

# Media and Politics in Japan: Fukushima and Beyond

Martin Fackler

Tokyo Bureau Chief, *New York Times*

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### Introduction

This document is a summary of a presentation on media and politics in Japan, which was delivered by Martin Fackler, Tokyo Bureau Chief of the *New York Times*, on 6 November 2014 at Chatham House.

The event was chaired by John Swenson-Wright, Head of the Asia Programme at Chatham House.

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### Martin Fackler

The speaker started by thanking the chair and the audience for coming to Chatham House. He explained that the relationship between media and politics in Japan was a topic both complex and multifaceted, which would have allowed him to speak, for instance, about the state secrecy law or the 'war on the *Asahi Shimbun*'. However, he had chosen to start the discussion with Fukushima, i.e. the nuclear meltdown resulting from the earthquake and tsunami of 11 March 2011, because he believed the latter represented a defining, watershed moment in Japan's recent history with regard to the relationship between the country's media and both its government and public.

Fackler expressed his view that Fukushima had been a real turning point in creating public distrust towards the major Japanese media, and to a lesser degree had contributed to an adversarial relationship – a rupture even – between the media, in particular the *Asahi Shimbun*, and the government.

He clarified that, although the term 'media' covered a wide spectrum in Japan, he would use the term in order to make reference to the country's six largest newspapers as well as the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK). Fackler pointed out that, in combination, these outlets exerted a disproportionate amount of influence in Japan, an influence unlike anything he had known in the US. Leaving aside digital metrics, the major Japanese dailies were by far the world's largest newspapers, with the *Yomiuri Shimbun* claiming a daily circulation of 10 million, followed by the *Asahi Shimbun* with 8 million. The *New York Times*, in comparison, claimed approximately 1 million on weekdays, and 1.5 million on Sundays. Fackler observed that it was remarkable how little the Japanese media landscape had changed, both before and after Fukushima. If one had compiled a list of the most important, serious Japanese newspapers in 1990, the speaker claimed, it would have been the same as today. In the US, by contrast, comparative lists would have rendered entirely different results. Furthermore, although the internet had also impacted on Japan, it had done so at a much slower pace, and with less intensity than in the US, the Japanese language perhaps having been a barrier.

However, the speaker argued that Fukushima had changed Japan's media landscape in one important respect: on the eve of the triple disaster, as media consumers the public had been rather naive, and far less sceptical towards their media than their US or British counterparts. For instance, the Japanese public had taken nearly everything that was on television to be true. But the Fukushima accident had changed this attitude: Japanese media consumers, Fackler claimed, had not only become much more sceptical towards their national media, but had also been driven to the internet, searching for alternative news

sources. Thus, he believed that the Fukushima nuclear accident might have been a 'big bang' in terms of media scepticism.

The speaker explained to the audience that he had been in Tokyo, approximately 250 km from the epicentre, when the earthquake had hit Japan and unleashed a terrifying tsunami. He had spent the following two months in northeast Japan, and had seen the full extent to which the coastline had been damaged from Miyako to the northern Ibaragi prefecture. Whereas the tsunami had reached nearly 40 metres near Miyako, the flood wave's average height had been 12–15 metres, which was about the height of the wave that had hit the Fukushima Daiichi plant. This had been among the world's largest nuclear power plants, with six reactors in one location on the Pacific coast. Following the earthquake and tsunami, three of these reactors had incurred fatal damage to their cooling systems, causing them to melt down.

In terms of the relationship between media and politics, the Japanese government had earned a lot of criticism in the days and weeks following the accident for failing to disclose information about what exactly had happened. The speaker believed that for the first 10 days or so following the accident, journalists had received better information from Washington than from Tokyo. The information coming from the US at the time had been largely correct. Mr Fackler observed the peculiarity of a situation in which a foreign country was releasing better information relevant to a country's public health than was that country's own government.

