

Interview with Ryuichiro Takeshita, Chief Global Editor of PIVOT (Feb. 7, 2024)

PIVOT – a Japanese Media Startup with Global Ambitions

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

Self-Introduction

JS: Could you please introduce yourself as well as the background of your startup PIVOT?

Takeshita: My name is Ryuichiro “Ryan” Takeshita and I am executive director of PIVOT, a media company producing business pictures. As its chief global editor, I am working on global content. I was previously working for Asahi Shinbun Company as a journalist. I left the Asahi in 2016 and became the editor-in-chief of the Huffington Post, a New York-based digital media company. After working for this company for five years, I became the founding member of PIVOT along with four other members in 2021.

JS: Could you tell us about your motivation in starting up an online media company?

Takeshita: I had been working on producing websites even before joining the Asahi. When I joined the Asahi, I thought I could work on digitalized news within five years, but it was not the case. I had been thinking about contributing to social or economic reform, distributing new information and publishing opinions since my university days, and I was interested in working in the digital space. Then I moved to the Huffington Post, which had been expanding by using social media ingeniously. Thereafter, as I thought that many readers were shifting their interest to movies and I became interested in working on movie-oriented media, I decided to join in the founding of PIVOT, an online media specializing in the economy, which was my area of expertise.

Content to Encourage Learning & Action

JS: What kind of content does PIVOT provide?

Takeshita: We would like to issue content that provides learning opportunities and make people feel they have learned something and would like to take some form of action, such as starting up a business, or changing jobs, or learning a new language, or taking up



Ryuichiro Takeshita

physical exercise, or starting investments. So we are providing content on management, investing, full-life learning and scientific knowledge. We are also trying to provide information and views on global topics, and help our viewers become more positive in their business lives.

JS: Do you think they would be more interested in such content with movies?

Takeshita: Yes, I truly think so. Reading less was once considered a negative habit, but today it is not the case at all. The more intelligent the readers are and the more interested in global issues and the more sensitive to what is going on in the world they

are, the more interested in movies they are. In the domain of cognitive warfare, authoritarian states are providing information with a clear emphasis on movies, and today cognitive warfare is moving to a movie-oriented phenomenon. Movies can help provide in-depth knowledge, and we now see the distribution of interesting information on international politics through them. We would like to encourage our readers to learn about a company's success in new digital marketing methods or about a unique Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for management, or a CEO's passionate efforts to establish good management practices.

JS: In starting up a business, a funding base is very important. Could you tell us about your funding base, if possible?

Takeshita: Yes, this has been publicized. We have had two funding procurements so far, and have accumulated a little less than 2 billion yen in donations from investors and venture capital. Also, as we are in the age of pictures, a variety of companies and public corporations need to create visual PR programs. We make such programs for them separately from our own content and their payment for these works will be part of our own fund.

JS: How do you issue views and information overseas?

Takeshita: At this moment, we are making content for domestic viewers in general. From April or May in 2024, we will create another channel for viewers worldwide and my English interview programs will be viewed overseas rather than in Japan. I would like to interview the founders of “Sakana AI” – a Japan-based AI startup – or leading Japanese politicians, and I would add my own commentaries to those interviews. I would like also to produce easy-to-understand videos myself for overseas readers after digesting what I learned from those interviews.

JS: It would be important to attract as many viewers as possible to your website. Do you have many experts on websites?

Takeshita: In the 2010s, I believe there was a shift from getting information by visiting websites to looking at the whole variety of information flowing into our smartphones. Today, we may not need even a website. Among us, there are some who are very good at assessing these information flows and we can enter the information distribution channels, in which Facebook or Twitter in the 2010s and TikTok or YouTube in the 2020s were dominant. I think this is our strength. We will see whether such know-how can be fruitful.

JS: In principle, are you creating content with a businessperson’s viewpoint in mind?

Takeshita: As we are a media, we care about the social implications of our content from a journalist’s point of view. So we are a little different from purely business people.

JS: You would need to work on your content by paying attention to significant social, economic and political developments, such as the war in Ukraine, as well as business developments. How do you balance the two?

Takeshita: In thinking about geopolitics, you would need viewpoints of international politics and business and also information provision. Needless to speak about international politics, on business, as we are today in the age of economic security, business actions would be a risk or affect economic security. For example, if the number of the business firms in transaction with China increases, this is certainly good news for the business, but we could question if this would be also good for economic security. In this regard, the policy practitioners would need to get to know what the business people think about and how they behave today in the midst of geopolitical crisis.

