

# The Gendering of Workplace Culture: An Example from Japanese Telegraph Operators

Kae Ishii

## Abstract

Japanese Morse telegraphers have been given a position of honor and a specific place in the culture of the workplace, dating back to the Meiji Period. However, they rapidly lost their power and influence after the Second World War, when the Teleprinter—a fully automated telegraph—began to replace Morse and its use began increasingly to prevail. The historical question then arises: Why were Japanese Morse telegraphers so influential and perceived as so honorable?

In recent years there has been a proliferation of sociological and social historical studies about “men” in Japan, all of which display a general tendency toward treating “masculinities” somewhat statically. It is only rarely in the domain of historical sociology that the “masculinities” in the workplace are examined in terms of the changes that they undergo over time. In modern society, “work” has played a crucial role in forming male and female identities, moulding consciousness and (pre)determining individuals’ actions accordingly.

This paper’s objective is thus to approach the organizational culture of the Telegrapher, to examine the role which this culture played in the formation of their identities and the way in which this culture changed after the Second World War.

**Key Words:** Telecommunication, Workplace Culture, Gender Segregation at Work  
Masculinities

## 1. Introduction

Since 1980, scholars of social history and cultural studies in Japan and in the West have studied the history of early mass communications, specifically the telegraph and telephone, in the context of today's information technologies such as the Internet and cell phones. The economic and business applications of Japan's communications infrastructure has drawn the interest of Japanese scholars<sup>1)</sup> and formed the basis of historical and educational investigation of the engineers, linemen and electricians employed by the Public Works Department.<sup>2)</sup> However, there is a dearth of historical studies and gender studies on operators and other non-management employees.<sup>3)</sup>

Further investigation demonstrates that this technology allowed for the rise of a male workplace culture. Looking at the infrastructure of modern telecommunication companies today, it is apparent that this form of "Gender Segregation" still exists. The results of the Japan's 2000 census are instructive. According to the census data, approximately 98% of all telephone operators in Japan are women. In contrast, only 6% of all wireless operators were women.<sup>4)</sup> This is a clear example of "Gender Segregation at Work"<sup>5)</sup>: telephone operators are predominantly female, and wireless operators are predominantly male.

"Gender Segregation at Work" has traditionally been explained in economic and technological terms, while the cultural factors have been overlooked. Since the 1980's, however, there has been increasing scrutiny of workplace cultures in Japan. Still, the relationship between workplace culture and gender has not been satisfactorily examined. In light of these research circumstances, I will discuss the work culture of early twentieth-century telegraphers and its impact on gender relations in the workplace. My research will investigate the long-term relationship between workplace culture and the types of technology that Japan chose to import and to develop.

## 2. Culture in the Workplace and the Cultural Factors of Technology Transfer

Workplace culture is inseparable from the labor process. In the days of Morse code, the telegrapher would combine dots and dashes to encode letters into messages. Since this task resembles to that of today's computer programmer, the job category was classified as white-collar work. However, the speed and "skill" of the telegrapher were akin to those of an artisan. The "skill" of these craftspersons was definitely praised by their coworkers and supervisors.

Telegraph apparatuses could be classified according to the method of transmitting and receiving, as shown in Table 1: Writing, printing, and automatic. It was after the Second World War that automatic telegraphs were widely used in Japan, as shown in Table 2. Morse telegraphs required the manual decoding and writing of messages. The work depended on the speed and accuracy of the telegraph operator. In this sense, Morse telegraphs were quite different from automatic telegraphs. In the 1870's, when telegraph apparatus first entered Japan, the operators were required to have clear handwriting, because they had to transcribe the messages that they received. Consequently, a particular and distinct "Morse Culture" emerged among Morse telegraph operators, differentiating them from non-Morse telegraph operators. However, the introduction of the telephone and the Teleprinter rendered Morse code obsolete, and with it the need for telegraph operators.

