

# Scene and Agent:

## Place and identity in the Coverage of the Tohoku earthquake

Dan T. Molden

### Abstract

On March 11, 2011, a massive earthquake struck the eastern seaboard of Japan, centered in the Pacific Ocean near Tohoku. Given the strength and wide ranging effects of the earthquake and tsunami as well as the subsequent concerns about the growing problems at Fukushima Daiichi, there was a great deal of international media coverage centered on Japan. As such, the news coverage of the events surrounding the Tohoku earthquake provides a somewhat unique opportunity to observe the description of one country's population (Japan) by another country's media. This paper attempts to address two research questions: How were Japanese people characterized in the news coverage of the Tohoku earthquake and what influence, if any, did the understanding of the situation have on that construction of Japanese identity?

### Introduction

On March 11, 2011, a massive earthquake struck the eastern seaboard of Japan, centered in the Pacific Ocean near Tohoku. That earthquake and the subsequent tsunami had a devastating impact on the shoreline of Japan. The aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami also led to the partial meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear facility. In addition, the earthquake was so powerful that there were reports of tsunami not only in Asia, but also as far away as North America.

Given the strength and wide ranging effects of the earthquake and tsunami as well as the subsequent concerns about the growing problems at Fukushima Daiichi, there was a great deal of international media coverage centered on Japan. Much of that media coverage was about the physical effects of the disaster on Japan, of course. However, some of the coverage was also about the reactions and the lives of the people living in Tohoku and beyond. As such, the news coverage of the events surrounding the Tohoku earthquake provides a somewhat unique opportunity to observe the description of one country's population (Japan) by another country's media (in this case, the United States).

It may be a given that each country or culture has an image or stereotype of the people of other countries. However, those images and stereotypes must form in some way and (one presumes) be

capable of being altered to fit the existing situation (or, perhaps the situation will be altered to fit the existing stereotypes). It seems natural to suggest that the communication created by the media is one of the most likely places where the negotiation of identity and the meaning of situations would take place. Again, then, the media coverage of the Tohoku disaster provides one extended example of such negotiation. Rather than the typical international coverage of another country, where a “human interest” story might happen once a year or so over the course of decades, the reporting about the Tohoku disaster meant that there were numerous stories in the United States media about the Japanese people over the course of weeks.

For those people living in Japan, of course, the media coverage in other countries would not be the primary concern when thinking about March 11<sup>th</sup>. Nonetheless, there are several important opportunities when studying how images and identities are created and maintained through the news. Examining the news coverage can reveal the extent to which existing identities and stereotypes are reaffirmed or reified and the extent to which such images and identities are altered by the new information.

Given the unique opportunity presented by the news coverage and the importance that the event itself presented and continues to present to the identity of Japan and Japanese people (as well as the importance of the Japanese-United States relationship), it seems that there is value in examining the construction of Japanese people during and after the Tohoku earthquake in the American news. Indeed, the NHK report (2012) on the news coverage of the earthquake specifically noted that “reporting of the news is very closely related to the political and social issues that each country faces and the values held by its people” (Kowata 53).

Specifically, this paper will attempt to address two research questions: First, how were Japanese people characterized in the news coverage of the Tohoku earthquake and the subsequent Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant meltdown? Second, what influence, if any, did the understanding of the situation (the earthquake, the tsunami, and the nuclear power plant meltdown) have on the construction of Japanese identity?

## Method

This paper will examine the coverage of the Tohoku earthquake and the subsequent meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi reactor by considering the coverage primarily in *The New York Times*, but also using several other secondary sources, including the NHK report about international coverage of these disasters. In particular, this paper will look for descriptions of the Japanese people and the

situation they found themselves in by considering the new stories dramatically. Specifically, Burke's pentadic analysis will be used to consider the construction of scene-act-agent-agency-purpose in the stories. Particular attention will be paid to the scene-agent ratio to determine if the stories show an influence of the scene on the understanding of the agent.

