

# Constructing the Reality of “Media” on the Internet: The Media Coverage of the NHK President’s Statement and the Online Response

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## The Changing Media Environment in Japan

The media environment in Japan has transformed significantly over the past decade. Most notably, the internet as media has provided a new form of communication, known as “network communication” or “Computer Mediated Communication (CMC).” In this communication process, societal members can communicate interactively among one another, representing a departure from traditional mass communication. In 2012, it was reported that 80% of Japanese citizens are active internet users and in the 13 to 39 age bracket, this figure climbs to over 90%<sup>1</sup>.

A number of researchers and journalists have pointed out that with the transformation of the media environment, a “mass media crisis” has emerged. This crisis is said to be characterized by three primary dimensions: (1) a reduction in revenue or income for mass media; (2) a reduction in the number of TV viewers; and (3) decreasing confidence in the credibility of media.

### (1) Reduction in revenue

The financial state of mass media corporations, including newspapers, broadcasting networks (TV and radio), and magazines, has deteriorated over time. Newspaper revenue is comprised mostly of sales revenue and advertising revenue, yet in Japan, the population is rapidly shrinking and the young generation no longer read the newspaper. Japanese newspaper sales have gradually declined, but not to the extent as in the United States.

Advertising revenue is also diminishing. Since 2009, the advertising revenue of newspapers has been less than that of the internet. Television advertising is also decreasing. Indeed, in recent years, a number of newspaper corporations have reported negative revenue growth.

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Table 1: Advertising Revenue (billion yen)

Year	Newspaper	TV	Radio	Magazine	Internet
2005	1,038	2,041	178	484	378
2006	999	2,016	174	478	483
2007	946	1,998	167	459	600
2008	828	1,909	155	408	698
2009	674	1,714	137	303	707
2010	640	1,732	130	273	775
2011	599	1,724	125	254	806
2012	624	1,776	125	255	868
2013	617	1,791	124	250	938

Source: DENTSU INC<sup>2</sup>.

## (2) Decreasing number of TV viewers

In addition, a new phenomenon known as “TV-BANARE,” or decreasing rates of TV viewing, has emerged. According to surveys conducted by The NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute, time spent watching TV has been comparable with time spent using the internet among the young generation. From

Table 2: Time Spent on the Internet (minutes)

Year	Males		Females	
	2005	2010	2005	2010
10's	0:18	0:27	0:16	0:25
20's	0:29	1:08	0:16	0:41
30's	0:20	0:49	0:14	0:23
40's	0:13	0:24	0:11	0:18
50's	0:08	0:10	0:07	0:14
60's	0:11	0:14	0:07	0:09
70's and over	0:13	0:15	0:07	0:08

Source: The NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute<sup>3</sup>

2005 to 2010, internet usage increased rapidly, particularly among adult males aged between twenty and forty. Heavy internet users tend to spend roughly four hours online per day, exceeding the three hour (upper) averages of TV viewing time.

### (3) Decreasing confidence in the credibility of the mass media?

In Japan's changing media context, alternative media such as internet has become a medium for the general public to be informed of news and also to comment on news. In this context one might assume that people are relying more on alternative media than mass media. However, data on the public's level of confidence in the credibility of the mass media indicates to the contrary. There has been no discernable decrease in credibility of the mass media from the public's viewpoint. In fact, the credibility of the internet as a news source remains lower than that of mass media.

The Japan Press Research Institute assessed the level of confidence in the credibility of the mass media in 2013. According to their findings, "NHK TV" is the most reliable form of media followed by "newspapers." NHK TV scored particularly highly on the criteria of "easy to understand," "reliable," and "socially influential."

Table 3: Media Credibility

Year	NHK (Public Broadcasting)	Commercial broadcasting	Newspaper	Radio	Magazine	Internet
2008	74.0	65.4	72.0	63.6	48.2	58.0
2009	73.5	63.6	70.9	61.6	46.4	58.2
2010	73.5	65.3	72.0	61.6	47.1	58.0
2011	74.3	63.1	72.0	63.8	44.1	56.3
2012	70.1	60.3	68.9	58.6	44.6	53.3
2013	72.5	60.4	70.7	60.6	44.7	54.1

Source: Japan Press Research Institute<sup>4</sup>

## A New Means of Reality Construction.

### (1) Social constructionism in mass communication studies

In accordance with these trends, social discussion over the role of media has intensified. While this discussion is not a new phenomenon—indeed, there have been numerous scandals involving the mass media and government interference therewith—as the number of internet users has increased, this discussion has taken

concrete form and can now be visualized. It has become commonplace for people to express and discuss views—particularly critical views—of the media via the internet. Indeed, the slang word “Mass-Gomi,” meaning Mass (communication)-Garbage in Japanese, was coined on an online bulletin board.