Table 1 Classification of Communication by Telegraphic Systems

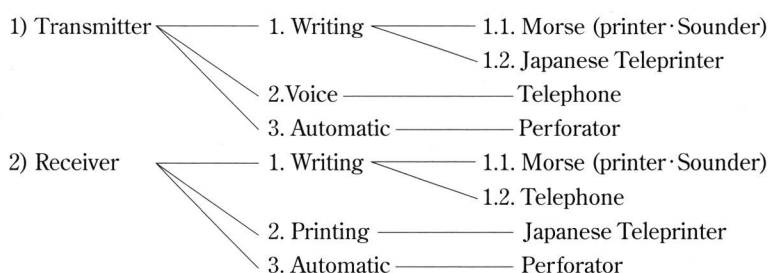


Table 2 The Shift of Communication Amount by Telegraphic System in Japan (%)

	Morse-Sounder	Teleprinter	Telephone
1929	41.7	5.7	1.7
1946	35.4	45.3	0.5
1957	2.8	73.7	12.7

Source: Tokyo Central Telegraph Office (1958: 374)

The Morse method of communication combines dots and dashes to encode letters into messages and transmit and receive them. In Japan until 1999, the Morse Telegraph was used mainly for sea rescue. Almost all communication technologies are based on the Morse method. We will not go into the technological aspects of Morse in detail, instead, pay more attention to the socio-cultural context surrounding the technologies. We will also turn a spotlight on the

relationship between gender and culture that was produced by the telegrapher in the workplace, or so to speak, the “Morse Culture”. We also need to observe this culture in the long term, to grasp the process and the mechanism whereby gender focus in the workplace did change.

Because the Japanese language has more characters than the 26-character English one, Japanese telegraph operators regarded themselves as more skilled than their counterparts in Western-speaking countries.<sup>6)</sup> The difficulty of their work required them to concentrate on listening to the Morse code, immediately translate the message into Japanese, write the message legibly, and remain focused.

Another difficulty lay in developing the proper interval and rhythm of their clicks, which was a highly valued skill among all telegraph operators. A Morse Sounder needed to have a mastery of the subtlest points of transmission, much more so than a Morse Inker did.<sup>7)</sup> In addition when we look at gender, “Gender Segregation at Work” became fixed following the introduction of the Morse Sounder. Men used the Sounder, and women used the Teleprinter and the telephone, especially in large urban telegraph offices. Women, however, were able to use the Sounder when working in the countryside or on the less-busy telegraph lines, and did so exceptionally.<sup>8)</sup>

Automated telegraphs like Hughes, Baudot, Teletype, and Ferndrucker did not require the operator to know Morse code. Teleprinters allowed operators to transmit messages simply by typing them on a keyboard. Compared to the handwriting message, teleprinting was faster and more precise; also, it allowed more women to become operators.

It was the first time the Japanese used the Teleprinter experimentally, when Senzaburô Kageyama, a secretary for the Japanese Post and Telegraph Office, wrote in the *Journal of the Association for Post and Telegraph* (1910) about German Teleprinter ‘Ferndrucker’ and its utility. Kageyama, who became the Director of the Telegraph Office in Osaka, requested experts and strived to develop the Japanese Teleprinter.<sup>9)</sup> Kageyama was one of the many Japanese intellectuals and politicians who went to Germany to study medicine, law, technology and culture during the Meiji and Taisyô eras. Upon their return, they helped to modernize Japan. As a result, the American Teleprinter was promptly introduced and used between Osaka and Nagasaki for telegrams in a Western language. However, the Japanese didn’t want to depend on foreign productions. Instead, they tried to produce a Japanese Teleprinter in the 1930’s that type Japanese characters. After the Second World War, the improvement and production of the Japanese Teleprinter were

commissioned in the private sector to the Oki Electric Company and Shinkô Manufacturing.<sup>10)</sup>

In the 1960's, the Teleprinter was, on the one hand, widely used in Japan; but on the other hand, there was a marked decline in the presence of the Morse Sounder. The belated arrival of the Teleprinter in Japan was caused by the technical difficulty of developing one that would print Japanese characters and the limited government funds that were allocated to the telegraph sector. Resistance from non-management employees was an additional obstacle. This resistance to new technology was expressed indirectly, because the introduction of new technology would entail rationalization and “deskilling” or downgrading the importance of the telegraphers.<sup>11)</sup> New technology could not be introduced into Japanese society without further negotiation with the workplace culture.

