

# Re-examining the Journalistic Function of Public Service Broadcasting in Japan: A Discourse Analysis of Television News Coverage on the Fukushima Nuclear Crisis

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## NHK and the Japanese media landscape

This paper purports to examine the journalistic function of public service broadcasting (PSB) in Japan by analyzing the news coverage on the Fukushima nuclear power plant crisis and nuclear energy policy in the past three years.

While digitalization and the advent of the internet significantly altered the media landscape in Japan, journalism failed to become actively practiced online. Rather, national newspapers, national broadcasting networks and NHK (Nippon Hoso Kyokai: Japan Broadcasting Corporation) retained the central journalistic role in Japan<sup>1</sup>.

As a journalism organization, NHK exerts a powerful presence. It has one of the largest news gathering systems in Japan; it hosts two evening news programs, “News 7” and “News Watch 9” –both of which boast high audience ratings; and it also has the highest reliability rating amongst Japanese news media (Japan Press Research Institute 2013)<sup>2</sup>. Due to these factors combined, NHK constitutes one of the most influential journalism organizations in Japan.

By contrast, internet-based alternative journalism largely failed to take root in Japan. To cite an example, *Oh My News Japan* was launched online in 2006 with great fanfare, but its page view remained low and the site was ultimately taken down in 2009.

This media landscape was transformed, however, by a catastrophic disaster. On March 11 2011, Japan was hit by the massive “East Japan Earthquake,” which in turn triggered a crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. The nuclear crisis gave rise to widespread distrust of the traditional news media. This occurred, firstly, because in reporting on the nuclear crisis, Japanese media organizations relied

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almost exclusively upon government information sources, while largely eschewing the voices of anti-nuclear specialists and activists. Indeed, public criticism of the coverage of mainstream newspapers and television amounted to claims that it was reminiscent of the “wartime censorship of the Imperial Headquarters.” Secondly, it became known throughout society that up until the nuclear crisis, the traditional news media had been accepting of and even promoted nuclear energy policy and were thus seen to be instrumental in shaping the myth of “infallible safety” of nuclear power plants. This dissatisfaction of professional journalism led to call for alternative and citizen journalism. As such, internet journalism in Japan was instigated upon the foundations of the Japanese anti-nuclear movement.

In this way, the “discovery” of internet journalism by the general public in Japan occurred as a result of the 3.11 crisis, and accordingly, certain communicative practices on the internet came to be recognized as “journalism.” As a corollary of such, the boundary between professional journalism and citizen journalism became blurred. This milieu promoted critical reflection on the role of the traditional mass media, including NHK.

The questions that arise from these developments are, how did the transformation in the Japanese media landscape evolve? How has NHK redefined its role within this changing context? And, how can we conceive of a new journalistic function for NHK in PSB?

This paper investigates these questions with reference to the NHK coverage on the Fukushima nuclear crisis and Japan’s nuclear energy policy. It firstly examines the public criticism of television journalism, particularly in regard to NHK. Next, it analyzes the news coverage on Fukushima in March 2014, three years after the disaster. Through a comparison of this coverage, this paper elucidates the public function of NHK within Japan’s changing media landscape.

## News Coverage of the Fukushima Crisis

### *The criticism directed at professional journalism reports*

In the wake of the Fukushima crisis the initial news coverage by traditional mass media was the subject of intense criticism.

On March 11 2011, the earthquake and ensuing tsunami damaged the reactor cooling system at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. As a result, the reactors for Units 1, 2 and 3 exploded in sequence, and Unit 4 burst into flames. This resulted in the widespread dispersion of radioactive substances and consequently, the establishment of a 30 km evacuation zone around the plant.

Traditional journalism organizations, specifically national newspapers, NHK and private news networks, became fully mobilized in their coverage of this unprecedented crisis. In fact, NHK and private news networks conducted special emergency programs for a 72-hour period after the crisis first hit. However, this

coverage was later to become the subject of much criticism.

