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Japan Quake Shakes TV: The Media Response to Catastrophe 日本の地震、TVを揺さぶる––惨事に対するメディアの反応

Philip J. Cunningham

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"Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please. We have just experienced an earthquake. Please move away from the buildings to an open area...We will provide more detailed information as soon as possible..."

The polite but authoritative "we" was the voice of the Tokyo DisneySea theme park in this instance, but similar, oddly reassuring warnings of peril were being echoed across Japan, mostly following the lead of television broadcaster NHK.

Japan has a thriving terrestrial broadcast television market, which in most cities comes down to half a dozen key players. To watch Tokyo's six main TV stations side by side, as media scholars sometimes do, is to be subjected to an overload of dazzling color, brightly-lit sets, short, snappy jingles, silly commercials and plodding documentaries.

When the biggest earthquake in memory hit Japan at 2:46 PM on the afternoon of March 11, 2011, it took less than ten minutes for the bright, cluttered screens to be drained of color, commercialism and fun. With a disaster unfolding, TV stations were under intense pressure to change the tone of their broadcasts.

To review broadcasts from that afternoon, is to be transported back to a turning point in which everything suddenly changed. The state of TV, as it existed at that precarious moment, good, bad and banal as it might have been, is now a broadcast relic, the last gasp of normalcy before the earth shook Japan to its core, the sea swept the Northeast with tsunamis and a nuclear crisis broke the easy access to electric power that has been a hallmark of modernity in Japan for decades.

Commercials, like them or not, are cultural statements if not technical works of art, but even the best of them quickly assumed a negative valence the moment disaster struck. On that fateful Friday afternoon, each station rushed to report, each in its own fashion, on the quake in real time even as the ground was still shaking.

As zero hour arrived, network TV was thrust into a series of startling juxtapositions and incongruent pairings. The audio babble alone was surreal, a wobbly wall of sound composed of overlapping jingles, earthquake bells, buzzers and alarms, bits of dramatic dialogue, background music, stentorian narration, and breathless news reports.

Japan's biggest TV station NHK, where I worked for a number of years as a writer, news polisher and producer, is a publicly supported broadcaster that also receives government funding -- and is sometimes criticized for an apparent lack of editorial independence for that reason -- was the first station to break into regular programming to report the big quake, just 12 seconds after the first jolt.

NHK interrupted its live coverage of a meeting in the Diet, Japan's parliament. Recordings taken from the cameras recording that session would later show famous lawmakers reacting to the quake, some standing about unfazed, others ducking for cover.

The flagship NHK is linked to a multitude of seismic data-collection sites across the archipelago and has a network of remote cameras ready in case of emergency, providing an unblinking view of public thoroughfares long before the advent of web-cams. Typically the remote lens offers a rooftop glimpse of urban scenery and close-ups of vital infrastructure, available to the studio at the flip of a switch.

As the designated go-to station for earthquakes and other natural disasters, NHK typically puts up graphics and comprehensive lists of hard-hit areas with magnitude readings, giving other stations a heads-up and time to react.

NTV, a medium sized station with a somewhat conservative take on the news, became the first of the commercial networks to take note of the earthquake, cutting from a short taped piece about Tokyo mayor Ishihara Shintaro to a live studio shot just after 2:48 that afternoon.

Despite this supple reaction, NTV coverage quickly reverted to a series of commercials, presumably pre-booked for that time slot. This included a pretty model demonstrating how to use mascara remover towelette and facial cleansing foam followed by an ad for an American insurance company with the logo "We're everyone's hospital."

TBS, another commercial station, broke the bad news next, not with a news report but just running text superimposed on top of the screen, clocking in just five seconds later than NTV. It saw no need to interrupt programming but continued to run its afternoon trendy drama, the sort of soap opera production/housewife fare for which the station is famous.

Meanwhile NHK was fully focused on the emergency, having gone from showing maps of the hard-hit regions in northeastern Honshu to live camera coverage of in-house presenters in the studio intercut with some shaky live views from train stations and tower tops in stricken areas. Tsunami warnings followed almost immediately.

Watching the other stations in simultaneity while NHK reported grim-faced on an earthquake of unprecedented magnitude, one was struck by just how many commercials and shifts of tone and mood can be squeezed into the span of a minute or two. But then, with an earthquake in progress, the hand of time seems to bend and slow down, if not halt entirely.