The speaker continued by observing that, following the meltdown, the main messages in Japan's media had downplayed the dangers to public health, cautioning the public not to panic, and at times blaming foreign media for exaggerating existing problems. Fackler illustrated this point with a short anecdote:

Some two weeks after the accident, he had ventured to Minamisoma, a city of about 75,000 people some 25 km north of the nuclear plant. Amid some excitement at the sight of a journalist, he had been ushered to the town's mayor without delay – something highly unusual in Japan – who had given him two hours of his time. The reason for this, Fackler explained, had been the fact that the mayor had been furious with the Japanese news media, who had abandoned his city. The mayor had explained that all journalists had fled the city on 12 March, i.e. the day after the accident, and had kept their distance ever since, reporting only via telephone. Having read that morning in a prominent Japanese newspaper that the situation was under control, the speaker had been surprised to learn that the very same newspaper's journalists had run away.

At this point, he explained, Fackler had for the first time felt with certainty that something was wrong. It had become obvious to him that what the newspaper knew – or at least believed – and what it reported had been at odds. In the months following the accident, the speaker had observed many Japanese experiencing similar feelings.

For the public, among the most important moments in this respect had been the discovery of 'Speedi', a computer system built by the government of Japan, at great cost, during the 1980s–90s. Speedi was an emergency computer system designed to predict, on the basis of meteorological data, the course of a radioactive plume's potential course following a nuclear accident, the idea having been to evacuate the population located in the plume's course. But although Speedi had been producing maps and charts following the Fukushima accident, these had not been made available to the public. In fact, Fackler observed, nobody had really seemed to be aware of Speedi's existence. To illustrate this point, the speaker turned to Namie, a small town of 12,000–15,000 people in close proximity to the Fukushima plant. After the first explosion, the people of Namie had fled northwest. Had they had access to Speedi, they would

have known that this was the very worst place to go. Fackler related that, on finding out months later, Namie's citizens had been outraged. The town's mayor had told the *New York Times* that, in his view, the failure to release Speedi data to his town had been equivalent to murder. Fackler pointed out that, against the background of Japanese politicians' circumspection *vis-à-vis* the media, this quote powerfully illuminated the prevailing anger. The *New York Times* had written about Namie in early August, and other international media had followed suit the following week. However, the first major Japanese newspaper to cover the story had been the *Mainichi Shimbun*, which had done so some two weeks after the *New York Times*. The *Asahi Shimbun* had started reporting the story only in October. Thus, while it had taken a while for Japanese to learn about Speedi, the latter had since become known throughout the country.

The speaker explained that, on learning of Speedi, many Japanese had blamed the government, partially in response to the logic of several government officials, who had claimed that they had wanted to avoid a panic. According to some, the speaker continued, this was a recurring motive in Japanese politics: Governments valued social order and stability above all else, in this instance above public health even. This pattern had been at the root of public anger at Tokyo. With regard to the media, public anger had resulted from a feeling that the media should have known the facts – or worse, had known but deliberately withheld information, failing in their role as watchdogs of government and instead siding with the latter against the public. As a result, people had begun going online for news. There had been a proliferation of websites, including various civic groups emerging with their own sources of information. There had also been a proliferation of various conspiracy theories – essentially a 'Wild West' of information had developed following the accident. As a consequence, the public had discovered the relative absence in Japan of serious new media. None the less, there had been a migration from newspapers to online media. The focus of information-gathering and learning about the world had shifted online, and this process continued to date.

According to the speaker, a second consequence of the accident had been a rupture between the Japanese government and the country's media, especially the *Asahi Shimbun*. Upon realizing that it had alienated its own readers by not reporting on Speedi, the *Asahi* had shifted its stance, and become highly critical of the government's response to Fukushima. It had even gone too far in one instance, reporting falsely that plant workers had fled the plant against the orders of Masao Yoshida, the Fukushima Daiichi plant manager at the time of the accident. His testimony had been kept secret by the government, and although the *Asahi* had had a considerable scoop in obtaining a copy, it had subsequently been forced, under significant pressure, to retract the story.

