



## Barking Dogs: All the Hype Unfit to Print 吠ゆる犬ども 印刷に値しないすべてのインチキ

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Mark Schreiber

### Introduction by David McNeill

Exotic stereotypes have long been a feature of reporting on Japan and this year has been no exception. In October this year, the British Observer newspaper carried a long article on why young Japanese people have stopped having sex. The story was read millions of times and triggered criticism and rebuttals from, among others, [Bloomberg](#) columnist William Pesek, who said in as much as the sex drought existed, it was driven by economic, not cultural factors.

Then there was the great eyeball-licking fetish. According to the Huffington Post, The British Guardian and other outlets, young Japanese had started a craze for licking each other's eyeballs. The British [Telegraph](#) newspaper even carried a photo of two teenagers engaged in the practice of "oculolinctus", with a warning that it could cause ruptures of the cornea and even blindness. The article quoted reports that "as many as a third of a classroom full of 12-year-olds confessed to having tried it." There was only one problem – it was not true.

The story first ran in June in English on the website JapanCRUSH.com and quickly went viral. At its peak of 82 million Google hits, it was one of the most heavily covered Japan news items of 2013. Veteran Japan-based writer Mark Schreiber painstakingly traces its origins to a Japanese website operated by a publisher that has long specialized in exotic, heavily sexualized content only rarely bothered by the truth. The story was picked up by other websites and, once translated into English, made its way around the world. After talking to doctors, educationalists and Ministry of Health officials Schreiber can find zero basis for any of its claims.

What is the lesson of the great eyeball-licking hoax? Schreiber believes it is partly about sliding journalistic standards in an era of cyber-driven demand for sensational content and advertising 'clicks' "That such an assortment of ludicrous falsehoods -- originating from a Japanese-language subculture site that appeals to fetishists -- can metamorphose into a major international news story testifies to the internet's ability to disseminate misinformation faster than any plague pathogen." Remarkably, The Guardian is one of the few websites to have taken the story down.

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An old saying in Japanese goes *Ikken kyo ni hoyureba, banken jitsu wo tsutau* ("One dog barks at an illusion, and 10,000 dogs repeat it as the truth.")

Dogs excited by the barking of other dogs is an apt metaphor for what transpired on the internet in June 2013, when a story originating on a Japanese subculture site claimed a mass outbreak of conjunctivitis, caused by oculolinctus (licking eyeballs, a practice also referred to as "worming"), had occurred among students at a Tokyo primary school.

Within days of its June 10 appearance in English on JapanCRUSH.com this 2013 version of the "Chicken Little" fable went viral on the internet, and at its peak recorded 82 million hits in a Google search using the terms "eyeball licking" and "Japan." (A search in French using "Japon" and "globe oculaire" obtained 66,000 hits; a search in German gave 48,300.) The story was reported (or repeated), in various versions, everywhere from the Huffington Post and The Guardian to the Nigerian Tribune and the Australian Kayak Fishing Forum.

The story stands out as an exceptional case of how both mainstream media outlets and blogs alike, in the rush to grab reader attention, completely abandoned common-sense rules for reporting. Determined somehow to make the story relevant, a few of the writers performed research locally, supplementing the original story with their own content to provide it with legitimacy. But if a search of multiple medical databases in Japan is to be trusted, the basic story premise -- that Japanese adolescents were engaged in an inexplicable orgy of eyeball-licking and paying the price in the form of mass infections -- had no foundation whatsoever.

The first dog's bark was issued on June 7, on a site called Bucchi (Butch) News, which is operated by publisher Coremagazine Co., Ltd. The story, as told by a person identified only as "Y," claimed that one-third of the students in a sixth-grade class at an unnamed primary school in Tokyo had come down with eye infections. The cause remained mysterious until a staff member at the school spotted a boy licking a girl's eyeball in the gym.

## コアマガジン

An editor at Coremagazine was unwilling to inform me of the source of the story, but I took note that his company runs full-page advertisements in its publications offering to pay out generous sums for "taboo news."

Founded in 1985, Coremagazine (which is the company name, not the name of a publication) might be described as the shock jock wannabe of Japanese publishing. From 1997 it began producing an "adult subculture" magazine called Bubka, which in its various anarchistic incarnations appeared on the stands alternatively as Jitsuwa Bubka, Ura Bubka and Manga Bubka. Most recently it resurfaced as Jitsuwa Bunka --- one letter removed, but with the same iconoclastic contents appealing to aficionados of wild and wooly lifestyles. The magazine is sold mostly from the adults-only section of magazine racks in convenience stores, which -- despite any claims to the contrary -- exercise virtually no controls over sales to minors.

In 1997, its first year of publication, Bubka ran full-page columns by Sagawa Issei, the "Paris Cannibal" who in 1981 murdered a Dutch student and ate parts of her body. (In its defense, however, it should be noted that Bubka was just one of a long list of Japanese media organizations, including TV networks, that accorded celebrity treatment to Sagawa following his return to Japan.) That same year, Bubka also ran a series of articles by pseudonymous writer Ise Satoru on Jewish plots to control the world. The articles were protested by a Tokyo-based Jewish anti-defamation group and the series was halted after one more installment.

