

Media Coverage of Fukushima, Ten Years Later

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Abstract: *When taking up the unlearned lessons of Fukushima, one of the biggest may have been the need for more robust oversight of the nuclear industry. In Japan, the failure of the major national news media to scrutinize the industry and hold it accountable was particularly glaring. Despite their own claims to serve as watchdogs on officialdom, the major media have instead covered Japan’s powerful nuclear industry with a mix of silent complicity and outright boosterism. This is true both before and after the Fukushima disaster. In the decades after World War II, when the nuclear industry was established, media played an active role in overcoming public resistance to atomic energy and winning at least passive acceptance of it as a science-based means for Japan to secure energy autonomy.*

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During the Fukushima disaster, the media served government objectives such as preservation of social order by playing down the size of the accident and severity of radiological releases, resulting in widely divergent coverage from serious overseas media. While a short-lived proliferation of more critical and independent coverage followed the disaster, the old patterns returned with a vengeance after the installment of the pro-nuclear administration of Abe Shinzō. This article will examine the roots of the Japanese media’s failure to challenge or scrutinize the nuclear industry, and how this complicity has played out in the post-Fukushima era. It will use a historical analysis to look at how the current patterns of media coverage were actually established in the immediate postwar period, and the formation of public support for civilian nuclear power.

During my 15 years as a foreign correspondent in Tokyo, including a six-year stint as Tokyo bureau chief of *The New York Times* (2009-2015), I often covered the same news events as Japanese journalists, standing shoulder-to-shoulder at more press conferences than we’d care to count. While I admire many Japanese colleagues individually as journalists, I was frequently struck by the shortcomings of Japan’s big domestic media and Japanese journalism as an institution.

But never did I feel these structural weaknesses as keenly as I did in the tense weeks that followed the triple meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station.

In Minami-soma, a city 25 kilometers north of the stricken plant, where some 20,000 remaining residents were cut off from supplies of food, fuel and medicines, I discovered that journalists from major Japanese media were nowhere to be seen. They had withdrawn from Minami-soma, forbidden by their editors in Tokyo from approaching within 30 or 40 kilometers of Fukushima Daiichi.

By doing so, they had essentially abandoned the already isolated residents. But you would never know that from the media's stories, which made no mention of their own pull out or the perceived risks that had prompted this retreat. Instead, the main newspaper articles uniformly repeated official reassurances that there was no cause for alarm because the radiation posed "no immediate danger to human health," as the chief cabinet secretary at the time, Edano Yukio, so famously put it.¹

The mismatch between word and deed—between what the newspapers were telling their audiences and what they were actually doing to protect their own journalists—was glaring. It turned out that this was only the first of several instances during the Fukushima disaster where I witnessed Japan's major media adhering to the official narrative regardless of the facts on the ground. I refer to this phenomenon as "media capture," borrowing from the more widely used term "regulatory capture," which is used to describe a similar failure of government oversight of the nuclear industry.

Over the months and years that followed the meltdowns, I saw numerous instances of national media refusing to take a critical or distanced stance in their coverage of the nuclear industry and its government regulators. Instead, they repeatedly chose to internalize the official narratives and even adhere to the government-approved language. We saw this in the widely diverging narratives that started appearing in the serious foreign press versus the major domestic media as the accident worsened.

To cite a straightforward example, we started using the word "meltdown" within hours of the first reactor building explosion at the plant, reflecting the almost unanimous view of outside experts that a melting fuel core was the only realistic source of the hydrogen that caused the blast. However, the domestic national dailies and NHK avoided the word "meltdown" (in Japanese, *merutodaun*) for months, following the insistence of the Ministry of Economics, Trade and Industry (METI), the powerful government agency that both promoted and regulated Japan's nuclear industry, that a meltdown had not been confirmed. The big Japanese media used other official euphemisms as well, including "explosion-like event" to describe the massive blast at the Unit 3 reactor building, which blew chunks of concrete hundreds of feet into the air.

In fact, I even had Japanese journalists calling me to berate me and my newspaper for using the M-word without METI's permission. Readers of the Japanese national dailies didn't see the M-word until mid-May, when METI and the plant's operator, Tokyo Electric Power Co. or TEPCO, conceded in public that Fukushima Daiichi had indeed suffered a meltdown in mid-March—three meltdowns, in fact.

