of deliberate misrepresentation. But bullshit is distinct from lying. Lying is deliberate misrepresentation of a state of affairs and of the liar’s beliefs concerning that state of affairs. A lie is by definition false, but bullshit need not be false. This is where the misrepresentational intent of the two differ (Frankfurt, 2005: 53-54). Unlike lying, bullshit does not necessarily aim to misrepresent factual matters or what the bullshitter believes about those facts. Journalistic and academic bullshitters most often hope that their deception is in accordance with the truth. What bullshit tries to deceive its recipients about is not the truth but what the producer of bullshit is up to. It falsely tries to give the impression that the bullshitter knows the truth and is transmitting it. But whether what they are saying is true or untrue is not the main concern, if a concern at all. The bullshitter “misrepresents what he is up to” (Frankfurt, 2005: 54) and deliberately conceals the fact “that the truth values of his statements are of no central interest to him; what we are not to understand is that his intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it” (Frankfurt, 2005: 54-55).

Both bullshitting and lying aim to deceive the recipient into believing that they are true. But their objects of misrepresentation and their objectives are different. Lying is strongly orientated towards its opposite, truth-telling. The liar knows the truth; it is impossible to lie knowledge of the truth. One could be mistaken or deluded and sincerely believe an untruth to be true, but lying is by necessity in response to what the liar takes to be the truth. To tell a lie, one must know the truth and to consciously conceal it by stating something one believes to be untrue (Frankfurt, 2005: 55-56). Bullshit requires no such conviction. The liar is therefore in a certain, negative, sense respectful of the truth, where the bullshitter is not. The bullshitter “does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose” (Frankfurt, 2005: 56).

³ An earlier version of this paper was presented to staff and PhD students in Asian studies at Universidad Complutense de Madrid in December 2015. Since then, the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States has prompted a notable upsurge in “bullshitology” with reference to the Trump presidency, e.g. Griffin (2017) and Gavalier & Goldberg (2017). For a short 2016 interview with Professor Frankfurt, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_D9Y-1Jcov4.

What marks bullshit out as a form of misrepresentation distinct from lying is thus its orientation towards the truth. The liar deliberately tries to deceive by misrepresenting the way things really are. As such, lying is the polar opposite of truth-telling. Both the liar and the truth-teller are orientated towards what they believe to be the truth, which they either seek to represent correctly or deceitfully. They are on opposite sides “in the same game” (Frankfurt, 2005: 60). The bullshitter is playing a very different game, and this makes bullshit “a greater enemy of truth” than lying (Frankfurt, 2005: 61).

Bullshit is a “third way” that relates to the truth in a fundamentally different manner from lying. What stands at the centre is not the truth but an instrumental interest in getting away with deception. Truth and falsity are irrelevant to the bullshitter, as long as the deception furthers his or her interests.

One reason why bullshit proliferates among journalists is that they are placed in situations where they have to write about matters of which they are insufficiently informed and where few have the courage to take a consistent standpoint of Socratic ignorance.⁴ In such situations, the easiest, face-saving option is often to bullshit one’s way through. While bullshitting is not immoral, it poses a problem for journalism and academic research and is arguably on the rise due to such structural factors as the production demands of the 24-hour news cycle, the casualisation of labour, the informatisation of social and economic relations, and the epistemic dominance of the English-speaking world in particular and the Western world in general.

The “closure” of faculties in Japan: The chronological facts of the matter

The “Times Higher Education affair” played out over the last two weeks of September 2015. After briefly outlining it, we shall consider why it arguably qualifies as a case of “bullshit journalism” and how harmful it can be.

On September 14th, 2015, an article by Jack Grove in *Times Higher Education* made the sensational claim that the Japanese minister of education had “decreed” mass closures of social sciences and humanities faculties (Grove, 2015). This publication is

⁴ Although Plato did not use this word, his account of Socrates’ Apology is at one level the story of a man who was condemned to death for challenging bullshit. Reading the *Apology* through Frankfurt leads to the conclusion that Socrates’ death sentence was in no small part caused by his calling of the bullshit of his fellow citizens – the politicians, the poets, and the craftsmen. In declining degrees of severity, they were all guilty of bullshit and the closely related phenomenon of what Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont called “intellectual imposture” because they misrepresented their state of ignorance and laid false claims to knowledge. Socrates can be seen as exposing bullshit in Frankfurt’s sense or “*impostures intellectuelles/fashionable nonsense*” in Sokal and Bricmont’s sense (Sokal & Bricmont 1998 [1997]).

widely regarded as authoritative on matters of higher education. Its world ranking of universities enjoys great prestige and its news reporting is considered reliable.