More complicatedly, we need to care about an information

provider’s perspective which would be power of language. This must be as important as military power or economic power only. More specifically, in the light of mitigating geopolitical risk, we would need to understand well how fake news or narratives or disinformation to be provided by either China or Russia would be distributed. We are, in this regard, in a unique position. We understand well the most updated information flow system as a media company and international politics by our press interviews and we ourselves are business persons in the startup community. Thus, our company, PIVOT stands at the cross point of those three factors important today handling business and economic security.

As we, PIVOT, are starting to work as a media in English, I hope we can handle geopolitical argument some day by taking advantage of Japan’s unique position, being geographically close to China and Taiwan and in close alliance with the United States.

Management of a Company

JS: PIVOT has a good variety of experts with diverse work experience. What do you think is crucial for maintaining coherence as a team?

Takeshita: I believe we are to be compared to a professional sports team. We do not have any detailed rules of management and trust each other as mature and independent professionals. We do not have any vertical organizational structure in the company. We are just like a professional football team with distinguished players from all over the world. They are real experts who would be greatly valued anywhere else, and would leave the company without hesitation if they were not happy working in a team. There would be no way to stop them leaving. There may also be some who are not so competent and whose personality does not really fit the team, but who would insist on staying with the company as their work might not be highly appreciated elsewhere. But to maintain good teamwork, we make it a rule not to employ such persons.

Japanese Entrepreneurs

JS: It is true that the number of young people more interested in starting their own business than working for large companies is significantly increasing. But my impression is that, compared with the US or other Asian nations, there do not seem to be so many startup ventures in Japan, and I do not think the number of entrepreneurs in Japan is increasing. What do you think?

Takeshita: Compared with Silicon Valley, the birthplace of

entrepreneurs, that may be true. But start-ups in Japan are certainly increasing much faster than 10 years ago. Now we see a definitive change in the trend of ventures. Silicon Valley is a peculiar place and not always a relevant comparison. The climate around ventures changes from country to country, and Japan is not an exception.

JS: Would foreign ventures coming to Japan to start businesses with Japanese ones help to activate Japanese venture business?

Takeshita: I think Japanese business is adjusting well to the changed economic environment after the lost three decades with serious deflation and after a change in generation, so I think there is a possibility of remarkable development. There would be opportunities for Japan in the domains where we can take advantage of the strength of basic research, such as quantum computers, nuclear energy and life sciences, well represented by iPS cells. The key to success is collaboration with companies overseas. This is not what we Japanese are good at, but we should do our best. For this, although we would need to increase the number of immigrants and refugees and also do our best to keep our society more open to the rest of the world, at the same time we would need to think about the risk of such a policy change. Overall, being open would be a big opportunity for us. We Japanese should also go overseas much more. I would like to turn the PIVOT English channel into a good point of connectivity between information on Japan and information from overseas for this purpose.

Role of Foreign Workers in Japanese Society

JS: The number of foreign workers in Japan is not increasing as much as elsewhere. This seems to have resulted in our failure to stop depopulation, and I think we need to accept more human resources from overseas from now on. What do you think would be the most serious barriers for foreigners entering Japanese society? We sometimes hear that the Japanese language or various kinds of discrimination by nationality in the workplace may be serious impediments for foreigners to enjoy living and working in Japan. How do you think these issues could be resolved?

Takeshita: I'm afraid it is certain that we will have a labor shortage and it will be too late to supplement the labor force with immigrants or refugees, as it has already reached a substantial level. I think it would be better to replace human jobs with AI. Different from the general concerns in the US and Europe that AI could take human job

opportunities, in Japan with its labor shortage we could create a good example of the use of AI in mitigating the negative impact of depopulation.

However, it would be better to accept more immigrants in the long run on the basis of the belief that diversity would lead to the promotion of peace. If you say you would have to accept immigrants to stop depopulation, that could be interpreted as regarding immigrants merely as a labor force. Also, it is true that we have issues like discrimination by nationality in offices or schools, as well as language barriers. So I think it would be good to create an environment that can accept immigrants and their families by urging interaction at schools among people of different nationalities.