### 3. The Formation and Change of a “Morse Culture”

1) “Dispute on the Line” (*Kijyô-Ronsô*): The Fight for the Honor and Cultivation of the “Skill”

Many early telegraph operators in the years came from Samurai families that had been deprived of their privileges by the new Meiji government that wished to open Japan to the world. Despite the loss of their privileges, these people were not only literate but also well-educated and multilingual.<sup>12)</sup> Because they were so ambitious, they were eager to learn about and use new technology. This is why sons of samurai families could attend a telegraph school at no charge and became successful telegraphers.

These skilled operators were highly regarded by others and by themselves. Popular terms at the time referred to “*a telegrapher's spirit*,” “*a telegraph men temperament*” and “*a beater spirit*.” They were synonymous with “*the artisan spirit*”, which meant they were proud of their craftsmanship and their ability to work without supervision.

“Skilled” operators were valued for their superiority and their “selfishness and whim.” They would work only with their favorite operators and refuse telegrams from unskilled operators. Although this arbitrariness was tolerated, it created congestion and backlogs. Excellent operators, even temperamental ones, were indispensable to management, even when they disrupted online traffic with their “Dispute on the Line” tactics. Even after the Second World War, telegraph operators had both formal and informal influence on the company, so that a non-telegraph operator was thought as worthless employees at a public telegraph and telephone corporation.<sup>13)</sup> The backgrounds of both the formal and informal estimation of “skill,” “battle culture,” and to polish “skill” with each other were

developed among the telegraph operators.

Telegraph operators competed to prove which one was the best. An exploration of “Dispute on the Line” is instructive in this regard. In a Dispute, operators used a “battle code” to converse in Morse code. For example, “*Poor, replace*” (*Hebo Kaware*) meant that an operator wanted to replace an unskilled operator. If matters did not improve, the operators could continue to send this message. In such a case, the noisy Morse signal (*bull*) echoed throughout the workplace, embarrassing the unskilled operators. If an operator became too frustrated, he simply shut the apparatus down, so an unskilled operator could no longer transmit.

A typical “Dispute on the Line” was dramatized by Eiji Yoshikawa (1892-1962)’s novel *An Open-Air Officer (Aozora Shikan)*. Yoshikawa was one of Japanese most prolific and popular writers and a Japanese historical novelist, who is mostly retelling existing stories. He wrote many historical stories and novels like “*Miyamoto Musashi*”, “*Taiko: an epic novel of war and glory in feudal Japan*” and “*The Heike Story: A Modern Translation of the Classic Tale of Love and War.*” Yoshikawa heard from his younger brother, a telegraph operator in Tokyo Central Telegraph Office, about the telegraph work and “Disputes on the Line” and wrote about it in his novel, *An Open-Air Officer*. The leading character, Tomikichi Takagi, was the typical, inflexible telegraph operator with an artisan spirit. What follows is a “Dispute on the Line” between Takagi, and, unbeknownst to him, a woman operator named Hosokawa in another telegraph office.<sup>14)</sup>

*“You crazy man, again, replace with the other!”*  
*Tomikichi’s ears flushed with shame, and he clicked.*  
*“None of your impudence!”*  
*The receiver replied soon after,*  
*“You tough!”*  
*Tomikichi clicked rapidly like quick shooting,*  
*“You idiot, you’d better be replaced with other”*  
*The unyielding telegrapher replied to that,*  
*“You scatterbrain!”*  
*“Go away!”*  
*“You scatterbrain!”*  
*“Go away!”*  
*“Screw you !!”*

This passage shows the kind of name-calling that could take place between

operators. It was a kind of duel. This novel also amplified the image that the telegraph was a domain for men, not for women. Similar to the culture of the duel between men that flourished in modern England and Germany,<sup>15)</sup> there was a culture of quarrel and duel for self-honor among the *Samurai*.<sup>16)</sup> The core of “masculinity” in many countries, not only Western countries, but also in Japan, consisted of a duel for self-honor at the risk of one’s life. That is why telegraph work, with a fictitious “Duel on the Line” was seen as “masculine.” Thus the work was considered also primarily to be only for men (see Figure).