In the following section, these trends will be examined from the perspective of social constructionism. According to V. Burr (2003: 2-5), social constructionism can be defined in terms of the following four points.

- I. A critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge.
- II. Historical and cultural specificity.
- III. Knowledge is sustained by social process.
- IV. Knowledge and social action go together.

In mass communication (and journalism) studies, the constructionist approach has commonly been applied as an analytical lens for news coverage of the mass media. In its coverage (or commentary), the news media relays news by selecting particular facts about an event. In other words, rather than reporting cases or events exactly as they occur, facts are selectively chosen in the process of news production. In this way, news media functions to define incidents and events and imbue them with meaning, thus constructing a particular reality.

Dennis McQuail (2005: 102) cites the following five basic principles of the constructionist approach in mass communication research.

- I. Society is a construct rather than a fixed reality.
- II. Media provides the materials for reality construction.
- III. Meaning is provided by media but can be negotiated or rejected.
- IV. Media selectively reproduces certain meanings.
- V. Media cannot objectively report on social reality (all facts are interpretations)

In mass communication research, the constructionist approach has often been utilized to highlight the process of reality construction *by* the media, for example, in news production processes. However, there is another process of reality construction pertaining to media that has been overlooked.

## (2) The Process of Constructing the Reality of the Media

A less prevalent focus of social constructionism in media studies has been the process of how the reality *of* media is constructed. The typical means by which this occurs is criticism—by the public—of the mass media, news media, and journalism, which has long been a common practice.

When certain mass media organizations have been the center of scandals, such as forgeries and false alarms, they have often been subject to criticism by other mass media organizations. This occurred when, for example, in 1989, a staff photographer of Asahi Shimbun deliberately defaced a coral reef in order to get a photo of so-called “underwater graffiti.” To cite another example, in 1992, NHK aired a fabricated documentary on the Mustang kingdom, a self-governing dominion in Nepal, which came to be widely criticized. It was found that the documentary scene in which the film crew developed altitude sickness had been reproduced, and also the quicksand that featured in the documentary had been formulated by the crew. The documentary was thus criticized as “fake”. And there are numerous other such examples.

Yet, with the spread of the internet, mass media audiences have become more visible. Through the online network, audiences have come face to face with each other, and have begun to recognize the opinions and impressions of other audiences.

Moreover, in the last decade, various forms of journalism and news media have started to operate on the web, often appealing to their superiority over the conventional mass media. This has served to strengthen their legitimacy among audiences.

As criticism has the effect of defining the role of the media, it can be conceived of as a means of constructing the “reality of media.” By pointing out the disparity between the activities of the actual media and its (ideal) role, criticism serves to render this “reality” as a social problem.

Journalism researchers have tended to neglect the significance of media criticism. And the fact that media criticism has yet to be theorized has only reinforced this neglect. This study takes a constructive approach to media criticism by considering its function of constructing the reality of mass media. In short, it conceives of “media criticism” as media discourse.

It is important to distinguish between the public critical discussion of mass media and that conducted by professional or academic communities. It should also be recognized that media criticism by the public is not limited to the internet, but has also developed to encompass claims against media companies and their sponsors. In fact, a number of TV programs have been aborted as a result of criticism, demonstrating that, discussion of the mass media has come to bear tangible effects on its activities.

Against this backdrop, it is timely to consider how criticism of the mass media is manifesting in the everyday world, prior to the normative discussion of the mass media in the professional context. This study will analyze the characteristics of the critical discourse on the internet in relation to the mass media in recent years, with a focus on the Japanese mass media, including public service media.

The reality of the media is not only constructed through “media criticism.” In the event that counter speech is engaged in in relation to the coverage of a certain

social problem, reality is constructed in duplicate. For example, when non-mainstream media such as magazines disseminate counter-speeches to newspapers and television, the non-mainstream media may criticize the very existence of the mass media. The reality of social problems that mass media coverage serves to construct, and reality the about the mass media, constitute two different realities.

In order to examine the role of journalism in the network society, it is first necessary to ascertain the social awareness of conventional mass media. Particularly when considering the potential for alternative journalism, it is important to be aware of the mass media criticism on the internet that has emerged over the past decade (about this section, see also YAMAGUCHI 2011).

## Case Studies

### (1) Media coverage of a statement by NHK's president

This section examines the mass media coverage of controversial statements made by the NHK president and members of the board of governors of NHK, as case studies.