In my own experience, when I was a schoolboy in New Mexico in the US, where I used to live, an English education program for non-native English speakers was available in any small school as "English as a Second Language", and that was institutionalized help for foreign residents. I think in Japan we should also have such a program of special Japanese language courses for any foreign student who does not speak Japanese fluently, in any public school in any local community.

JS: Should we do our best to speak easy Japanese and pronounce the language clearly in our daily conversation to lower the language barrier for foreign workers?

Takeshita: If we cannot work well when giving too much attention to such matters, it would be contrary to what was expected. It is true that easy Japanese and clear pronunciation would be necessary in disseminating public information about disasters or basic daily needs when communicating with foreign residents. But I think it would not always be the case.

JS: In selecting immigrant labor necessary or useful for the host country, there is a so-called "point system" in the United Kingdom and some other countries. They evaluate people applying for immigrant status by language capacity and professional skills in deciding to allow them to enter the country. Do you think Japan should also adopt such a system?

Takeshita: Yes, I think it would be better to introduce it with certain conditions. But we must not forget that this system needs to work to facilitate the entry of immigrants first and should not work as a method of discriminating among them. They would need to do some preparatory work to earn points and the whole system should work to turn such preparation to their benefit after being accepted by Japan.

JS: Are you thinking about providing information on everyday life for such foreign people and helping them to live in Japan through your media?

Takeshita: We already have such a program called “KUROFUNO”. With this, we are aiming to encourage foreign workers in Japan and help them attain a good working performance. As a media company, we will do our best to support them, quite apart from what the administrative agencies can do.

Japanese Dream

JS: On your website, you stress we should develop “our Japanese dream”. Against the most recent economic and social developments in Japan, what do you think this Japanese dream would be, specifically?

Takeshita: For me, the Japanese dream is that an entrepreneur can start up easily in our society with freedom of opinion and diversity, and that individuals with distinctive values can participate in worldwide discussions. Japan is an economic superpower, but we need to promote our presence in the world a little more. I believe this means contributing to solutions on a variety of issues the world now faces, rather than just raising the value of Japan itself, and becoming more involved and visible on global geopolitical issues.

JS: For example, it is often pointed out that Japan excels in disaster mitigation. How about publicizing information and views on this topic through your media?

Takeshita: That is an excellent idea. Disasters happen everywhere, partly due to global warming. Against this background, we would like to publicize Japan’s engagement in them. We would also talk about Japan’s weak points in disaster mitigation as well as its strengths. For example, shelters in Japan are devised to be male-oriented and this must be corrected. We should provide information on such weaknesses as well. I believe it is important to mention what needs to be corrected as well as the strengths of Japan. In this way we might also be able to get new ideas about solutions from unexpected sources, and then use them to further strengthen Japan’s disaster management.

JS: I think it would also be good to examine Japan’s super-aging society and see how people in their 80’s or 90’s can be happy. Could this fit into your concept of the Japanese dream?

Takeshita: Yes, I think so. In particular, as Japan has strength in life sciences, including autophagy, Japanese science could contribute to anti-aging worldwide. Japan could make it possible to create a society without many diseases and with active super-aged people and the least friction between the young and the old. It is certainly a good idea to publicize it as a Japanese dream.

JS: Without innovation, we cannot realize happiness for the super-aged. Could there be a dream of new technologies like robot suits to help realize well-being for the super-aged?

Takeshita: A variety of new technologies would need to be created for that dream. For example, architects would have to think about hallways or staircases or steps for a robot to negotiate easily.

Or we could have nursing beds for easy caregiving, with AI checking a patient’s urine instead of caregivers needing to do it.

Future Ambitions

JS: Do you have any other thoughts on future projects?

Takeshita: Most importantly, we would like to create an English channel soon. We have never had Japanese media with a global impact. NHK World or the Asahi Weekly are basically just English translations of Japanese news. We would like to create an English media to join in global discussions rather than just transferring information about Japan worldwide.

JS: Finally, the quality of Japanese democracy is often questioned. I think the role of the media is important in this regard as well. Do you have any thoughts on this issue?

Takeshita: Yes, it is important. For example, even when a Japanese journal proclaims the need to end the tragedy in Gaza in its editorial column, it is questionable whether this viewpoint makes any impact around the world. We would like to create a channel to enable Japanese journalists’ opinions on Israel, Palestine, Russia or Ukraine to reach the relevant international policy authorities or the United Nations, or other civil societies.

JS

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