Figure. Caricature of telegraph operators as “*Samurai*” with weapons  
Source: Tokyo Central Telegraph Office (1961: 94)

A man named Hirai, who graduated from the telegraph school in 1921 and worked as an operator, looked back on his working life and commented:

*“I was not interested in the telephone at that time. ... because I was proud of being a telegraph operator and recognized that the telephone was for the weaker sex.”*

His remark shows the technological and gender prestige that he attached to being a telegraph operator. It is interesting that “Dispute on the Line” was recognized by operators as being a friendly competition that sharpened the skills of both parties. Operators were conscious of other kinds of emotion other than hatred against their fellow operators with whom they were disputing. The ex-telegraph operator Mr. C explained the scenario as follows:

*“We had a sense that we must dispose of the task in front of us. It resulted in Disputes on the Line and at the same time strengthened the strong bonds of friendship. They exchanged names and remembered long.”*

This sense of comradeship between two men was cultivated in these Disputes on the Line and was made use of for union activities. Thus, "Dispute on the Line" contributed not only to improve "skill," but also to cultivate a sense of male solidarity between operators.

## 2) The Gendering of Telegraphic Work and the Subversion of the Gendered "Skill"

This is not to say that there were no female telegraph operators. As in Germany,<sup>18)</sup> wives and daughters of telegraph operators in Japan helped with the work in the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1901, women were employed in Kyoto, Kagoshima, and Tokyo in 1906. However, women were used only for the domestic, less busy lines and the telephone. Men used the Morse telegraph and were responsible for the busy and international lines, which required knowledge and "skill." In rural areas and on less busy lines, female operators used the Morse apparatus.<sup>19)</sup> Yet that use did not mean that gender had ceased to matter in the workplace.

In this period, when more women were introduced into this occupation, we find more discourses that differentiated female and male operators. For example, there was a practice of distinguishing female from male operators in the workplace. From the research we see that gender played a specific important role in this occupation. It was possible to some extent for telephone operators, to judge the gender and age of their partner by hearing the voice, but it was difficult for telegraph operators, to judge gender and the age of the partner, because they couldn't see her/his face or hear her/his voice. That's why the telegraph operators tried to guess the gender of their partners by the strength and rhythm of the Morse signal, and by resorting to the "Dispute on the Line." However, there were some exceptions to such gender bias among telegraphers. The practice of telegraphy allowed the blurring of the boundary between female and male.

Takagi, the leading character in Yoshikawa's novel *An Open-Air Officer*, got it into his head that his partner on the line was an "arrogant and twisted man with a face like a watchdog" by judging the nature of the strength of the Dispute. He planned to "hit him in the face as the case may be." Indeed, Takagi went to the telegraph office, where his good rival worked, and found that his rival was in fact a woman. After this visit, he fell in love with the woman.

If that is the case, how did Takagi judge his rival as a man? He judged by how the rival spoke and the strength and rhythm of the Morse signal. Ex-operators whom I interviewed reported the same story as follows:

*"The signal, which women sent, sounded tenderly like BGM.  
The signal, which men sent, sounded lively, well spoken."*



*“Women have perhaps a strong temperament as men, but I suppose,  
men send stronger than women, don’t they?”*

Even if the fellow operator used masculine language, its rhythm was somehow pliant, this excited young telegraphers on the line. The operators gave full scope to their imagination regarding the features and ages of fellow operators with whom they were connected on the line.

Thus, the practice of telegraphy allowed the possibility of obscuring the boundary between female and male because of the characteristics of doing it. If a female telegrapher was “skilled” enough and drilled by doing “Dispute on the Line” with male operators, she could do work equally to the male telegraphers. In fact there were many female telegraphers in the countryside during the Second World War.

### 3) The Impact of the Teleprinter: The Fall of a “Morse Culture”

Mr. C was assigned in 1951 to the Tokyo Central Telegraph Office when there were still remains of “a telegraph men temperament” and “Dispute on the Line.” “Skilled” operators were nominated by operators in other telegraph offices, and they were very proud of that fact. There was a telegraph contest to improve “skill,” as if “skill” stirred up their competition. He looked back and mentioned the decline of the “Morse Culture” as follows:

*“Operators employed around 1975 lost the “telegraph men temperament,” that is,  
they were like ordinary white-collar workers. The mechanization went forward rapidly.”*