It was remarkable that the article appeared more than four months after the events it reported about and that it very quickly had a global snowball effect, where other news organisations, such as Bloomberg, *The Guardian*, *Time*, and the *Smithsonian Magazine* repeated essentially the same story (Jenkins, 2015; Dean, 2015; Smith, 2015; Blakemore, 2015). This resulted in a global outrage and even a petition to reverse the supposed policy. Before discussing this chain of textual production and its impact in some more depth, let us chronologically reconstruct the sequence of events leading to and following on from its publication.

On the 8th of June 2015 the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology sent a circular to the 86 national universities called *A Review of the Organization and Operation of the National University Corporations and Other Higher Educational Institutions* 国立大学法人等の組織及び業務全般の見直しについて (MEXT, 2015a). It asked the universities to “make every effort to draw up an organizational restructuring plan in the light of the decrease of the university-age population, the demand for human resources and the quality control of research and teaching institutions and the function of national universities.” It also requested that the universities should take “active steps to abolish organizations or to convert them to serve areas that better meet society’s needs.” It was mainly targeted at teacher-training, not core research and teaching in the humanities and social sciences.⁵ The main events leading up to the two weeks of global outrage in September and the ministry’s eventual damage-limitation exercise were:

- 8th June MEXT sends a circular to the 86 national universities: *A Review of the Organization and Operation of the National University Corporations and Other Higher Educational Institutions* (MEXT, 2015a)
- 1st July the Federation of Microbiological Societies of Japan responds

⁵ What was particularly problematic from the point of view of the ministry was that many degrees in education had no practical teaching element and that their graduates were therefore not easily employable in the education sector. It was possible to graduate with a degree in education without any teaching experience, and not having the experience made it difficult for graduates to find employment as teachers. Concerned about the teaching quality on these courses, the employment of its graduates, and projected lower demand due to the changing demographic structure, the ministry wanted teacher-training to become more labour market-orientated by introducing a teaching certification as a compulsory element (MEXT 2015).

- 23rd July statement by Science Council of Japan
- 28th July the Japanese Archaeological Association responds
- 25th August UK-based publisher Sage's *Social Science Space* website anonymously publishes "Japan's Education Ministry Says to Axe Social Science and Humanities"
- 11th September. Minister Shimomura says at a press conference: "There is no objective of abolishing the humanities and social sciences." The minister puts misunderstandings in the Japanese press down to the bad writing of junior officials.
- 14th September *Times Higher Education* publishes "Social sciences and humanities faculties in Japan 'to close' after ministerial intervention"
- 16th September Time magazine publishes "Alarm Over Huge Cuts to Humanities and Social Sciences at Japanese Universities"
- 18th September Science Council of Japan states their faith in reassurances by MEXT that there is no risk of closure of departments
- 20th September *Bloomberg* publishes "Japan dumbs down its universities at the wrong time"
- 21st September a business studies lecturer from Liverpool University launches an online petition on www.change.org to "Reconsider the closure of humanities and social sciences faculties".
- 25th September *Financial Times* publishes "Japan engulfed in row over university reforms" by their Tokyo bureau chief
- 26th September *The Guardian* publishes "Japan's humanities chop sends shivers down academic spines"
- 27th September Ministry Academic Steering Committee hold an emergency meeting to "explain the true meaning" of the circular. Science Council of Japan chairman repeats that they were wrongly "worried that the humanities and social sciences would be abolished, but having heard the explanation I am relieved that this is not the case."
- 30th September *Times Higher Education* publishes Steffensen's "Japan and the social sciences"
- 1st October MEXT issues a press release in English saying: "There are some misunderstandings [among the public] concerning the notice issued by the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology that: 'MEXT thinks that academic disciplines related to the humanities and social sciences are not needed for national universities.' This is in fact untrue."