Over the weeks following the nuclear disaster, television news organizations including NHK continued to relay the voices and views of the government, TEPCO (Tokyo Electric Power Company) and pro-nuclear specialists, who uncritically emphasized the “safety” of nuclear power. Television journalists neglected to request of the government that it disclose the detailed information about the extent of the dispersion of and contamination by radioactive materials. As a result, they were not able to provide accurate reports on the problem (Ito 2012; Yamada 2013)<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, distrust toward television journalists who merely conveyed the views of government authorities, continued to mount.

In this context, a number of media scholars and journalists took it upon themselves to critically examine the initial coverage of the disaster. Their investigations revealed that the traditional media, especially national newspapers and television news, supported the Japanese government’s nuclear energy policy and helped to shape the “myth of infallible safety” of nuclear power plants (Jomaru 2012). They also proclaimed that the Kisha club or “press club,” the dominant news gathering system in Japan, was the cause of the media’s dependence on authorities as news sources. In short, the problem of the initial coverage on the Fukushima crisis was identified as being in the structure and culture of traditional professional journalism in Japan.

As a result, severe criticism was leveled against the media, particularly NHK, which is regarded as having the most specialized news gathering system of Japanese news networks. Indeed, NHK has nuclear energy specialists among its journalist ranks and has even produced documentaries on the shortcomings of Japan’s nuclear energy policy (Karasudani 2014). Nevertheless, this expertise was not drawn upon in its coverage of the Fukushima disaster. According to Ito, who analyzed television news coverage over the week following the crisis, NHK depended mostly on government authorities, TEPCO and pro-nuclear specialists as information sources (Ito 2012). As such, it was criticized for perpetuating the views of them.

#### *The conditions of cross-boundary journalism become ripe*

As argued above, the news coverage on the Fukushima nuclear crisis by traditional journalism organizations bred distrust among audiences. Many citizens thus turned to the internet in search of the information that authorities were reluctant to divulge. A number of specialists and anti-nuclear activists began to declare their own opinions online. The general public also used the internet to express their views. In particular, the Social Networking Service (SNS) was utilized by the citizens to disseminate and share information about the nuclear accident and radioactive contamination. Moreover, a plethora of information was posted online by specialists, activists and the citizens via blogs, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube (Yamada 2013)<sup>4</sup>.

Free and online journalists mediated these myriad voices by holding various press conferences and broadcasting them on the internet. This internet activity of journalists came to attract citizens' attention and it dawned on the public that internet journalism could play a new public role in the Fukushima nuclear crisis.

It is important for assessing the public function of journalism that alternative journalism was sparked on the internet. Alternative journalism, such as Ourplanet-TV, was practiced by freelance journalists who advocated anti-nuclear views, criticized the news coverage of mass media, and utilized U-Stream to broadcast interviews with anti-nuclear groups and press conference held by government authorities and TEPCO (Shiraishi 2011). They also broadcasted on the spot news coverage of the anti-nuclear demonstrations. Additionally, Ourplanet-TV nurtured citizen journalists and provided platforms for their journalistic activities. In this way, the boundary between professional and citizen journalism became blurred.

While the initiation of the citizen journalism on the internet was spurred by distrust of professional journalism, it was shaped by the political context of the time. Then Prime Minister Naoto Kan of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) had issued a directive to Chubu Electric Corp. that it ceases operation of all reactors in Hamaoka Nuclear Power Plant, in May 2011. Then in July, the Kan administration declared that Japan would gradually reduce its dependence on nuclear power, with the ultimate goal of achieving a nuclear power plant-free society. Anti-nuclear movements expanded their networks through the internet, enabling the mobilization of ten thousand people scale demonstrations. It was in this political and social milieu that internet-based alternative journalism took off.

These developments in turn impacted upon traditional professional journalism. National newspapers became divided into pro- and anti-nuclear camps. A few newspapers also began to critically examine their past coverage on nuclear energy policy (Jomaru 2012). NHK, in addition to other private news networks, did not go to this extent (Kanehira, Fujimori and Kumamoto 2012), however, there was some observable influence of the advent of citizen journalism on their reporting. First, NHK began to cover the anti-nuclear movements (Kanehira, Fujimori and Kumamoto 2012). Second, NHK's documentary program about radioactive contamination received strong support by internet users (NHK's "ETV Special" Team of Reporters 2012). Third, one announcer resigned from NHK and established an online anti-nuclear journalism organization. Yet, there was no significant change discernable in NHK's news gathering system, nor its stance on the Fukushima crisis and nuclear energy policy.