Ironically enough, one of the commercials is an exquisitely filmed travel pitch, about a fantasy escape to western Japan, which is exactly where rattled residents of Tokyo would seek to go in the days to come to get away from the twin perils of aftershocks and radiation.

About three minutes into the quake, the comparative coverage took on an eerie, unnerving quality. NHK panned the city skyline from a hard-shaking remote camera, while NTV showed a brief studio shot of violently swaying furniture and swinging light fixtures. Then, rather inexplicably, the latter shifted to a smooth, soothing commercial, zooming in on a fresh sliced cabbage, best eaten with a certain mayonnaise, followed by a tomato-themed ad for toothpaste meant to remedy swollen gums.

At the regional station, TV Tokyo, a timely earthquake alert flashed on the screen in a distinctly inauspicious manner. The bad news did not interrupt programming but was superimposed over an unconventional sales pitch for gravestones, featuring two comical middle-aged men, one in a tacky suit, the other in a graduation cap and gown talking about why you should only use the best grave stones because "A grave is your home for eternity."

Meanwhile TBS continued its trendy drama of lovingly photographed stylish actors dressed in black, while Fuji TV cut to an empty news desk with chairs rolling around uncontrollably; apparently a failed attempt at a live update, with lights and cameras ready to go but no people in view.

A few seconds later, by which time the off-shore epicenter of a huge quake had been identified on NHK, three soap operas were still up and running, along with a story about fishing. And a commercial for "Body Cooler" featured a sexy actress standing on a beach as a long, smooth blue wave crashed in the background.

By the time Fuji TV finally broke the news at 2:51 PM, the story was old and redundant. Its viewers already knew about the earthquake because the Tokyo region had been shaking underfoot for minutes. From this point on, four out of six channels were offering dedicated quake coverage.

TV Asahi, which produces good news programs and sometimes battles with NHK over political differences, was inexplicably slow at the switch. While pandemonium was breaking loose on the other channels, Asahi aired an ad for a 1950s drama, showing seaside scenes of a man and a child in period costume perched on rocks in front of crashing waves, intercut with quaint scenes set in snowy rural mountains. Next up was a coming attraction filled with apocalyptic imagery, billowing explosions, people running scared, roaring flames everywhere, engulfing the map of Japan superimposed on the screen in advance of an urgent news break.

Finally, around five minutes into the tremblor, the control room switched to a newsreader who looked straight into a wobbly camera, and with considerable poise, backed by a visibly frantic newsroom, began to announce the bad news.

Six and a half minutes after the quake started to rattle Tokyo, TV Tokyo continued to broadcast its scheduled program, a jaunty tale about three jokey TV personalities who decide to try their hand at fishing. There is a close-up of a striped fish writhing in a net, then tossed into a blue basket to exclamations of pleasure about what a beautiful fish it is. At that point, TV Tokyo at last cut to full-time earthquake coverage.

Broadcast record of six tv stations at the time of quake

In a single afternoon, Tokyo television coverage went, in short order, from scenes of happy people pouring cups of healthy instant green tea to grim-faced newscasters estimating death tolls, from sleek, seductive ads for cars photographed under immaculate conditions, to the flotsam of cars and jetsam of houses helplessly bobbing in a black tide. Glossy takes of starlets doing their makeup and comedians promoting luxury products were replaced in sequence by jumpy camera phone images of devastation and despair.

Just as the quake struck, an insurance commercial was aired featuring a loud, obnoxious duck decked out in a curly yellow wig. By an odd

coincidence, Gilbert Gottfried, the actor behind the voice of the Aflac duck in the related US commercial series was terminated a few days after the quake for making some callous jokes about real estate changes in Japan.

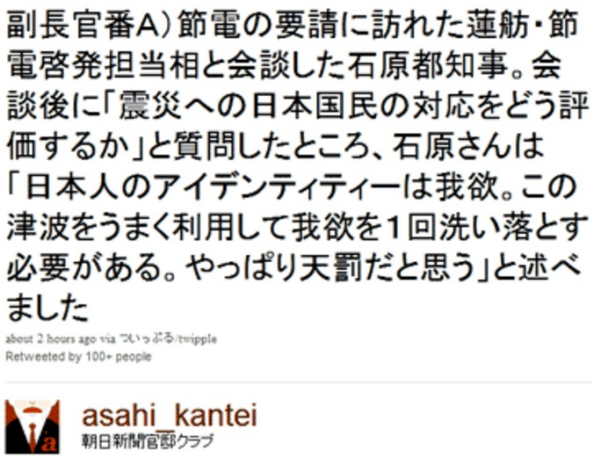
US Aflac ad featuring Gilbert Gottfried as voice of duck

Sample Aflac ad for Japanese market, different duck

One minute the screens were beaming with joyous young actresses singing the praise of hair coloring foam, female-only phone apps and aromatic laundry scents, the next the viewer was assaulted with sad, unadorned faces numb with shock and despair. One minute a convenience store chain urged viewers to "Start a New Life". Moments later the slogan sounded like a bad joke as small towns were shown being ripped asunder by rushing waters of unspeakable destructive power.