The *Times Higher Education* article of 14th September and its impact

The above timeline does not include every relevant item in the chain of textual production set off by MEXT's 8th June circular. There may be other texts or statements made that are pertinent to the case. The key development is the *Times Higher Education* article published on the 14th September, and later revised, which originally claimed that

the minister of education had “decreed” the closure of humanities and social science faculties. The revised version of the article toned down its language and stated that:

Many social sciences and humanities faculties in Japan are to close after universities were ordered to “serve areas that better meet society’s needs”, it has been reported. Of the 60 national universities that offer courses in these disciplines, 26 have confirmed that they will either close or scale back their relevant faculties at the behest of Japan’s government, according to a survey of university presidents by the Yomiuri Shimbun.

It follows a letter from education minister Hakubun Shimomura sent to all of Japan’s 86 national universities, which called on them to take “active steps to abolish [social science and humanities] organisations or to convert them to serve areas that better meet society’s needs”.

Grove’s article – which was based on the Social Science Space blog post – led other news organisations to publish essentially the same story, but each time with some further embellishment. These stories first appeared in English and later in Spanish, German, and other languages.⁶ It is remarkable that none of the journalists were based in Japan, seemed to read Japanese, or contacted sources in Japan to corroborate the claims. One was not even a professional journalist but, as the biographical profile of *The Guardian* states, “a final year philosophy student at the University of Leeds and aspiring journalist.”

Even if one is reporting on Japan out of London and does not speak Japanese, there are plenty of officials in the Ministry of Education and other relevant organisations who can respond to a query in English. What transpired seems rather divorced from the Japanese reality it claimed to describe and to have relatively autonomous dynamics of its own. It was only when the *Financial Times* and *Japan Times* joined the fray on 25th and 26th September, and when Steffensen’s article was published in *Times Higher Education* on 30th September, that actual knowledge based on Japanese textual sources and interviews entered the non-Japanese news stream (Kingston, 2015a; Harding, 2015; Steffensen, 2015). None of the alarmist authors abroad did what Jeff Kingston did to write his column for the *Japan Times*. As Kingston summarises the procedure: “I contacted several national university professors and experts on higher education in

⁶ Of the major European languages, Spanish seems to be relatively more dependent on the English-language media than e.g. French or German, and perhaps even more so than much smaller languages like Danish and Dutch. At the same time, imperial history has made Spanish the language with the second-largest number of native speakers in the world, and Spanish media enjoy considerable prestige and influence in Latin America. A similar dependency on English-language rather than Japanese sources is also evident in Spanish-language Japanese studies (see Steffensen 2018: 267).

Japan and elicited a range of responses, including some relatively positive assessments” (Kingston, 2015b).⁷

The original article and the ones that followed painted a very alarming, but untrue, picture of what was going on. The reality is that none of the universities concerned have plans to close social science and humanities faculties. The main target of reform is the ten national teacher-training universities, for reasons to do with demographic change, academic standards and perceived societal needs. Social science and humanities faculties are also decreasing their student intake, a few will see lower levels of staffing, but none are threatened with closure. At the more general level the article also misrepresented the relationship between the government and universities. Japanese ministers of education simply do not have unchecked power to shut down entire faculties from one academic year to the next. As in most other countries, education and research policy is more plural, fragmented, and dialogical. Japanese ministers of education are not Oriental despots with unlimited and unchecked power over universities.

When taking the size and structure of the university sector in Japan into account, the situation looks far less ominous. There are 783 universities in the country, and the national universities make up a small elite proportion of this. Japanese universities fall into a small number of publicly owned and funded organisations and a much larger private sector, which accounts for 77.3% of all universities and some 80% of the undergraduate student body. The circular, to which 17 universities supposedly responded that they will “close liberal arts and social science courses”, was only sent to the national universities. If that had been true, only two percent of the universities in Japan would have been affected. As it happens, no closures are foreseen, but even if it had been the case, it would by no means amount to “many faculties”.

