

# Discourse Analysis on the NHK Reform: Public Service Media and Its Audience in Japan

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## Introduction

The last decade has seen changes in the role of public service broadcasting in Japan. Historically, the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (Nippon Hoso Kyokai, hereafter the NHK), the sole public broadcaster in Japan, has performed the mission of circulating diverse contents to its audience, and by so doing arguably has gained public trusts. In the last decade, however, it faces a new challenge: a rapid decline in the number of audience. Three major reasons are commonly pointed out. First, several scandals in the mid-2000s caused many audiences to refuse paying their license fee (receiving fee), which is the NHK's principal source of income. Second, the media environment has rapidly and radically changed. Third, the younger generation does not watch the NHK as often as their elders.

To tackle these problems, the NHK introduced a scheme called "the audience-first policy". This policy stressed the importance to accommodate the needs of the general audience. Based on this idea, the NHK tried to utilize digital technologies, conducted researches on information behavior, and surveyed consciousness of the audience towards the media. In addition, the NHK promoted policies adjusting to the diversifying needs of the audience. One of these policies was the production of various programs, and another was the development of multiple media outlets. In this process, the NHK transformed itself into a so-called "public service media". In addition, it has come to regard the audience as consumers in the media market.

However, it appears that the NHK exaggerates the new media market and its technological development. It overlooks the transformation of Japanese political culture and civic consciousness in the new media environment. Thereby they fail to identify hidden social and generational disparities in the Japanese society. In other words, the NHK's market-oriented redefinition of the publicness has not captured certain realities of the society.

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Today, Japan faces drastic changes in political and social values. The NHK will need to alter its idea of publicness to adapt to these changes. It is in this context that it is important to study the NHK's conceptions of "publicness" and "audience". This paper will show, by analyzing the discursive construction of the two concepts of "publicness" and "audience", how the public service media can reunite socially divided audiences.

## Recent "Crises" of the NHK

### (1) Characteristics of the NHK

The NHK was established as the Japan Broadcasting Corporation in 1926. It changed its legal status from an incorporated association to a special corporation in 1950. The NHK started out as a radio broadcaster, and began TV broadcasting in 1953.

The NHK itself is regulated by the Broadcast Act. It stipulates that "The NHK aims to transmit domestic basic broadcasting through good, rich broadcast programs, which may be received far and wide throughout Japan (...) for the purpose of public welfare" (Article 15). The NHK is supported by funds collected by signing contracts with all television set owners and charging them a license fee. The NHK plays an important role which is different from either a state-run broadcast or a commercial broadcast.

In 2012, the NHK has three radio channels, three international channels, two terrestrial channels, and two satellite channels.

The NHK as a news broadcasting service possesses a large news-gathering network. Japan has 13 main nationwide news product corporations; five newspaper companies, two wire-services, five private broadcasting networks and the NHK. Among them, the news-gathering system of the NHK is one of the best.

The NHK has received the confidence of the audience. According to the 2011 survey of Japan Press Research Institute, the most credible media is the NHK (71%), the second is newspaper (63%) and the third is private television (35%)<sup>1</sup> (Japan Press Research Institute 2011: 1).

The NHK provides various programs such as news, drama, education, sports and traditional Japanese culture. The nighttime news programs of the NHK which start from 7pm and 9pm, achieve high viewing rates. Furthermore, the documentary programs of the NHK have an established reputation of uncovering various social problems and reviewing history. Recently, the NHK investigated the actual condition of radiation contamination in devastated areas of the 2011 nuclear power plant accident.