In January of 2014, Momii Katsuto was instated as NHK president. At his inaugural press conference, he made a remark about the so-called “comfort women,” or women who worked at Japanese military brothels, that drew significant attention. Media reports drew parallels between his statement and the Abe administration’s political position of on the “comfort women” issue. As the relationship between government and public broadcasting is a highly contentious topic in Japan, the Asahi Shimbun issued daily reports and critical columns on the incident. In response to the controversy, Momii claimed to the effect that “NHK cannot say *left*, when the government says *right* (i.e. the government and NHK should be of the same opinion on issues.)”

Following this, the Asahi Shimbun severely criticized Momii in an editorial on January 26, 2014, arguing that his statement was too close to that of the government, and suggested that an intervention be made into the site and process of program production. Moreover, the Asahi praised the BBC for its criticism of the government with respect to its role in the Falklands War, and highlighted the difference between NHK and BBC in their public broadcasting principles.

Various other newspapers also reported on the statement of the NHK president. In a similar vein to the Asahi Shimbun, the Mainichi Shimbun criticized Momii’s statement for its lack of political neutrality and claimed that public broadcasting should voice opinions that stand in opposition to that of the government.

The Yomiuri Shimbun, on the other hand, sympathized with the views of Momii on the “comfort women” issue, evinced in the editorial it issued on January 30, 2014. The Sankei Shimbun also expressed its support for Momii’s statement.

Further to the Momii’s statement, the activities of two NHK board members,

Hyakuta Naoki and Hasegawa Chiyoko, sparked controversy in February of 2014. The first incident occurred when Hyakuta, who was participating in a campaign on behalf of a candidate at the Tokyo gubernatorial election, described opposing candidates as “kuzu,” meaning scum in Japanese. In reporting this event, the Asahi expressed concern about the qualities of NHK’s management committee.

The second controversy involved the contents of an essay written by Hasegawa as part of a memorial tribute to Japanese activists of the New Right. In her essay, Hasegawa praised a New Right activist who had visited the president of the Asahi Shimbun back October of 1993, and committed suicide by handgun in his office.

A number of newspapers, notably the Asahi Shimbun and the Mainichi Shimbun, criticized the behavior of these two board members. In addition, NHK was flooded with complaints by viewers, and newspapers issued reports to this effect. Remarkably, the management committee of NHK expressed that it opposed the actions of these board members.

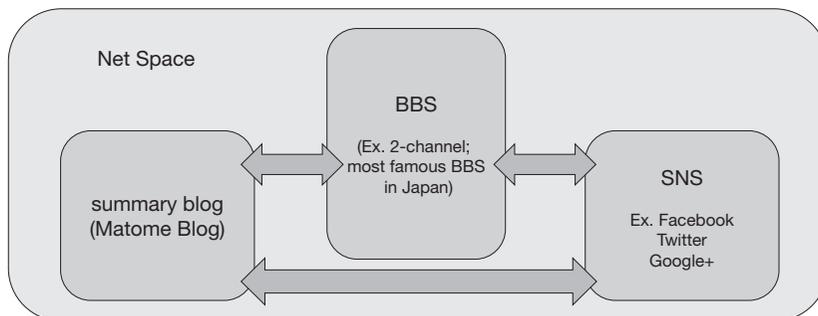
These incidences of controversial behavior and remarks by the NHK president and board members served to shape the reality of the media. Essentially, the tone of the newspaper coverage was very critical of NHK and depicted it as a problematic organization.

As of yet, Zelizer (2004) say there is no consensus between journalists, journalism researchers, and journalism educators as to how news should be reported. Disagreement exists between the Sankei and Asahi Shimbun about role of international broadcasting, which was clearly evident in the NHK issue. As the visualization of societal opinion has advanced with the spread of the internet, the process of reality construction of the media has accordingly become complicated.

(2) Internet response

How did internet users react to the reporting of the NHK issue? This section examines the comment thread of “2-channel” (known as Ni-Chanel), the largest electronic bulletin board in Japan, particularly in the “breaking news plus” category. Information that is printed on 2-channel is reprinted on another site—a summary

Figure 1: Interaction of Information Inter-Media in Net Space



blog, called “Matome blog”, which net users use to view 2-channel information. Twitter and Facebook are also utilized in conjunction with this summary blog. SNS users are able to easily navigate between 2-channel, the summary blog and SNS (See figure 1).

The following thread appeared on 2-channel<sup>5</sup> in relation to the Asahi Shimbun article<sup>6</sup>. While some opinions on the thread reflected that of the Asahi Shimbun, others supported the statements of the NHK president.