The *Times Higher Education* article was based on the blog *Social Science Space*, which is hosted by the publisher Sage. According to *Social Science Space*, the Japanese newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* reported that “17 national universities will stop recruiting students to humanities and social science courses – including law and economics”. What the *Yomiuri* actually wrote is that 26 universities “plan to restructure their humanities departments” and that 17 of them “will stop recruiting in

⁷ After MEXT’s statement in English, *Social Science Space*, from where the original inaccurate rumours had spread, also published a more measured and well-informed piece by Jeff Kingston, according to which the reforms to higher education had been inaccurately caricatured “as a barbaric assault on the humanities and academic freedom” (Kingston 2015c).

excess of 1300 new students” to the departments undergoing restructuring (Yomiuri, 2015b). They did not plan to stop recruiting but to impose stricter limits on admissions to certain departments.

The suggestion that entire faculties would be forced to close in the near future on the order of the minister was based on *Social Science Space's* mistranslation of the *Yomiuri Shimbun* article. The newspaper did not make this assertion, nor does it seem to be mentioned in any Japanese news report or publicly available government or university source. The universities and news media in Japan only mentioned reorganisation and reduced staff and student numbers. In fact, the NHK contacted all national universities and reported on the 19th July that no universities were considering closures. Some departments would be merged or otherwise restructured, and a small number of universities would restrict their intake of undergraduates in certain disciplines. This process has been ongoing for some time as part of the wider National University Reform Plan, so any direct causality between current organisational restructuring and the letter is questionable (See Kingston, 2015c; MEXT, 2016). There is therefore not that much of a dramatic news story – the minister sent an ambiguously worded letter in anticipation of forthcoming negotiations, to which the universities and a number of academic organisations responded with their mostly critical views. As the former Diet member for the now defunct Democratic Party of Japan, Suzuki Kan, told Robin Harding of the *Financial Times*: “The reporting has been totally misleading. This is totally misunderstood” (Harding, 2015).⁸

Decisions such as closing departments or faculties ultimately lie with the university in question, which is why Japanese journalists have been asking them what their plans were, rather than simply reporting which academic units the minister had ordered closed. Many universities were already restructuring and what the eventual outcome will be depends on a process of dialogue and consultation between the ministry, the universities and other interested parties. Some disciplines and departments may be embattled, but the situation is nowhere near as bleak as represented by THE, and the regulatory framework ensures that it could not be so.⁹ Both the national and private universities receive state funding, but Article 7 of the Fundamental Law on Education guarantees university independence and

⁸ Note that as a member of the opposition, Suzuki could have motives to exploit the misunderstandings for party political gain, yet he represented what he took to be the truth of the matter – that the exaggerated news reports were misleading.

⁹ When looking at trends in research funding in recent years, the HSS disciplines have maintained their relative proportion of funds allocated and increased it in some years. This makes the picture of an all-out assault on these disciplines even more untenable.

autonomy, and in 2004 the national universities became educational corporations (*gakkō hōjin* 学校法人) and thus even less exposed to ministerial intervention than in the past when they were part of the ministerial chain of command (MEXT, 2012: 6).

By way of conclusion: Bullshit and the search for truth in an “Anglobalising” world

The main question that arises is why and how such blatantly questionable news gets produced, disseminated and goes relatively unchallenged. The answer is arguably that “bullshit journalism” is facilitated by unequal cultural power relations between the collective West and the Anglosphere in particular, and the rest of the world. As Bismarck supposedly said, the most significant geopolitical fact that would shape the 20th century was “the inherited and permanent fact that North America speaks English” (Ratcliffe, 2012: 225)¹⁰. After the end of the short 20th century, this historical legacy will continue to shape the future, just as Latin continued to serve its functions after the collapse of the Roman Empire.

The sensationalist articles in English and those in other European languages derived from them gave the impression of reporting the truth of a matter. But rather than serving as a vehicle of truth-telling, they appear to have served as means for the authors and the publications to advance themselves, with little apparent regard for whether what was written was true or false. The authors may have believed themselves to be in possession of the truth, but the basis for this belief was very flimsy, and nobody seems to have taken any measures to corroborate their belief. They thus fulfil the criteria of bullshit, as discussed above.