In the chapter that I wrote for *Legacies of Fukushima: 3.11 in Context*, I tried to explain some of the reasons why the civilian nuclear power industry could have such a peculiarly strong grip on the media and their narratives. The nuclear industry was a national project

that was promoted by the powerful central ministries as a silver bullet for resource-poor Japan's dependence on imported energy. This gave it an elevated status as the elite bureaucrats guided Japan's postwar recovery and economic take-off.

I looked at the media's dependence on Tokyo's powerful central ministries, which takes its most visible form in the so-called *kisha kurabu*, or "press clubs." These are arrangements that allow national media to station their journalists inside the ministries and agencies, where they are given their own room and exclusive access to officials. Much of the reporting by the major Japanese media starts in the *kisha kurabu*, where journalists gather to wait for the next press conference or off-record briefing from officials. The *kisha kurabu* system fosters a passive form of journalism, in which reporters become dependent on the ministry within which they are embedded. In pursuit of a scoop that can make or break a career, the journalists compete for handouts from ministry officials. All too often, they enter a Faustian bargain in which the journalists swap narrative control in exchange for exclusive access to information. The result is a passive form of access journalism that ends up repeating spoon-fed official narratives.

I also looked to the past at the emergence of newspapers like the *Asahi Shimbun* during the early to mid-Meiji era, when the national priority was to protect autonomy by finding a way to catch the industrialized West. I argued that this history baked into the mindset of Japanese journalists a feeling of responsibility for the fate of their nation, including its vital energy needs. It also led to an identification with the government, and particularly the elite officialdom, as protectors of Japan and its people from predatory foreign powers. This inclination to side with the state has continued in the postwar period, when journalists have clearly seen themselves as members of a national elite attached to a broader bureaucratic-led system.

One point that I wanted to underscore was that this media capture was not something so simple or venal as corruption. This is how it is often portrayed by critical Japanese writers, usually freelancers and book authors, who focus on the so-called Nuclear Village, a nexus of business, government, labor unions, academia and news media linked by the cash flowing out of the highly profitable nuclear plants. While money doubtlessly plays a role in many of these relationships, including perhaps the for-profit commercial TV broadcasters, I see no direct evidence that it sways the coverage of the national newspapers. These are privately held companies for whom advertising is a much less important revenue source than subscriptions (or the rent from their valuable real estate holdings in central Tokyo and Osaka).

Regardless of the cause, the result has been generations of postwar journalists who have consistently failed to serve as watchdogs on one of the nation's most politically powerful industries.² Starting in the 1990s, public scandals started plaguing the industry, and TEPCO in particular. In 2002, government inspectors announced that TEPCO had been routinely falsifying safety reports to hide minor incidents and equipment problems at reactors including several at Fukushima Daiichi. TEPCO eventually admitted to more than 200 such violations stretching back to 1977. Five years later, TEPCO revealed even more cover-ups of safety issues, which the company had failed to report in the previous inquiry.

Despite what was clearly a chronic and systemic failure of both internal compliance and government oversight, no one was arrested or charged, and the existing regulatory framework left unchanged. The media could have played a role of holding the regulators'

feet to the fire by exposing the structural problems behind this abysmal record of obfuscation and cover-ups. Instead, the watchdogs chose to remain largely silent, reporting on the government's revelations, but making few efforts at independent investigative reporting.

Of course, such criticisms enjoy the benefits of hindsight, with the accident in 2011 making it easier to see these failures as part of a broader narrative that leads inevitably to Fukushima. But how about after 2011, when the severity of the disaster led to numerous calls for reform? During that time, the national media have also been held up to uncomfortable scrutiny by a jaded and distrustful public, who felt betrayed by their early coverage of the accident.

Unfortunately, ten years later, nothing seems to have changed.

This was apparent in mid-April of 2021, when the Japanese government announced a decision to release into the Pacific Ocean more than 1.2 million tons of radioactive water that has been building up in hundreds of huge metal tanks on the grounds of the Fukushima Daiichi plant. (The accumulation of contaminated water has plagued the plant from the early days of the disaster. TEPCO has resorted to some high-tech solutions with mixed results, including a mile-long "ice wall" of frozen dirt that failed to fully block the water, much of which flows into the plant from underground.)

The water stored in these tanks contains tritium, a radioactive isotope of hydrogen that is best known for its military use as the fuel for thermonuclear warheads (hence the term "hydrogen bomb"). On the spectrum of radioactive substances, tritium emits relatively low levels of radiation in form of beta particles. But it is a radioactive substance nonetheless, a fact that major media played down or even omitted by choosing, once again, to adopt the industry and government's language to describe the dump. The main news stories in the major national newspapers and TV broadcasts used the official term for this water, which is *shorisui*, or "treated water."

