Chapter 64
Media Management in Disaster Events:
A Case Study of a Japanese Earthquake

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ABSTRACT

According to a survey by Goo Research (April 2011), the average Japanese person appears to have relied primarily on television news for gathering information in times of disaster, and as unlike a lot of overseas media, the public broadcaster NHK's news broadcasts were defined as very calm and measured. This chapter focuses on the NHK coverage of the earthquake and nuclear crisis in March 2011 compared with private channels' and specific websites' coverage with regard to specific events. The aim is to enlighten the ways and the tools through which Japanese Public Television played a double role: on one side it became a primary source of information for hard news and played a "service" role for the population in need; on the other side and with special regard to the coverage of the nuclear crisis, the duty to inform was balanced by the duty to reassure the public and promote harmony so that NHK privileged government and corporate statements about the Fukushima situation. The authors corroborate their study through an analysis of NHK's programming and private channels' changing schedules and advertising during the recent disaster. This chapter provides a concrete example of the potential television role in disaster mitigation, taking into account both the positive and critical aspects.

INTRODUCTION

The object of this study is the use of Japanese Public Television to manage and mitigate the earthquake consequences and the Fukushima situation. A preliminary analysis of the tools and strategies used by NHK to describe the earthquake and the tsunami occurred on March 11th and to inform people about their consequences, will demonstrate that the Japanese Pubcaster entered a "natural disaster mode" during the first week from the natural disaster. A follow up analysis of the official statements and documents released by NHK Media Department during the first week from the earthquake will help enlighten the main characteristics and functions of the so-called "natural disaster mode" and will demonstrate how this kind of coverage is innate to the NHK.

A sample analysis of the programming and contents of the week from March 11th to March 19th will demonstrate how in the NHK coverage of the disaster the duty to inform was balanced by the duty to reassure and promote harmony. With special regard to this last point we will perform a comparative analysis of specific events connected to the Fukushima incident as reported both by NHK and independent journalists on the Net.

This study aim at documenting a type of TV coverage we have defined as the "NHK natural disaster mode," in the belief that this model could represent a good practice to follow when covering a natural disaster and its immediate consequences. Despite its good features, though, this model has also shown some critical aspects when confronted with controversial situations, such as the Fukushima incident. As Japan's nuclear energy crisis continues to unfold at the Fukushima Daiichi power station, the news media have struggled to sort through confusing, and often conflicting, information about damage to the crippled plant and its threat to public safety.

BACKGROUND

Media Coverage of Japan's Disaster

The scholarship shows that the media can play a critical role before, during, and after crisis and/or disaster. The media are essential, for example, for warnings to be effective and may be the single most important source of public information in the wake of a disaster (Quarantelli, 1991). The scholarship, though, also shows that media reports that distort what happens in a disaster and lead to misunderstandings (Parker, 1980). Failure by officials to issue a warning, for example, may be a result of myths created by the media. Death, economic loss, human suffering, and social disruption are the standard themes in the media's portrayal of disaster (Smith, 1998). For the audience, the apparent image is one of total destruction (Wenger, James, & Faupel, 1980). Generally, researchers argue that media content tends to overemphasize the chaotic, non-social, irrational, and non-traditional aspects of the event (Adams, 1986).

Moreover, a review of Journalism textbooks suggests that the authors who deal with disaster coverage often state as fact what disaster scholars have shown to be inaccurate (Scanlon, 1998). For instance, researches have demonstrated that people find it easier to cope with the truth, with clear factual accounts of what is known about what is happening. It is lack of clarity and confusion not accuracy that makes persons uneasy (Quarantelli & Dynes, 1972). And yet, scholars researching the field found reporters felt it was their duty to shape their stories to avoid panic (Kueneman & Wright, 1976) and may downplay negative stories, especially in their own communities or be sympathetic to officials with the same goal (Rogers & Sood, 1981).

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