Fackler's presentation was followed by questions from the audience.

The first question concerned difficulties in Japan on the part of both journalists and the wider public to access precise data. The speaker remarked that even today, data related to the Fukushima accident were difficult to obtain. In his view, the most accurate data on radiation levels came from the US Navy. Likewise, labels on Fukushima produce simply stated that radiation levels were below the safety threshold. However, both farmers and consumers were rejecting this approach, leading to frequent freelance radiation measurements. Shortly after the accident, the speaker had come across a truck stop in Fukushima featuring a Russian-made device for measuring radiation used by local farmers. Farmers and sellers alike had started labelling food with very precise measurements in order to circumvent the public's distrust of the vague assurances given by the government. According to the speaker, this was a sign of problems with transparency.

A second question related to potential civic movements, and their relation to technology.

Fackler reported that some movements of this kind certainly existed, such as the 'Fukushima Mothers', who had organized themselves through a shared concern over insufficient information on radiation. Simultaneously, there had been a proliferation of online information. The speaker thought it very interesting that a civic reaction against the central government had taken place in Fukushima, but that very little information about this reaction was reaching the public in Tokyo. While the central media had ignored the issue, civic movements had come into existence at the local level, albeit with varying levels of organization.

The speaker was then asked about the central media's motivation in not reporting on these groups, and whether this was a government-driven phenomenon or rather a case of self-censorship.

The speaker responded that the central media's silence on civic activists was self-imposed. On the one hand, he thought, the phenomenon related to the Japanese ideal of self-restraint. More important, however, according to the speaker, was the presence in Japan of an extreme form of 'access journalism' – the practice of reporting via central governmental institutions. As a consequence of the prevalence of access journalism, journalists who were too critical were cut off from the best information. This in turn led to a very passive, restrained form of journalism, and seemed to be the default mode at Japan's central newspapers. There were few rewards for entrepreneurial, on-the-ground work. Journalists' careers thus often depended on privileged access to inside information from a particular ministry. This made it very difficult to criticize a given ministry, or even to give different interpretations of events. This, according to the speaker, was the reason why, despite their various political leanings, the Japanese media's coverage of the central administration was rather homogeneous. For a brief period following the Fukushima accident, the central media had realized that they had alienated their respective readers by underreporting the accident. However, unless there were such large incentives, access journalism remained the default.

More broadly, the speaker felt that journalists working at Japan's central newspapers were part of a bureaucratic establishment, coming, with few exceptions, from the same established universities. Although not all of them came from the upper classes, they had gone through the same education system and held very similar values and outlooks. This was the reason why the regional newspapers at times offered very different perspectives from the central media, and a real gap remained between the two.

The next question concerned the extent to which the characteristics that the speaker had ascribed to Japanese journalists were also present in other countries.

The speaker explained that these problems existed in other countries as well, including the US. It was not the case that Japan had a unique problem with access journalism or with overly obsequious journalists. However, in the US the problem seemed to occur cyclically. Journalists got ever closer to power until some incident caused them to retreat again. Japan, he asserted, did not seem to have this cycle. Journalists and administration officials seemed to grow closer and closer, but, barring younger newcomers, nobody seemed to problematize the situation. This was where Japan was different, not least because of the extent to which access journalism had been institutionalized in the country. The speaker explained that there had been many internal discussions about the status quo following the Fukushima accident. The *Asahi Shimbun* had had many internal discussions, including questions of why it had been so uncritical of the country's nuclear industry.

The next question concerned the speaker's argument that Fukushima had been a watershed moment for the relationship between Japanese media and civil society, asking whether much had really changed apart from the fact that many more people now had access to online alternatives.