### (2) "Crises" in the 2000s

As above, the NHK plays a public role by providing useful information to its

audience on the premise that whole nation in Japan watches its programs. However, the NHK was shaken by several internal crises in the 2000s.

a) Scandals and Denial of Payment for License Fee

Several scandals were the first of these crises the NHK encountered. The political scandal that happened in 2001, involved the reforming of one of its documentary programs. The documentary of the war responsibility of the Emperor Showa was tampered with by pressure from an influential politician of the ruling party. This scandal gained public attention mainly by newspaper reports in 2005. Around the same time, an NHK chief producer was accused of embezzling production expenses of the NHK. Through a series of scandals, questions were raised over the publicness of the NHK, which led viewers and listeners to resist paying their license fees. As a result, payment rates declined from 79% in 2001 to 69% in 2005. Since the NHK does not adopt penalties for nonpayment of license fees, the audience expressed their antipathy towards the NHK by not paying their fees (Hayashi 2010: 190-191).

b) Change of Media Environment

The second crisis is a change in the media environment. In Japan, the use of internet rapidly increased in the early 2000s. Nowadays, 79% of Japanese use the internet. Especially, the use of social media is increasing. A new multi-channel system has been developed thanks to the progress of digital technology. In 2012, about 300 CS (Communication Satellite) channels and 31 BS (Broadcasting Satellite) digital channels are available. The multiplication of media and channels transforms viewing behavior and audience consciousness. These changes threaten to undermine the aims of the NHK as a broadcast media whose mission is to provide various services to the whole nation.

c) Youth's Little Interest in the NHK

The third crisis is the growth of the number of youths who have little interest in NHK programs. According to an NHK survey, the average viewing time of all TV channels in Japan was 226 minutes in 2011. The NHK was watched 59 minutes on average. In 2001, the total average had been 231 minutes and of that the NHK had 66 minutes (Hirata, Tsukamoto and Nishi 2011: 76). The average viewing time has decreased in a decade. However, the situation surround the NHK is more serious than this figure shows. This is because during the decade viewing time of the NHK is increasing among elderly people. While more elders watch the NHK, fewer youths watch the NHK. In other words, main audience of the NHK is elderly people now, while the number of youths who don't watch the NHK is increasing.

According to a 2011 survey, the percentage of people who tune in to the NHK differs by generation. While 86% of people in their sixties and 92% of people in

their seventies watch the NHK, only 55% of people in their twenties watch it. A particularly severe problem is the percentage of youth who watch the NHK news programs. The gross viewing rate of the NHK 7pm news program was 17% in 2009. However, the rate of youths in their twenties was only 2% while the rate of people in their sixties was 26%, those in their seventies, 35%. The NHK 9pm news program faces the same difficulty. While the gross viewing rate of the program is 11%, only 1% of youths in their twenties watch it (Hirata, Tsukamoto and Nishi 2011: 79-80). The generational gap in NHK viewing time is expanding. This situation makes it difficult for the Japanese audience to share a common viewing experience.

## The NHK Reform and Redefinition of Publicness

In response to these “crises”, the NHK began a reform process. This reform includes a redefinition of the NHK’s publicness. It can be understood that the NHK has transformed itself into a so-called “public service media”.

### (1) Discursive Features of Reform Plan

The urgent problem for the NHK to solve is “Audience Revolt” caused by the scandals, which means that the payment fee rate must be recovered. Since 2005, the NHK embarked on “the NHK Reform”. According to the NHK, “what the NHK needs is to reconsider the meaning of public broadcast, and show this answer to the audience” (NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute 2006: 7).

The NHK organized the “Plan for the NHK Reconstruction” on September 2005 which was a packaged approach to regain audience trust (NHK 2005). This plan includes the “plan for trimming down on organization and operation”, the “plan for equitable burden-sharing of NHK license fee” and the “audience-first policy”. The “audience-first policy”, which attracts the most attention, exhibits concepts of new public service.

The NHK reconstructs the idea of publicness in accordance with the “audience-first policy” discourse. Then, what does “audience-first policy” mean? According to a report of the “Advisory Council for the NHK in the Digital Age”, “audience-first policy” means “the NHK, whose revenue source is license fee borne by the audience, reflects various interests of the audiences, and broadcasts expected programs without impartiality” (Advisory Council for the NHK in the Digital Age 2006: 11). Furthermore, the report says that the NHK needs to realize its next mission:

NHK must make the best efforts for the audience to reach various ways of life and different ideas, and enrich their lives by broadcasting a broad range of programs such as news, education and entertainment, and accomplish

the maturity of a diverse and dynamic democracy by enhancing public consciousness (Advisory Council for the NHK in the Digital Age 2006: 11).