Sample footage from Tokyo at the time the quake struck

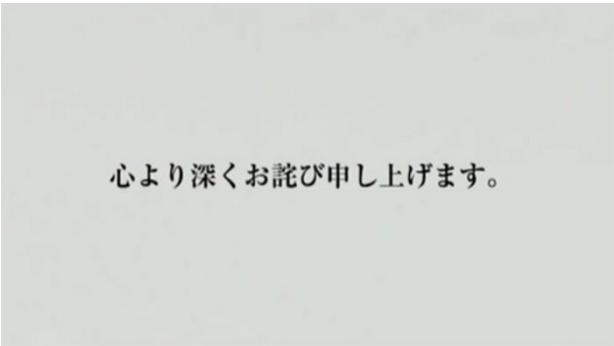
Three days after the quake and tsunami, Tokyo mayor Ishihara Shintaro may have nulled his chances for a fourth term as Tokyo mayor by telling Asahi Press Club journalists that the tsunami of March 11 was "tenbatsu" or "punishment from heaven" because the Japanese have become greedy and egotistical.



Asahi Kantei Twitter post on Ishihara Shintaro comments

How odd to hear a leader in a largely Buddhist country preach the wrath of God like a small town American fundamentalist (indeed, an American survey indicated that 38 percent of respondents viewed the quake's devastation as God's wrath). But Ishihara, who first acquired fame as a youth writer, is something of a populist, and his penchant for shocking off-the-cuff comments of the sort a more thoughtful, cautious politician would be loathe to make, is part of his idiosyncratic persona. Still, he was enough of a politician to apologize after the posting of his comments on Twitter raised a storm of protest.

In days that followed the quake and tsunami, public service announcements began to take the place of commercials, as broadcasters returned to airing taped shows with time slots that advertisers were reluctant to fill. But the anodyne messages offered by Japan's advertising council also began to irritate viewers, due to the banality of the themes, such as rabbits and other cute cartoon animals teaching the value of making friends by exchanging polite greetings.



Tepco's tastefuly crafted non-apology apology

Ad Council Public Service Announcement after the quake

So many viewers complained about the predictable punch line, brought to you by the advertising council or "A.C." that finally the end credit was dropped. The fact that complaints reached a threshold at which the normally one-way conversation between advertiser and viewer became a heated dialogue attests to the mounting frustration and quiet rage felt by ordinary Japanese as they watched the Fukushima Daiichi disaster unfold on television.

One company that showed a rare willingness to advertise during these depressing days is none other than the Tokyo Electric Power Company, or TEPCO, the company most responsible for negligence and lack of adequate safety procedures at the dangerously radioactive Fukushima complex. It might seem brazen for TEPCO to advertise when it itself is the topic of the nightly news, but it is engaged in a desperate PR battle to save its deteriorating reputation and stock valuation at a time when both are in free fall.
TEPCO's non-apology apology looked like the notice for a wake, consisting of white lettering on a black background, apologizing for the inconvenience in highly formulaic terms that clarified nothing about the company's responsibilities for the disaster and neither named nor depicted the company's president.

Tepco's public relations commercial on "Inconvenience"

Shima Kosaku, the ultimate salaryman

The spot was appropriately subdued, after all, TEPCO has long courted some of the best-paid copy artists, advertising executives and even manga artists in the business, such as Hirokane Kenji, famous for his long-running salaryman series "Shima Kosaku," also produced "Genshi-chan" or Lil' Atom as a TEPCO mascot.

Genshi-Chan The Ultimate Lil' Atom

Under the spell of its own overarching corporate vision embracing the unlimited power of a nuclear future, TEPCO has demonstrated in some of its questionable business decisions, short cuts and cover-ups risking the lives of its employees, a willingness to take calculated risks to meet the admittedly voracious demand for electric power in Tokyo and the surrounding megalopolis.