While technically correct, this term euphemistically glosses over the fact that this is not the same as, say, treated sewage water. Nor does treated water convey the fact that this water still contains a radionuclide that emits beta radiation.

One result was an interesting battle of words that pitted the mainstream media, which used the approved "treated water," against journalists who were outside the press club's inner circle. These publications and web sites chose to use clearer terms such as *osensui*, or "contaminated water." The leftist daily *Tokyo Shimbun*, a smaller regional newspaper that has stood out for its more critical coverage of the nuclear disaster, compromised by calling the water *osenshorisui*, or "contaminated treated water."³

More eye-opening was the fact that there were actually efforts to enforce use of the officially approved term. As many journalists discovered, there was an army of social media trolls at ready to pile onto anyone with the temerity to use more critical terminology, and particularly "contaminated water." TEPCO and the government mobilized university experts and PR professionals to police the public sphere for use of words that were deemed "unscientific" and "ideological."

Of course, the choice of the word "treated" is itself also highly political. It buttressed the larger message put forth by the government and the plant's operator that the release of this

water was no cause for alarm, but something very common and normal that nuclear plants around the world do all the time. By accepting the official terminology, the media were implicitly adopting this framing of the issue, which focused on the claim that the water could be diluted to the point of being harmless when dumped into the Pacific.

Scientifically, this is a valid claim. My point here is not to take sides. Rather, I am criticizing the large domestic media for failing to do the same: i.e., not take sides. By adopting the official narrative, the media were complicit in the government's and TEPCO's exclusion of other, also valid counterarguments. One of the biggest is the fact that this release is anything but normal. No nuclear plant has ever conducted an orchestrated release of such a huge quantity of tritium-laden water. (At the time of writing, the amount, 1.2 million tons, is enough to fill almost 500 Olympic-sized swimming pools.) Worse, the release is to be carried out in the same closed, opaque manner as the rest of Japan's decade-long response to the disaster. Unless TEPCO and METI break with past precedent to allow full international oversight to verify that the water is as clean as they claim it is, we are left once again to trust actors who have consistently violated public faith.

Just as importantly, there are valid reasons to at least question whether the water is as clean as TEPCO says it is. The company has been telling us for years that it has installed state-of-the-art treatment and filtration technologies that scrub the water of every radioactive particle except tritium. However, in 2018, the plant operator suddenly revealed that 75% of the treated water at the plant still contained excessive amounts of other, more radioactive substances including strontium 90, a dangerous isotope that can embed itself in the living tissue of human bones.⁴

To be fair, TEPCO may be right in its assessment of the water's safety. Even so, it is the job of conscientious journalists to take a skeptical attitude toward such claims until they can be independently verified. The media also need to remind why this is necessary, given the company's and the industry's history of cover-ups. My goal here is to fault the major domestic media for once again failing to do this, despite the bitter lessons of 2011. Adopting the language of METI and TEPCO privileges the official perspective over others. It shows that the journalists are internalizing the official framing of the event and how it should be discussed and understood.

Officialdom is thus allowed to set the boundaries of public debate, excluding more critical perspectives as "political," "unscientific" or even "foreign." The last characterization reflects the fact that the Chinese and South Korean governments raised some of the loudest objections to the release. The media have tended to frame these as the latest in a litany of self-serving complaints by Asian rivals that like to accuse Japan of failing to apologize for World War II-era atrocities. While Beijing and Seoul may have political motives for seizing on the water issue, this shouldn't be a reason for journalists to avoid taking up more substantive criticisms about the release. Opposition has appeared in many other countries and reflects the failure of Japan to consult with other nations that share the Pacific Ocean, which will be the site of the mass water dump.

This is a failure by media, once again, to inform their readers of the existence of alternative narratives that take a dimmer view of the actions taken by Japan's officialdom, or that point out where government interests diverge from those of Japan's public. This is also a failure of a different sort: of media to protect their own intellectual independence. By uncritically adopting the official narratives, the journalists are relinquishing the right to frame in their

issues. This surrendering of agency is the central fact of the media capture that I described above.

To be clear, Japan is not unique in suffering from the problem of media capture. The press in other democratic countries face similar challenges. In the United States, we use the term “access journalism” to describe the pitfalls of journalists, often in Washington, who trade autonomy for exclusive access to official sources. However, Japan’s version of access journalism is more extreme, producing a uniformly monolithic coverage closer to that in non-democratic societies. The most apt American equivalent may be the period of extreme patriotic fervor between the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, when U.S. media failed to adequately challenge the erroneous claims of the Bush administration that Iraq was in possession of weapons of mass destruction.