The important thing, at first, is that the NHK defines the mission of public broadcast as to provide programs and information which satisfy the needs of audiences with various interests and identities. In addition, the NHK mentions that the NHK “makes even further efforts to various desire of audience with carefully listening to people in each region, each field, each generation and each opinion (Advisory Council for the NHK in the Digital Age 2006: 11).

The second is that the NHK discusses the role of public broadcast in the new media environment changed by digitalization in terms of the “audience-first policy”. In order to accomplish its “audience-first policy”, the 2005 reconstruction plan mentions the need to develop a “public broadcast service which is useful for every audience” by enhancement of contents, production of expected programs and utilization of digital technology (NHK 2005: 3). The 2006 report of the “Advisory Council for the NHK in the Digital Age” touches on utilizing blogs and says the following:

The new (digital)<sup>2</sup> tool enables us to directly and quickly listen to interest and needs of audience, and should be more utilized in terms of “audience-first policy” (Advisory Council for the NHK in the Digital Age 2006: 18).

In this way, the NHK reforms redefine the concept of publicness. It places the “audience-first policy” at the heart of the reform plan and at the same time deals with digitalization. The reform project redefines the basis of program production and business strategy. In sum, scandals and the change of the media environment led the NHK to transform itself into a public service media of world standard.

## (2) Development of “Audience-first Policy” and Image of Audience

The NHK advocated the “audience-first policy”, which needed to, firstly, respond to diverse audience requirements, and secondly, understand audience information behavior. Moreover, the NHK also had to alter its definition and perception of audience to achieve its goal. That is, the NHK’s reconstruction of publicness led to a reconsideration of the image of audience in public broadcast.

### a) Audience as “Consumer”

The NHK reforms actively represent the audience of public broadcasting as “consumers” or “customers”.

The NHK adopts a new system for reflecting audience opinion and desire in program production and business operation. The system intends to assure the audience about its service, analyze the level of its accomplishment in quality

and quantity, and report it to the audience. In order to analyze this, the NHK investigates viewing time, a ratio of people who reach the NHK and the percentage of gratification. The NHK also adopts the “Contingent Valuation Method”. The CVM survey is a method which converts what is hard to judge value into monetary value (NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute 2006: 9). In other words, it measures the NHK’s value by asking the audience how much they can pay for NHK programs.

In addition, the NHK established the “Action for Customer’s Satisfactory Progress” in 2005, and arranged “Meetings with Audience” for direct talks with them (Hayashi 2010: 192). This shows that the NHK regards the audience as “customers”. In other words, a feature of the “audience-first policy” is to satisfy the audience as “customers”, and the NHK researches diverse audience requirements in order to reflect them in program production and business operation.

#### b) Survey of “Youth” Audience

The second character of the NHK’s reconstruction of audience image is that the NHK focuses on audience consciousness and information behavior by segmentalizing audiences.

What the NHK would most like to know is what the youth want from public broadcast.

The NHK owns its research institute “NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute”, and has actively investigated and researched consciousness and behavior of the audience. These days, the institute has increased their effort to investigate the interests of the young media-audience. For instance, the NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute has recently provided the following reports:

“How People in their Twenties Perceive Television in the Internet Era” (January, 2008)

“How Should TV Speak to People in their Twenties?” (June, 2008)

“Images of Viewers in Their Twenties and Thirties According to the Level of Engagement in Television” (September, 2009)

“Men in Their 20’s, amid Anxiety and Information Overload: (1) A Chasm Highlighted by Their Media Use and Perception of Everyday Life” (October, 2009)

“Men in Their 20’s, amid Anxiety and Information Overload: (2) A Chasm in TV Viewing” (November, 2009)

“The Positioning of Television among the Youth: Young People’s TV Viewing and Media Use” (December, 2010)

By a series of researches, the NHK tries to understand the younger audience. The above reports show that the younger audience is segmentalized not only into gender and age, but also into the level of engagement with television viewing, degree of media usage, and their consciousness of life and society. The NHK attempts to produce programs satisfying each segment of youth audience.

