Over the past decade, media and culture have been subjects of vigorous inquiry in Japanese sociology, and a number of important studies have been completed in these areas. Paul du Gay identifies two main reasons for the “explosion of culture” (du Gay, 1997: 1), which has attracted the interest of researchers in the human sciences: first, a “substantive” increase in the importance of cultural practices in everyday life; and second, an “epistemological” concern with the ways in which culture is received and understood. The growing recognition of cultural practices as important subjects of sociological investigation has accompanied increasing discussion of the globalization of popular culture. The contemporary Japanese media, specifically, offer a powerful site upon which to observe the global transfer of popular culture.

In considering media and culture in Japanese sociology, let us begin by outlining how media studies and cultural studies have developed along different paths in Japan. First, it was not until the 1950s that the study of mass communication was established as a major field of Japanese sociology. For the next three decades, until roughly the mid-1980s, “media studies” meant simply “Americanized mass communication studies”. In the 1970s and 1980s, sociological cultural studies were known as “mass culture” or “youth culture” studies. Researchers in these fields employed varied approaches and methodologies, including ethnography, counter-culture sociology, Marxism, structuralism, consumer culture theory, semiotics, micro-sociology, the sociology of meaning, communication theory, and cultural anthropology.

Over the past decade, it has become difficult to differentiate clearly between media and cultural studies in Japanese sociology. The difficulty is not that an integrated approach has emerged, but rather that similar methodological standpoints have been applied in both fields.

In the late 1980s, some Japanese media researchers embraced cultural studies from the UK, identifying the field as an emerging global influence. Because cultural studies tend to entail cross-disciplinary inquiry, researchers from various fields have been involved, both in Japan and other countries. In recent years, cultural studies have come to
be regarded as a crucial movement in the human sciences, although some intellectuals view the term karutyraru sutadiezu (transcribed from katakana) as simply the study of imports as trends or fashions. Indeed, some sociologists reject cultural studies—even some who study media culture—and argue against any association with the field, invoking sociological methodology in explaining fundamental differences between their aims and those of cultural studies. Researchers who are deeply involved in cultural studies have also engaged in these arguments, and hence the boundary between sociology and cultural studies will doubtless be a subject of dispute for the foreseeable future (Webster, 2001).

In the current volume of the International Journal of Japanese Sociology, we introduce excerpts from a variety of Japanese sociologists who work in the areas of media and culture. Our aim is not to confine cultural studies narrowly within the field of sociology, but rather to survey media and cultural studies as practiced in Japanese sociology. Toward this end, we asked five active scholars—published widely in the Japanese-language sociological literature—to contribute representative articles for the current special issue.

The first two articles offer new perspectives on contemporary media phenomena, primarily those of the past decade; first, Wakabayashi Mikio discusses the spread of new media and information technologies and the new “realities” they introduce. More specifically, Wakabayashi examines two aspects of the contemporary urban environment—“Disneylandization” and the “cybercity”—and identifies essentially similar social transformations embodied in each. That is, Disneylandization and the cybercity each define a new relationship between space and society that is characterized by semantic emptiness, as well as by expectations and desires for a sense of “placeness”. Furthermore, Wakabayashi locates the origins of these transformations in the nineteenth century, emphasizing that they result from the latest developments in the long history of modernism, rather than being new postmodern phenomena.

In the second article, Ito Mamoru discusses the struggle over the production of public memory through his analysis of television programs, in particular two specific programs produced by Nippon Hosho Kyokai (NHK; Japan Broadcasting Corporation). The first is a documentary series, Project X: Challengers, that has been on the air since 2000. This series takes as its subject the development of new technology during the last fifty years of Japanese history, particularly the twenty years from 1955 to 1974, focusing on “ordinary” and “anonymous” people (most of them are male engineers) and the roles they played. Ito analyzes the production and consumption of this series in terms of the discourse of “Japaneseness” and the national.