Tepco ad for the energy rich good life (before the quake)

Greater Tokyo region brightly lit up by Tepco

Far from being a stranger to advertising, TEPCO is a "generous" sponsor of television programming. The huge corporation, Japan's largest energy firm, has scores of subsidiaries and an ample war chest to buy the best public relations and legal protection in the business. Its "generous" support for commercial television and advertising in print has given it more than a modicum of protection from hard-hitting journalism, not unlike the unspoken power of the American tobacco and oil industries that use advertising and sponsorship to sanitize their image and deflect serious inquiry.

But you won't learn much about that, on public television NHK. NHK, not unlike America's NPR, might be largely free of direct commercial pressures, but it is not free of influence. Both organizations share a finger in the wind quality of being over-sensitive to flavor-of-the-month political correctness. But NHK dwarfs NPR in terms of budget, reach and influence and it enjoys direct governmental links that make it more akin to VOA or Radio Free Europe.

Best described as a quasi-governmental entity, NHK enjoys de facto, if not de jure status as the voice of Japan. By pedigree and tradition it is the platform by which Japan speaks to the nation and the world. It was the home of Tokyo Rose during the Pacific War and when Emperor Hirohito made his famous announcement at the close of World War 2, he was talking to NHK. Even today it dominates coverage of Diet Sessions, Sumo wrestling, diplomatic news and, after the Tohoku earthquake, a special message from Emperor Akihito.

Emperor Akihito address the people in wake of disaster

While NHK hires journalists by the dozen, and produces many thoughtful, reflective documentaries, it is dependent enough on government funding to fill its budget gap that it goes easy on governmental policy and large corporations that enjoy bureaucratic support.

Quasi-governmental NHK projects a mild-mannered persona, walking the narrow line between a willingness to report and an unwillingness to offend. It could also be described as a quasi-journalistic entity, given that it offers a media mix of fresh, original programming along with gun-shy cancellation of controversial programs and government influenced news product.

Still, NHK stands head and shoulders above the rest as the earthquake and disaster channel par excellence, thanks as much to its own vast information collecting infrastructure, with bureaus, reporters and cameras across the country, and significantly, due to its government-authorized links with Japan's Meteorological Agency and Ministry of Transport.

That's why it's a good place to turn for government and corporate statements about the earthquake and tsunami, but not a good place to learn about corporate malfeasance that worsens the toll of nature's fury and creates entirely man-made disasters. As former NHK television journalist Kamanaka Hitomi found, NHK was so loath to take on Japan's nuclear power industry when she was producing a news story on the topic that she quit in protest and has campaigned against nuclear power plants ever since. An insightful indictment of the formidable "power elite" that she was up against can be found in Andrew DeWit's recent article on Japan's power elite, that is the link between Tepco and other large utilities and government regulators.

Having spent three years in the studios and newsrooms of NHK in Tokyo, followed by a sojourn at CCTV in China, I can attest to the notion that NHK broadcast news, while more hard-hitting and thorough than that of its Chinese counterpart, is alike in the sense that it shares a hybrid broadcasting mission in which the duty to inform is balanced by the duty to reassure the public and promote harmony.

Although opponents of nuclear power still face an uphill battle in fossil-fuel poor, energy-hungry Japan, there have long been strong individual voices, from Okinawa to Hokkaido speaking out about the dangers of harnessing for electricity generation the terrible power that reduced Hiroshima and Nagasaki to cinders.

Adding to an enormous and profound body of work on the topic of things nuclear, Oe Kenzaburo has just commented on the 3.11 crisis, linking it in a trinity with the atomic bombs dropped on Japan and Pacific atomic tests conducted by the US military. (http://www.newyorker.com/talk/2011/03/28/110328ta_talk_oe)

As a result of grievous damage to national infrastructure and power shortfalls, Japan will be pressed to find ways to lessen its dangerous dependence on nuclear power. Tokyo, where rolling blackouts are setting the tone for a new, less energy dependent lifestyle, is on the front line, confronting out of necessity its materialistic, energy-guzzling lifestyle square on.

There is no going back. The fantasy world depicted on Japanese TV just as the quake struck is a freeze-frame, a snapshot in time, of a time and place that has been changed irrevocably by the force of nature and the follies of man.

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Recommended citation: Philip J Cunningham, "Japan Quake Shakes TV: The Media Response to Catastrophe," The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol 9, Issue 13 No 6, March 28, 2011