However, younger operators than Mr. C took an ambiguous attitude against the “Morse Culture.” Mr. G, who was the last generation trained at the telegraph school to use the Morse Sounder, saw the “telegraph men temperament” from a cool angle. He said, *“it doesn’t matter to send rapidly.”* *“A rapid telegrapher tends to suffer from “Tekuzure” (a kind of tendonitis) and fall into ruin.”* In fact “skill examination” was abolished afterwards by the labor union, which required of operators too much rapidity and exactness and resulted in *Tekuzure*. Thus, a feud developed between the older and younger generations after the Second World War as to the redefinition of their identities. Here are a couple of statements from the younger generation:

*“Telegraph operators don’t know much of the world, they are not active enough and waste their superiority. I wish that they’d make the most of themselves.”(Kanji Uchida, male, 26 years old)*

*"Men in the Central Telegraph Office are innocent and pure; in other words, they don't know much of the world. They are chickens once they go out of the office."* (Keiichi Tanaka, male, 32 years old)

There were also many criticisms of the expert ignoramuses of the older generation.

*"The pride of the telegrapher is all very well, but they should not forget that they are employees of a public corporation and should take more interest in the telephone."* (Hiro Arakawa, male, 35 years old)

This statement criticizes their sense of superiority over the telephone indirectly.

Democratization after the war influenced the workplace greatly. Employees were given more freedom, their own newspaper and magazines were published, and recreation like theater, painting and music flourished. The idea of "equal rights between female and male," which democratization strongly held, had an impact on the workplace. Mrs. D looked back over the past and explained the impact of the changes as follows:

*"I was very impressed 50 years ago, to find that women talked laughing with men equally in the telegraph office. ... Sex didn't matter in the workplace because we've done the same work."*

Mrs. E agreed with her opinion and supplemented it as follows:

*"It was still rare at that time for women to be promoted. However, we had the same conditions, if we did the same work. I found it yet progressive."*

But at that time,

*"... because there were more men than women in the telegraph office, odd jobs came to women."*

As this statement indicates, even if women and men worked in the same workplace and did almost the same work, cleaning the workplace was left to women.<sup>24)</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion: The Fall of a "Morse Culture", its Consequences and Implications

In this paper, I have argued that informal practice and custom coexisted in the Japanese workplace in the form of "Morse Culture" – illustrated by "Dispute on the Line." This culture formed an exclusive world for men that contributed as one of set drivers to gendering the job of telegraphy. On the other side, women could creep into this world based on certain circumstances. However, the major change of "Gender Integration at Work" occurred only after the Second World War when the Teleprinter was

widely used in Japan, and accordingly, “Morse Culture” went into decline. Until then, operators were drilled to send and receive messages rapidly and exactly.

A new culture replaced the “Morse Culture” after the Second World War. The postwar generation of telegraph operators abolished the “skill examination” and encouraged more women to enter the field. Postwar democracy also shed greater light on the negative side of the “Morse Culture” and brought forth the concept of equal rights between female and male in the workplace as follows:

*“Non-management employees had been haughty in the past, because the telegraph section couldn’t function without them. ... Finally, after the mechanization of telegraphy, non-management employees were no longer as important, and management employees became more powerful.”*

This statement by a female worker shows us that postwar democracy and technological innovation accelerated the regression of “skill-centralism” and reorganized the configuration of power in the workplace that had been earlier only classified by skill and gender.

Table 3 The List of Those Interviewed

Interviewee (Sex)	Date of birth	Place of Birth	Education	Place and Task	Etc.
A (m)	1926	Hiroshima	Elementary School	At Railway Station Morse	
B (m)	1928	Wakayama	Telegraph School	In Osaka/Hyogo Morse	Sub section Chief Instructor Operations Management
C (m)	1932	Tokyo	Telegraph School University (at night)	In Tokyo Morse	
D (f)	1934	Tokyo	High School Telegraph School	In Tokyo Morse	Combination child care and career Two-incomes (with Mr. F)
E (f)	1934	Tokyo	Telegraph School	In Tokyo Teleprinter/Telephone	Combination child care and career Two-incomes
F (m)	1934	Tokyo	Telegraph School	In Tokyo Morse	
G (m)	1941	Nagano	High School Telegraph School	In Tokyo Morse/Telephone	

A Note on Sources: The interviews in the notes are from seven former telegraph operators – two women and five men. Interviewees answered almost the same questions. They worked as an operator between 1940s and 1990s. Interview tapes are in the author’s possession.

## Notes.

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