The speaker clarified that online civic activity had begun as a channel of protest against Japan's reliance on nuclear energy. While this remained an important motive, a small but vocal number of right-wing nationalists and anti-Korean racists had since joined the online community. Thus, while the Japanese online community had become very dynamic, it had failed to produce any serious online media outlets. There were no Japanese equivalents to US platforms such as *Slate*, the *Huffington Post* or *ProPublica*. Certainly there were sites presenting raw footage, but there was very little online-only journalism. In sum, Japan was entering a new space, but the result remained a work in progress. Fackler estimated that Japan was lagging approximately a decade behind the US in this respect.

At this point, a member of the audience offered a comment, explaining that he had been in Tokyo during the time of the accident. He recalled the extraordinary sense of confusion, partially driven by the absence of any reliable information. It seemed to him that at the time there had been a tension within the government, and maybe elsewhere, between a recognition by some, including the Prime Minister and the main government spokesman, that it was necessary to get information out as quickly as possible, despite limited verifiability, and a desire on the part of Japanese officials and politicians to ensure that all official information was perfectly correct. The latter ideal had been impossible to achieve, given the complexity of the situation as well as the speed with which it had developed. At the same time, the context in which information was being released would have needed explanation as well, especially given that the population had been frightened and distrustful already. To the commentator, it seemed that there was a tendency in Japan to avoid risk. In this context, he argued, avoiding risk had been tantamount to waiting until given pieces of information were no longer of use to anyone.

The next question concerned the role of Japanese scientists.

Fackler responded that very few nuclear scientists were wholly independent in Japan. There existed the so-called 'nuclear village', not unlike what President Eisenhower had termed the 'military-industrial complex' – i.e. an enormous vested interest encompassing academics, media and much else. In a sense, the speaker pointed out, a nuclear power plant in Japan was a money-printing machine. Energy companies were legally guaranteed a certain profit margin after whatever they claimed as costs, including events for journalists or research projects. Thus, he estimated that 95 per cent of Japan's scientists had been captured by this system, with the remainder having taken an anti-nuclear stance. Thus, in addition to the problem that scientists were generally unable to agree on the dangers of nuclear energy, there was an added political dimension.

The subsequent question, recalling the speaker's statement that Fukushima had been a watershed moment, inquired whether he thought there had been a change in the governance of Japanese newspapers.

Fackler stated that there had been a real effort to change coverage at the *Asahi Shimbun*, but that business as usual had ultimately prevailed. Although the nuclear plants had not been reactivated so far, the same people as before were in charge of Fukushima Daiichi. Tepco was still running the plant, overseen by a committee composed of prominent members of the 'nuclear village'. In this sense, it was remarkable to the speaker how little had changed, and he was doubtful as to whether this approach was wise.

The next question related to possible concerns over potential imbalances in Japan between investments in the Tokyo Olympics as compared with the Tohoku region – and Fukushima in particular.

The speaker confirmed that such concerns existed in Japan, especially in the Tohoku region itself. Many in and around Fukushima were asking why so much money was being spent on stadiums in Tokyo while there was a US-sponsored, 30-year, multi-billion-dollar clean-up effort going on. Simultaneously, there were increasing signs that current clean-up projects were not going to work, in which case Japan could be faced with a second Chernobyl. There were many questions as to whether investment was being balanced in this respect. On the other hand, an argument could be made that Japan needed an impulse, and that not all investment could go to Fukushima.

The final question asked whether the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), had it been in power at the time of the accident, would have responded differently from the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ).

The speaker felt that the DPJ had been so focused on winning the prior elections that its members had neglected a plan for government. This had been particularly unfortunate, since the DPJ had seemed to have a genuine opportunity to effect change. Prime Minister Naoto Kan seemed not to have trusted his administration. While this had led to some of his best moments, it had certainly made it difficult to govern the country. But while the speaker speculated that the LDP might have used the levers of government more effectively at the time of the disaster, he was unsure as to whether its leadership would have provided a better response.