## NHK and the Struggle over Collective Memory

### *A new social and political context*

Three years have passed since the Fukushima nuclear crisis and several new

developments have occurred in Japan since then. How have such developments affected NHK's news gathering, and to what extent has its coverage of the Fukushima crisis and nuclear energy policy changed? And what sort of public role can be found for NHK within this new context?

First, the Japanese government's nuclear energy policy has undergone fundamental change. Following the resignation of Prime Minister Kan, his successor Yoshihiko Noda initiated a policy shift in favor of restarting nuclear power plants. With the change of government from the DPJ to the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in December 2012, the second Abe administration set forth a pro-nuclear policy and promoted the export of nuclear power plants. As part of the basic energy plan that formulated in April 2014, Abe retracted the nuclear power plant-free policy and he began pushing to restart the Sendai Nuclear Power Plant, which, if carried out, would make it the first nuclear facility to resume function since 3.11.

Second, "the climate of opinion" in Japan is changing. While many citizens still desire less dependence on nuclear power and oppose the restarting of nuclear power plants, there is concern about the negative impact that the stopping all nuclear power plants would have on the Japanese economy. Thus, the public wavers between its hope for "economic growth" and "a nuclear power plant-free society."<sup>5</sup> Complicating the situation is noteworthy that Tokyo has been chosen to host the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The government has since incorporated the hosting of the games into the frame of "reconstruction" from the disaster, and had tied the interests of the public success of this event and Japan's economic growth. The concerns about the possibility of contaminated water and how this would be addressed which was voiced during the Olympic bidding campaign, have gradually receded.

There has also been a decrease in the number of protesters mobilizing in the anti-nuclear movement. Moreover, alternative journalism related to radical movements has declined, and a number of online journalism organizations that once supported the anti-nuclear power plant movement have ceased their activities and shut down their web sites.

#### *The "struggle over collective memory" in journalism*

Evidently, the general public's interest in the Fukushima nuclear crisis has dissipated with time. Yet as the political symbolism of "reconstruction" after 3.11 has been incorporated into the logic of economic growth and this in turn has functioned to legitimate the restart of nuclear power plants, a "struggle over collective memory" has emerged. This struggle, which has become a new focus of the news coverage on the Fukushima crisis, has three primary dimensions. First, it entails the attempt to continuously re-mobilize public opinion about the crisis so that it will not to be forgotten. Second, on the part of news media, it entails the continuous re-examination of the crisis with a view to shedding new light on it. And third, it entails the continuous critical monitoring of the Japanese government's

nuclear energy policy. In short, this struggle over memory constitutes an attempt to prevent the crisis from being forgotten and the public interest in nuclear energy policy from waning.

News broadcasting has been a central site of this struggle, owing to the visual impact of television news images, and the power of emotive news stories of individuals in stimulating the recollection of memories.

This section focuses on television news programs aired in March 2014. NHK and private news networks provoked the recollection of memories of 3.11 by broadcasting a special feature and ceremonial event about the disaster. It investigates how television news, particularly NHK news programs, contributed to the recollection of memories of the Fukushima nuclear crisis. Through a comparison of television news programs, it reveals the public role of NHK in the contest over collective memory.

#### *Television news coverage of Fukushima in March 2014*

Here the news programs of NHK and four major private news networks between March 4 and 12 2014 will be examined. Specifically, the following programs will be the focus: “News Watch 9” of NHK, “News Zero” of NNN, “Hodo Station” of ANN, “News 23” of JNN and “News Japan” of FNN.

##### *a) Common characteristics of the programs*

There are a number of commonalities among the news programs of NHK and private news networks. First, each of the programs broadcasted special features on March 10 or 11. NHK’s “News Watch 9” and NNN’s “News Zero” referred to Fukushima on March 10 and the earthquake disaster the following day. JNN’s “News 23” and FNN’s “News Japan” broadcasted features on the earthquake disaster on March 11 and made reference to Fukushima therein. ANN’s “Hodo Station” also broadcasted Fukushima news, but only on March 11.