Bubka's exotic editorial mix of cannibalism, anti-semitism and sexual fantasies, including those involving underaged girls in sailor suits, were all par for the course. Eventually it found itself in trouble with the authorities, and in 2006, its previous editor achieved the distinction of becoming the first person arrested for violation of Japan's new law banning child pornography.

In April 2013, less than two months before the appearance of the eyeball-licking story in Bucchi News, the Tokyo Metropolitan Police raided the offices of Coremagazine on suspicion of obscenity, and four days later, the publisher -- no doubt in response to encouragement by the MPD -- announced it would suspend publication of two of its magazines.

But back to eyeball licking. Bucchi's story was first repeated on a web site named Yomerumo, and then re-posted by a poster with the ID "upset-win" on "Naver Matome," a digital curation site sponsored by LINE, the Japanese subsidiary of a major Korean-owned IT company. The site provides posters with an incentive by rewarding them based on the number of hits they attract.

The poster on Naver Matome incorrectly identified Yomerumo as the eyeball licking story's source, cherry-picked the contents to reflect the more lurid aspects of the phenomenon and then embellished it with three graphics, including two stock photos of vulnerable-looking adolescent girls in student uniforms wearing *gantai* (eye patches) and a third photo showing a man licking a young woman's eye.



The large number of hits (527,953 the last time I looked) attracted the attention of JapanCRUSH, a site dedicated to running contents taken from Japanese-language internet sites, and which bases its criteria for story selection on what's trending at the moment.

JapanCRUSH, which is affiliated with similar sites called ChinaSMACK and KoreaBANG, does not list the name of its publisher or editor, nor does it run the names of its contributors. Its FAQ section carries this disclaimer: "It is important to remember that what we translate does not represent all of Japan or every Japanese person."

The JapanCRUSH translation was soon picked up by a China-based news blog called Shanghaist and from there went viral.

Whether in Japanese, Chinese or English, it was clear from the very beginning that the source of the eyeball licking story was anonymous and unattributed, and that common-sense journalistic instincts that would normally treat such a story with well deserved skepticism were completely lacking.

In the minds of the writers and editors, the appearance of similar reports on multiple sites served as an indication of the story's veracity, effectively transforming what had originally been a ludicrous tabloidesque tale appealing to Lolita fetishists into a straight news story.

The story was tweeted. It was televised. It was reported on serious medical sites. The chorus of barking dogs soon began engaging in outrageous exaggerations, describe the phenomenon with words like: "Japanese craze" (The Telegraph); ". . . giving all Japanese kids pinkeye" (gawker.com); ". . . trend on the rise" (Times of India); "Japan's craziest new fetish" (mashable.com); ". . . leads to spike in infections" (ctvnews); ". . . weird new eyeball-licking craze" (NY Daily News); ". . . surge in eye infections" (Washington Times); ". . . pinkeye epidemic" (NY Daily News); "The new second base in Japan" (thefrisky.com); "new fad sweeping japan" (decodedscience.com); "all the rage in Japan" (hypervocal.com); "the new foreplay craze in Japan" (daily.bhaskar.com); "Japanese eyeball licking trend has major health implications" (healtheo360.com); ". . . causing a wave of eye infections" (investmentwatchblog.com), and finally, "New Japanese Eyeball Licking Trend Causes Massive Pinkeye Outbreak" (allvoices.com)."

At least two of these "chumps" who took the story at face value and reported it were writers whose online profiles flaunt their masters degrees in journalism from Columbia University.

The headline "Why are Japanese teenagers licking each other's eyeballs?" asked by Keith Wagstaff in The Week (Jun. 14), was cunningly phrased to negate any denials, in much the same manner as does the loaded question "When did you stop beating your wife?"

While some versions of the story were merely paraphrased, others were embellished, and still others appear to have been fabricated outright. One reporter almost certainly fabricated a nonexistent person named "Elektrika Energias." Described as a "29-year-old graduate student in the US Virgin Islands," she claimed she enjoyed having her eyeballs licked. Her remarks were swallowed whole and then repeated by hundreds other writers. This obviously made-up name, meaning "electrical energy" in Spanish, is reminiscent of a Monty Python farce. It cannot be found anywhere else on the web except in connection with the eyeball licking story.

How does a writer prove that something never happened? He can't. But this is what I did. I inquired to two national associations of ophthalmologists with offices in Tokyo and an organization of school clinicians that operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. I spoke with an ophthalmologist in Yokohama who treats many children. And I prevailed on a professor at a national university medical school to undertake a search of various medical and public health databases. In all cases, the findings were negative.

That such an assortment of ludicrous falsehoods -- originating from a Japanese-language subculture site that appeals to fetishists -- can metamorphose into a major international news story testifies to the internet's ability to disseminate misinformation faster than any plague pathogen.

No one knows how many readers believed the story, but few of those who spread such disinformation appear contrite. Most of the original articles remain posted (or cached) on the web.

In today's Brave New World, it would seem, there is no crime for repeating what someone else said, even if the originator of the information is the subject of a current police investigation into obscenity.

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