Judging from media and information reach of the youth, there is likely to be various types of young audience. In this situation, it is really hard to develop enough satisfactory programs for the audience to watch. A television needs to get information of the premise on how the youth sees information and contents from each media, what benefit they gain, and how they position television (Tani 2009a: 2).

What is important is the relevance between the “audience-first policy” and the segmentalization of the audience in the NHK’s research. The NHK diversified their services to include diverse audiences in tandem with their redefinition of the concept of publicness.

### **Critical Considerations on the NHK Reform**

The main findings of this paper are the following: first, through the NHK reforms after the mid-2000s, the meaning of “publicness” has changed. Second, the “audience-first policy” has been positioned as the central idea in the redefinition of publicness of the NHK. Third, the NHK’s attempt to capture the change of the media environment and its audience is linked to this redefinition of publicness. The NHK upheld the idea of “audience-first policy” and developed diverse media strategies and planned new programs which meet the needs of the individual audience. This section will critically consider some implications of those changes.

The problem of the NHK’s redefinition of publicness in the form of the “audience-first policy” can be found in their method of capturing the audience, or their method of discursively constructing the audience. It is an ideology which claims that publicness will be achieved by accumulating the individual needs of their diversified audience. This ideology is based on the belief that the accumulation of individual audience needs builds publicness. However, this reconstruction of publicness would not develop public values adequately even if the numerical goal of payment fee ratio was to be achieved.

### (1) The Tendency of Neo-liberalism

The first reason of the NHK's failure is that the logic of neo-liberalism is incorporated in the discourse of the NHK reforms. It is often said that this logic of neo-liberalism has undermined public values (Giroux 2011). And it is also pointed out that as a global trend, this logic has influenced ideas and policies of public service media which try to adapt to digitalization (Yonekura 2007). That is to say, media policy to promote the multimedia and multichannel and the convergence of broadcastings and telecommunications, stimulates competition with private broadcasting companies; therefore, introduces market principles. The discourses of the NHK which tries to reconstruct relation with its audience in terms of "needs", "gratification" and "benefit", represents its audience as "consumers" and "customers". As a result, "diversity" and "interactivity" in the discourse of the "audience-first policy" pursued by the NHK has become similar to discourses of market principles, while they are not necessarily linked to diversification of political and social values.

### (2) Change of Social Conscious

The second shortfall is that the discourse of promoting the NHK reform doesn't accord with today's media audience. In other words, the NHK reforms do not capture the change of social conscious and values in Japan.

Divisions, oppositions and conflicts between various groups within the Japanese society are apparent. The implementation of neo-liberal reforms has widened economic gaps. Especially, the intergenerational gap has intensified. Youth employment is unstable, and has led them to grow discontent with elder generations. Central-local relations are an even greater problem. Local objections towards the center are increasing. Especially, in Okinawa, which has been laden with a heavy concentration of U.S. bases, feelings of injustice and unfairness against other parts of the Japanese society are mounting. After the nuclear accident caused by the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, objections are growing in local areas where nuclear plants are located. Likewise, public opinion is divided on the question of whether to resume operations of nuclear power plants around the nation.

Local and social media play a key role in these discontents, and show their suspiciousness to mass media including the NHK. In present-day Japan, individual identities are diversifying. Yet people keep their identities and objections to their own, and do not build solidarity between each other. As a result, social divisions and conflicts are becoming ever more serious problems.

In this situation, the construction of solidarity in society is the main theme in the argument of publicness. In order to construct solidarity, it is necessary for each individual voice to link up with various voices and invigorate public discussions. However, the NHK is working to individualize and segmentalize audiences in its

reforms. Therefore, the NHK's reforms and audience researches are not able to sufficiently capture the changes of audience and society.

The social demand for the NHK is apparent. It is to construct solidarity in Japan, and that is a different direction from the NHK reforms. In order to respond to its requirements, the NHK needs to reconsider its "audience-first policy", and establish an alternative relationship with its audience. It is vital for the NHK to capture the actual condition of the changing audience and society.

## NOTES

1. Multiple Answer.
2. Bracket put by the author.

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