Second, these programs formed a discourse emphasizing the messages of “don’t forget” and “not yet settled.” NHK’s “News Watch 9,” NNN’s “News Zero” and FNN’s “News Japan” covered the issues of “nuclear decontamination,” “treatment of contaminated water” and the “decommissioning of nuclear reactors” which are still all salient issues. ANN’s “Hodo Station” and JNN’s “News 23,” on the other hand, raised the issues of “health threat” and “mental care.”

Third, there were few conspicuously references made to the anti-nuclear demonstrations in these programs. Although demonstrations were held nationwide from the beginning of March,<sup>6</sup> only NNN’s “News Zero” made mention of such, referring to single demonstration, held in Fukushima on March 11.

##### *b) Distinctive characteristics of NHK news*

NHK’s “News Watch 9” covered the Fukushima-related news every day from

March 4 to 12. There were no other programs, with the exception of “News Watch 9,” that did the same. “News Watch 9” conveyed multiple viewpoints in its coverage: on March 4, it reported on employment issues in disaster-struck areas, including Fukushima Prefecture; the following day, it discussed the result of an awareness survey of residents in the affected areas conducted by NHK; on March 6, it reported that there had been an increase in the incidence of dementia among elderly evacuees from Fukushima; and on March 7, it raised the new matter of poverty among these elderly evacuees. In this way, NHK news presented contemporary problems concerning the victims of the Fukushima crisis, from a variety of viewpoints.

A special feature that was broadcast on March 10 expressed these perspectives more evidently. “News Watch 9” devoted half of its sixty-minute broadcast to reporting on the current state of Fukushima and the program raised three issues. First, that the evacuees were divided into two groups: those who wanted to return and those who did not. Three years on from the accident, the number of those that have abandoned the idea of returning to their homes and have decided to remain in their new residence, has increased. It was implied that consequently their local communities would be unable to reconstruct themselves, even in the event that the radiation level is reduced to its former amount. Second, it had become difficult for mothers who live in Fukushima and wish to protect their children’s health, to voice their anxiety about radiation. This “spiral of silence” is partly connected to the mood of “reconstruction.” Third, in the process of nuclear decontamination and treatment of contaminated water, people have been forced to endure additional burdens. It was reported that fisherman who tried to restart their business were greatly concerned about whether the new policies and procedures of the government and TEPCO would result in further contamination of the seawater around Fukushima by radioactive material. The program also relayed the anxieties of the people residing in a community where the government plans to construct a “temporary storage facility” for radioactive materials. The citizens believed their community would be unable to recover if contaminated by radioactive materials.

In this way, NHK’s news program communicated the various sufferings and anxieties of the victims of the Fukushima nuclear crisis. This is a distinctive feature of NHK news as compared with other private news networks. NHK’s “thick description” of news events is made possible by its high quality news gathering system, and has been conducted by reporters working in its branch offices.

The news texts of NHK encapsulate the “undecidability,” “hesitation” and “bitter decisions” faced by Fukushima residents, evacuees and other affected parties. In short, its texts avoid reducing their stories to “simple narratives.” Other private news network programs, by contrast, have propounded simplistic narratives of “reconstruction” or “anger toward authorities.”

The “reconstruction” narrative has depicted recovery as gradually progressing

in stricken areas, and cautions that in order for it to be successful, all members of Japanese society must unite and lend their support. For example, FNN's "News Japan" spoke of the "bonds" of youth, which have ostensibly been strengthened over the past three years. Similarly, NNN's "News Zero" reported about youths endeavoring to revive a shopping precinct, and injecting their fresh ideas. In the same program, a reporter accompanied a popular young politician<sup>7</sup> and tracked his "reconstruction" efforts in Fukushima. These sorts of reports have produced a "narrative of (youth-led) reconstruction."

On the other hand, ANN's "Hodo Station" highlighted the sufferings of mothers in Fukushima whose children were diagnosed with probable thyroid cancer. While local and national authorities denied any relationship between the nuclear disaster in Fukushima and the onset of cancer, the program cast doubt about such views and demanded that authorities disclose information. The discourse that formed in this program could be summarized as "rewarding good and punishing evil." In this narrative, authorities constitute the "evil" that conceals "truth," while anti-nuclear groups are the "good" that bring relief to victim mothers.