In Japan’s ongoing Fukushima disaster, this lack of agency manifests itself as a failure to not only set the narrative, but even to decide what is newsworthy. Most of the coverage is essentially an act of regurgitating the information that was distributed at the ministry’s *kisha kurabu*. Since the news reports are based on information received from ministry officials, not surprisingly they usually showcase the actions of those officials. Both the pages of Japan’s national dailies and the evening news broadcasts of NHK are filled with stories of Japanese officialdom in action, solving some problem or punishing some wrongdoer. Most news reports are mini-dramas in which officials play the starring role. As such, they serve as demonstrations that agency lies in the elite bureaucracies at the center of the postwar Japanese state, and not the major media, which seems to serve as an appendage.

Even when critical stories appear, they are rarely the work of enterprising reporters unearthing facts that the powerful would rather keep covered. Rather, the revelations tend to come from official actors when they have decided to take action against malfeasance. One example was TEPCO’s cover-ups, mentioned earlier, which were exposed by nuclear regulators, not investigative reporters. A more recent example is revelations that started to become public in March 2021 of years of security lapses at the huge Kashiwazaki-Kariwa nuclear plant in Niigata, facing the Sea of Japan. Over the next two months, news stories dribbled out about workers who were able to access the sensitive areas around the plant’s nuclear reactors without proper ID. In one case in 2015, a man entered the reactor area using the ID of his father, who also worked at the plant. Once again, there lapses were not exposed by intrepid reporters but regulators themselves, who leaked them to prepare the public for their decision to reject TEPCO’s request to restart the plant.⁵

The lack of media agency is all the more glaring because there have been very notable exceptions. Japan’s journalists have shown that they are capable of true investigative reporting that can define and drive the public narrative. For a brief window of time during the early years of the Fukushima disaster, some major Japanese media experimented with more autonomous journalism. This began in the late summer of 2011, as public disillusionment in the domestic press’s compliant coverage grew. This prompted some media to try to re-engage readers with more hard-hitting reports that challenged the official claims.

The most notable of these efforts was launched by the *Asahi Shimbun*, Japan’s second-largest daily, which beefed up a new reporting group dedicated to investigative journalism. (By investigative journalism, I mean journalists taking the initiative to pry out hidden truths and assemble these into original, factual narratives that challenge the versions of reality put

forth by the powerful.) The *Asahi's* investigative division got off to a strong start by winning Japan's most prestigious press award two years in a row. It scored what it trumpeted as its biggest coup in May 2014, when two of its reporters wrote a front-page story that exposed the dangerously poor crisis management at the plant as it teetered on the brink of catastrophe. The story revealed that the government had hidden testimony by the Fukushima Daiichi plant's manager during the accident, Yoshida Masao, who later died of cancer. It also recounted what it said was the most explosive revelation of this secret testimony: that hundreds of workers and staff had fled the crippled plant at the most dangerous point in the disaster, despite the fact that Yoshida never gave them the order to leave.

However, the *Asahi* erred by giving the story a misleading headline, which left readers with the impression that the workers had fled in defiance of Yoshida's order to stay. (In fact, Yoshida himself says in the testimony that his order didn't reach these workers—a stunning breakdown in command and control that was lost in the subsequent blow up over the article.) This misstep gave critics the opening that they needed to try to discredit the entire story, and by extension the newspaper's proactive coverage of the disaster. A host of critics, including the prime minister himself and the rest of the mainstream media, set upon the *Asahi* with unusual ferocity. After weeks of withering attacks, which essentially accused the newspaper of lacking patriotism and of belittling the heroic plant workers, the *Asahi's* president made a dramatic surrender in September 2014, retracting the entire article, gutting the investigative team and resigning his own job to take responsibility for the fiasco.⁶

Thus marked the end of the *Asahi's* short-lived foray into investigative journalism, which I have described in more detail in this journal.⁷ Suffice it to say here that when forced to make a choice, the *Asahi*, the nation's leading liberal voice favored by the intelligentsia, chose to remain on the boat. To preserve the privileged insider status as a member of the *kisha kurabu* media, the newspaper chose to sacrifice not only its biggest reporting accomplishment of the disaster, but also the journalists who produced it, who were sent into humiliating internal exile. For years afterward, the newspaper shunned proactive reporting on Fukushima, staying within safe confines of the official storyline.