In the Anglophone mediascape, there is apparently less concern with accurate, truthful reporting when reporting on Japan or other non-Western countries, less journalistic rigour, and less scrutiny by readers. An “Orientalist double standard” seems to be at work – lower standards prevail and are tolerated when writing about the non-West. The journalists surely did not consciously seek to misreport facts, but also did not take very elementary steps to corroborate those facts. One suspects more care would have been taken to check facts and gather alternative information if the article had been about an Anglophone or European country. In the whole process, the truth of the matter was incidental to the authors getting away with forming the impression that they were knowledgeable about the matters when they were not. The only exceptions were the three commentators based in Japan, working with Japanese-language sources and with more

¹⁰ It is questionable whether Bismarck said this, since there are no German records to that effect, and the claim was first made in an English-language publication (Beer 1917: 186).

knowledge of the Japanese university sector and political system than stereotypes of Oriental despotism (Kingston, 2015a, 2015b and 2015c; Harding, 2015; Steffensen, 2015).

The story only became a global sensation some four months after the events, which had been reported in the Japanese press during June and July, and some reports (e.g. Blakemore, 2015) were published after it had been debunked and after MEXT's clarificatory press release in English. Although there was some ambiguity and doubt it was clear to the Japanese media, the universities, and academic associations by around mid-July that, despite a clumsy phrasing in the circular, there was nothing approaching an existential threat to university education and research in the social sciences and humanities. By the time the anonymous blog entry on *Social Science Space* went online at the end of August 2015, the affair had mostly blown over in Japan. The Science Council did voice its concerns about the Ministry's intentions but did not make as extreme claims as *Social Science Space*. Once the story was out in English, not much would probably have happened if it had stayed in relative obscurity on the blog. What made the crucial difference was that it was picked up by a publication that enjoys considerable prestige and which, it seems, other news publications follow blindly and unquestioningly. The story gained momentum in the English-speaking journalistic sphere once it had the authority of *Times Higher Education* behind it. And when *Bloomberg*, *Time* and *The Guardian* repeated the claims, it was no surprise that other Western-language media, such as the Spanish press, followed their lead. As in Andersen's fairy tale, "it got into the papers" and grew into a global "truth" that it became increasingly difficult to dislodge the more it was repeated. Here it is notable that it was only after these two weeks of global rumours that the Ministry felt they had a PR crisis on their hands and that the way to address it was to issue a denial in English. Again, it shows clearly that despite its still considerable economic and technological clout and much talk about "Cool Japan" and "soft power", Japan is a relatively weak state when it comes to control of the global mediascapes and ideoscapes (Appadurai, 1990: 9-10). For much of the world, the English-speaking media are immensely powerful when it comes to setting agendas and in effect defining the "truths we live by", whether it is in Spain, Japan, or the postcolonial world. As the case shows, English is a global pivot language, through which everybody else's knowledge is increasingly filtered, and their mutual images constructed. As the case also illustrates, the speed at which this takes place in today's world is breath-taking.

From being ignored for months, a global media storm was whipped up in a couple of days, to which the Japanese state finally had to respond.

As we have also seen, the Anglograph media exist in a world of their own with its own discursive dynamics that seem to be relatively isolated from the empirical reality it supposedly reflects. At the same time that the English language and the cultural values it represents and transmits become more and more dominant and plays a part in integrating the world, another side of the coin is that knowledge of foreign languages and cultures within the Anglosphere is generally decreasing. When comparing the average PhD student or young academic in countries like the UK or US today with those of a generation ago, there may be a select few who have mastered languages like Japanese, Arabic or Chinese as part of their research, but on the whole competence in foreign languages is decreasing. As observed by, among others, Goddard and Jeffreys, language learning is in critical decline in the UK (Goddard, 2018; Jeffreys, 2019). Today, it is by no means uncommon for doctorates in comparative studies involving texts originally written in French, German or Japanese to be based exclusively on English translation. Furthermore, the dominance of English has a knock-on effect especially for smaller language communities like Dutch or Scandinavian. For the last 20 years or more, English has come to be the almost exclusively used non-native language in parts of Europe that were historically more multilingual. This has a narrowing effect on the range of perspectives available to us. When the range of matters journalists and academics deal with becomes global and the range of languages in which they deal with it narrows, they will more often find themselves on shaky ground and have to improvise or pronounce on matters they know too little about. When pressures to publish are added to this, authors are structurally predisposed to take shortcuts. When the intellectual side-effects of the global triumph of English conspire with the legacy of Orientalism and when there is pressure to produce larger quantities of impactful news or academic publications in a shorter time, people resort to bullshit. And as Frankfurt argued, bullshit's indifference to the truth makes it a greater problem than deliberate dishonesty.

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