The NHK news narratives stand in contrast to these simple stories. The mothers of Fukushima story is not reducible to the "reconstruction" or "anti-nuclear" discourses. Rather, it represents a "polyphony" of voices from everyday life, among which audiences can discern the emotions of anxiety, hope, uneasiness and more. In this way, NHK news text, through its characteristic thick description, conveys multiple layers of collective memories and represents a polyphony of voices.

## The Possibility of Journalism in PSB

This paper considers the journalistic function of public service broadcasting in Japan in the post-3.11 borderless media landscape.

The news coverage of the Fukushima nuclear crisis resulted in criticism of Japan's traditional news media, particularly broadcasting media. Online citizen journalism, on the other hand, garnered positive attention as a form of alternative journalism that served to mobilize anti-nuclear public opinion. Yet, its presence has gradually decreased over the three years following the disaster.

We should not, however, conceive of the professional journalism of mass media on the one hand, and alternative journalism as practiced online, on the other, in a simplistic dichotomy. Indeed, *the Tokyo Shimbun*, a local paper in Tokyo, covered the anti-nuclear movement in a manner akin to online alternative journalism. And as mentioned previously, ANN "Hodo Station" reported on the suspected health threat posed by radioactive contamination in the same discursive framework as alternative journalism portals, such as Our Planet-TV.

It is difficult to say, however, that television journalism has undergone fundamental change. There was almost no coverage on the anti-nuclear



demonstration in television news throughout the analysis target period. The voices of political elites, rather, dominated television media discourse.

It is also hard to say that the television journalism coverage of developments in Japan's nuclear energy policy was conducted in a systematic and continuous way. While the basic energy plan of April 2014 was extensively reported on by newspapers, television news programs including NHK refrained from covering the event.

This study has revealed the possibilities for television journalism in the three years since the Fukushima nuclear crisis began. As we have seen, television journalism represents a struggle over collective memory. As television constitutes a form of daily media, it can function as an archive and television news can serve to activate the collective memories of a society.

Television news can moreover represent various aspects of collective memory, not only by reporting public events or ceremony, but also by describing the dramas of the lives of ordinary people. In the case of NHK, this has been made possible by virtue of it having one of the largest news gathering systems in Japan, enabling it to represent the complexities of Japanese collective memory.

This form of representation is important for Japanese society today as there are numerous identities and interests intertwined in the Fukushima crisis which would not be accommodated by a "simple story." A new journalistic function of PSB has thus been to capture such voices, broadcast them, and extend sympathy throughout society. PSB now also needs to incorporate some radical online voices. Furthermore, it must traverse the boundary between traditional mass media and the internet by cooperating with other media forms.

It is of timely necessity to reconsider the journalistic function played by PSB in this cross-boundary media landscape. The Fukushima crisis has provided a lens through which to do so. NHK would be well served to redefine its news coverage system based on the lessons learned in the initial coverage on the crisis (Ito 2012; Kato 2012; Shiraishi 2011; Yamada 2013). At the same time, it would also be worthwhile for it to pursue other possible journalistic functions in PSB.

## Notes

1. In Japan there are five national newspapers, five commercial broadcasting networks and the public broadcasting corporation, NHK.
2. NHK was always ranked first in the past six surveys.
3. A number of NHK staff entered the 30 km evacuation zone for reporting purposes. These were not staff of NHK's News Department but rather, reporters from its educational program, in its Program Production Department (NHK's "ETV Special" Team of Reporters 2012).

4. Tweets on the science and culture division of NHK were also referenced widely (Yamada 2013)
5. According to a public opinion survey conducted by *the Yomiuri Shimbun* in March 2014, 73 percent of citizens support a reduction or cessation of nuclear power plant energy. At the same time, 70 percent are concerned about the impact that a shutdown of nuclear power plants could have on the Japanese economy.
6. For example, according to *the Asahi Shimbun* on 10 March, 30 thousands people scale demonstrations were carried out in Tokyo on March 9.
7. Shinjiro Koizumi, Parliamentary Secretary of the Cabinet Office and Parliamentary Secretary for Reconstruction.

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