The second program Ito considers is an episode of the ETV 2001 series, Wartime Sexual Violence, based on coverage of the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery. Both domestically and internationally, NHK has been strongly criticized for heavily revising and censoring this episode. In his analysis, Ito concludes that television has become the central technology for the formation of public memory, which is a process that originated in the nineteenth century.

Whereas Wakabayashi and Ito discuss recent media phenomena at least to some extent from a historical perspective, the third article, by Sato Kenji, analyzes visual communication from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries by way of considering the present. As does Ito, Sato discusses the formation of public memory, but his focus is on media that pre-date television.

In particular, Sato examines the private production of picture postcards, arguing that postcards produced during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) fall into two categories. The first group includes postcards
of “beauties”. Since photographers of the period were bound by taboos against depicting “ordinary” women, they only depicted geisha. However, they gradually began photographing ordinary women, and this group of picture postcards gave rise to the phenomena of national stars, defining the fundamental formats of movie star portraiture. The other category comprises “event postcards”, which can be regarded as an important origin of the photojournalism carried out today. Furthermore, Sato discusses the construction of perception, visual perspective, and notions of time and space.

The last two articles in the current issue are concerned with the interaction between media and audience. The article by Namba Koji focuses on advertisement; and the article by Muramatsu Yasuko, identifies the subject of gender as an important theme in media studies. Both researchers also include brief sketches of the history of media studies since World War II.

In his comparative study of advertising history in the USA and Japan, Namba draws on recent achievements in media effect studies, particularly the interaction approach between media and audience frames; Namba employs models of the processes of advertising, frame building, and individual-level effects of framing. First, Namba reviews recent research in advertising history in the USA, from the Doyle Dane Bernbach–Volkswagen relationship of the 1960s to the Wieden and Kennedy–Nike relationship of the 1990s. Next, he examines Japanese advertising history from the same viewpoint. Namba concludes that advertising techniques have developed along similar lines in the USA and Japan, and that the similarity entails an increasing “intertextuality”; that is, an increasing complexity in modes of advertising expression. Namba relates this idea to the development of advertising literacy in audiences, as well as to the transformation of reality effected by advertising. Although globalization is leading to fewer differences between Japan and the USA, Namba notes that the meanings of “advertising” nonetheless vary, both for media and audiences over time and from place to place.

Finally, Muramatsu Yasuko is one of Japan’s foremost researchers in the field of media and gender. Moreover, Muramatsu is widely known internationally as a leading Japanese feminist researcher, having published English-language articles and papers including “More Women Into Science and Technology: The Situation and Problems in Japan” (Muramatsu, 2000) and “Why Measure Diversity?” (Muramatsu & Ishikawa, 1996).

In her article for this issue, Muramatsu offers examples demonstrating how feminist studies of mass media texts and audience “readings” of those texts have developed since the 1970s. Re-examining four research papers—two from the 1970s and two from the 1990s—from the perspective of gender-identity construction, Muramatsu revisits the debate between liberal feminism (cultural essentialism) and feminist cultural studies (gender constructivism) since the 1990s. Methodologically, Muramatsu relies on qualitative analysis based on quantitative surveys. Arguing that it would be untrue to regard early media studies as always assuming a passive audience, Muramatsu emphasizes that the studies she considers can be understood to address active reading of mass media texts by female audiences.

It bears noting that a great number of excellent studies in media and culture have recently appeared, which we were unable to include in this special issue. The outstanding activities of the Gendai fuzoku kenkyukai since 1976 should be regarded as important, as should various studies that have been conducted of sports culture, fan culture (e.g. Takarazuka), popular music, manga (comics), mobile phones, race and ethnicity, and nationalism and trans-nationalism, among other subjects. The five articles included in the current issue are representative of the varied achievements of sociological researchers; being among the finest, we are confident that they offer our readers an
excellent introduction to media and cultural studies in Japanese sociology.

References


Saeko Ishita
Associate Professor of Sociology,
Graduate School of Literature and
Human Sciences, Osaka City University,
Sugimoto, Sumiyoshi, Osaka,
Japan 558–8585.
Email: ishita@lit.osaka-cu.ac.jp