The *Asahi's* biggest mistake was its failure to stand behind its journalists. Investigative reporting is by nature a highly risky undertaking, and one that pits a handful of underpaid journalists against some of the most powerful members of society. By not only failing to stand up for its investigative reporters but trying to scapegoat them by punishing them for the mistakes in coverage, the *Asahi* sent a chilling message to all mainstream journalists: Newspapers don't have your back. In such an environment, what journalists in their right mind would want to challenge the powers that be?

Admirably, some of the *Asahi's* investigative reporters did stand their ground even at the cost of their careers at the newspaper. Soon after the debacle, two of the investigative group's top reporters quit to launch Japan's first NGO dedicated to investigative journalism, which in 2021 was renamed Tokyo Investigative Newsroom Tansa.⁸ Another resigned to join [Facta](#), a Japanese magazine dedicated to investigative coverage (and offering stories that cannot be found in the large national newspapers). These decisions to place principle over company and career underscore my broader point: The sources of Japan's media capture are bigger than the individual reporters and embedded in the structure of media institutions

and the practice in Japan of journalism itself.

The *Asahi's* capitulation in 2014 marked the end of not just the *Asahi's* but all the mainstream media's efforts to create new, more critical narratives of the Fukushima disaster. These days, most reporting tends to fall into one of a few prepackaged, safely uncontroversial storylines. There is the Fukushima 50 narrative of successfully overcoming Japan's biggest trial since World War II. Another is the "baseless rumors" (*fuhyō higai*) narrative, which casts fears of radiation as over-exaggerated, and usually the creation of women, leftists and foreigners.

Journalists have told me that the *Asahi's* surrender created a powerful prohibition on critical coverage. Having seen what happened to Japan's leading liberal newspaper, and the star reporters there who lost their careers, few journalists have the stomach to challenge the status quo. The result is a grim new conformity.

Adding to the pressure to toe the line has been the appearance post-Fukushima of another new, problem-plagued national project: the Tokyo Summer Olympics, originally scheduled for 2020. Coverage of the Olympics has again tended to adhere to official narratives, even as public misgivings grew in Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide's decision to go forward with the Games a year later, in 2021, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic.

From the start, the government has used the Olympics to divert attention from Fukushima while proclaiming that the disaster is now in the past. While there has been critical coverage, it has been the exception and not the rule. Indeed, the media's silence was deafening when the previous prime minister, Abe Shinzō, told the International Olympic Committee in Buenos Aires in September 2013 that the plant's "situation was under control," even as contaminated water was then still bleeding into the Pacific.

By failing to take the initiative in Fukushima, the media have ended up supporting official efforts to use the Games to put the lid back on the nuclear disaster. The Olympics have become yet one more means for Japan's elites to regain control of the public sphere, or at least the part of it controlled by the big legacy media. (They have had less success asserting control over the much more anarchic and anonymous world of social media.)

The media's reluctance to challenge the government has also been apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic. I'm still waiting for the investigative articles that expose the truth behind Tokyo's biggest failures during the pandemic. The major media emitted barely a peep in response to the government's blatantly discriminatory decision during the first six months of the pandemic to close Japan's borders to all foreign nationals, including long-term residents, while allowing Japanese nationals to come and go. More importantly, I would be the first in line to read an investigative exposé into what delayed the roll out of vaccines in Japan.

All too often, coverage of COVID-19 ended up repeating the pattern that we saw in Fukushima. The media once again surrendered their biggest public asset: their power to challenge the official narrative and expose the facts that officials don't want us to know. Instead, the major domestic media once again show themselves more interested in preserving their privileged insider status. By doing so, they once again do a disservice of their readers.

The need to serve their readers by finding an independent and critical voice should have

been the media's biggest takeaway from Fukushima. Instead, they appear to be merely repeating the mistakes of a decade ago.

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Notes

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² Jomaru, 2012.

³ Ogawa, 2021.

⁴ Brown and Darby, 2021.

⁵ Kyodo, 2021.

⁶ Fackler, 2016.

⁷ Fackler, 2016.

⁸ Tansa, 2021.

Featured image: Yuji Onuma had come up with the slogan for the gate that originally hung above the entrance to his home village of Futaba, north of the reactors at Fukushima. It said, "Atomic Power: Energy for a bright future." After the disaster, he went back, with a new, handwritten correction in red, "Atomic Power: Energy for a DESTRUCTIVE future." Image courtesy of Yuji Onuma

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