Regardless of this person’s views, I think his reflections are normal. I have to say, his statement is reasonable. The situation itself is wrong. (Res No.104)

The new president understands the problem with the current coverage. The current coverage lacks objectivity and fairness, and has been shaped by public opinion. I can sympathize with him.(Res No.249)

In addition to these comments in defense of the NHK president, there was also criticism leveled at the Asahi Shimbun reports of the NHK controversy.

The Asahi Shimbun reporter is malicious. His reporting is a criminal act and abuse of his position and the power of mass media. It is unjust. He is despicable human scum. (Res No.404)<sup>7</sup>

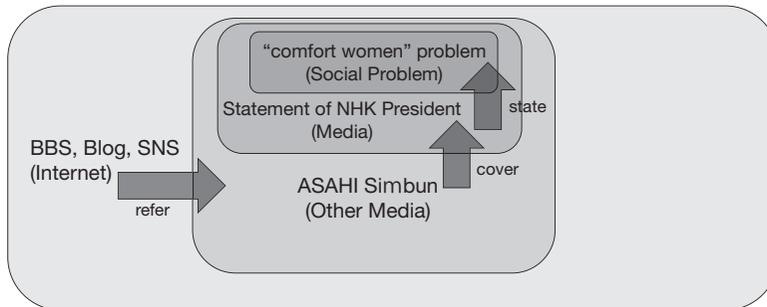
The Hokkaido Shimbun criticized the statement of the NHK president<sup>8</sup>. However, newspaper reports that criticized the president were in turn criticized on the internet:

Having newspapers that reflect the position of China and South Korea is not a good thing. (Res No.6)

There was also the view put forth on the internet that the statements of NHK president were induced by articles written by an Asahi Shimbun reporter. This led to internet users focusing on the identity of this reporter. On 2-channel a user commented that: “Apparently, the name of the (Asahi Shimbun) reporter has been identified. He is a 24-year-old reporter and his name seems to be Shindo Shou;” yet, the source of this information was not disclosed. The Asahi Shimbun denied that this claim was correct on their website<sup>9</sup>.

In this way, the focus of the controversy shifted from the statement of the NHK president, to criticism of the coverage of the Asahi Shimbun, to the identification of the Asahi Shimbun reporter (See figure 2). While the original issue—the “comfort women” problem—remained important, references to it diminished in the mass

Figure 2: The “Nested” Structure of Reality in Network Society:  
Multitier or Multiplex Reality



media.

## Discussion

Through the analysis of the media coverage of issues surrounding the management committee and chairman of NHK, as well as the reaction of internet users to the reports, the following inferences can be made.

I. Discussion on the role of NHK in public broadcasting is often a feature of mass media coverage. The Asahi Shimbun repeatedly criticized the controversial statement made by the NHK president. As one would expect, a conflict of opinion exists between newspapers.

II. With the spread of the internet in recent years, discussion on the role of NHK has intensified, not only in terms of speech as a counter to the mass media, but some writings criticize mass media coverage at the meta-level.

III. In regards to the “duality” of the construction of reality,” the “nested” statement by the NHK chairman in relation to the “comfort women” was conceived as a problem in newspapers, while the coverage and reports were seen as problems on the internet.

In sum, the act of discussing the mass media has been generalized by the diffusion of the internet. Scholarly researchers is not immune to this phenomenon as newspapers also publish the comments of experts in journalism research, and these comments are being relativized online.

Moreover, criticism of the mass media conducted on the net is increasingly bearing influence on the activities of the mass media itself. The Asahi Shimbun, for instance, felt the need to clarify that the rumored identity of the reporter was untrue.

In light of such trends, in internet society it will likely become progressively more difficult to organize discussions about the mass media. The recent discussion

over the NHK controversy clearly attests to this.

## NOTES

- 1 White Paper: Information and Communication in Japan 2013.
- 2 <http://www.dentsu.co.jp/news/release/pdf/cms/2014014-0220.pdf> (browse on December 10, 2014)
- 3 [http://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/summary/research/report/2013\\_04/20130403.pdf](http://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/summary/research/report/2013_04/20130403.pdf) (browse on December 10, 2014)
- 4 <http://www.chosakai.gr.jp/notification/pdf/report6.pdf> (browse on December 10, 2014)
- 5 <http://www.logsoku.com/r/newsplus/1390640138/> (browse on December 10, 2014)
- 6 <http://www.asahi.com/articles/ASG1T5J3XG1TUCVL005.html> (browse on December 10, 2014)
- 7 <http://www.logsoku.com/r/newsplus/1390906047/> (browse on December 10, 2014)
- 8 <http://l.moapi.net/http://www.hokkaido-np.co.jp/news/fourseasons/517759.html> (browse on August 25, 2014)
- 9 <http://www.j-cast.com/2014/01/30195560.html?p=2> (browse on December 10, 2014)

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