## Review of Literature

There has been a recent move in the field of communication to consider the rhetoric of disaster. As a starting point, disasters represent an exigence, a gap in our understanding of the world, which must be answered. Kevin McClure (2011), for example, wrote that:

[N]atural disasters are potent exigents that engender a complex field of rhetorical activity that ripples across broad discursive spaces of American culture. Theoretically and methodologically the sheer range of the rhetorical phenomena engendered by significant natural disasters represents an opportunity for rhetorical scholarship that can be launched from a variety of perspectives and methods with an array of possible social, political, religious, and scientific discourses and media coverage for analysis. (12)

McClure, then, argued that each disaster represents an opportunity not only for a discussion of the disaster itself, but also for the communication which surrounds that disaster. McClure recognized that the rhetorical communication surrounding an event like the Tohoku earthquake could not prevent the earthquake, but it could help shape human understanding of the event. Writing specifically about American Presidential rhetoric in the face of disasters, McClure (2011) contended that:

While rhetorical discourse cannot prevent natural disasters, it certainly can "bring about significant modification" in the rescue, relief, and recovery that follows. Thus, it is the nature of the rhetorical situation engendered by a natural disaster that distinguishes the natural disaster address from other presidential discourses related to crises. (1)

There is a concern, however, that the study of the communication surrounding a catastrophic event like an earthquake or a meltdown at a nuclear plant might be taken over by strictly technical concerns, as those might hold out the promise of prevention or relief. James Hikins (2010) noted that tendency when discussing the reaction of American politicians to the Hurricane Katrina crisis:

An indication that some attention is being paid to addressing this shortcoming lies in the fact that politicians, from President Obama to Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal

have tried to call attention to the human costs of the Gulf tragedy. And New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu's recent hosting of 17 mayors from across the nation for the purpose of educating them on the effects of the Gulf spill so they may better prepare their own communities for disaster is a beginning. But these voices soon devolve into discussions of technical issues of oil skimming, dispersants, and, perhaps worst of all, how much money we can throw at the feet of victims. In short, we have been more concerned with quantifiable, technical solutions and have been ignoring the one thing that is most effectual in rebuilding lives and communities in any post-disaster environment, namely, language.

Considering that fear, it may make sense to analyze the stories that surround the event. One of the powers of narrative or drama is to help shape human understanding, especially in the face of things that seem difficult or impossible to understand. Stephen Muecke (2007) wrote that:

The stories told about natural disasters are crucial in the organisation of people's responses in the medium to long term. While the stories of individual events are told in the detail, they are nonetheless already broadly scripted by narrative forms of mythical strength. These are the stories that can make sense of the senseless, these events we might be tempted to call sub-lime, because they are so awe-inspiring as to seem like heaven or hell visited upon earth. (259)

In this case, the stories considered will be the stories of the Japanese people as told by the press of the United States. Those in the U.S. and elsewhere may not have had to make sense of the destruction of the earthquake and the tsunami, but they did have to make sense of the Japanese people's ability to persevere in the face of that destruction.

## Analysis

Virtually all of the discussions of the news coverage of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami note that there were, essentially, two different phases of the coverage. The first, immediately following the earthquake and tsunami, was largely positive. These reports focused on the ability of the Japanese people to stay calm and work together in the face of the disaster.

The report from the NHK (2012), for example wrote that:

From the time of the disaster, overseas newspapers, television, and other media praised the self-control and forbearance of the victims and others involved, and international

journalists were often deeply moved by the willingness of those directly affected to respond to interviews despite their own personal distress. (Kowata 2)

One example of this sort of coverage, from *The New York Times*, was an article written by Martin Fackler and Mark McDonald. They described the scene in Sendai and interviewed a teacher from Britain, Michael Tonge, who had been working in Sendai:

No buildings had collapsed in his neighborhood, Mr. Tonge said, and people were not panicking — typical of a nation accustomed to order and schooled to stay calm and constructive.

“The few shops open have people queuing nicely,” he said, “with no pushing or fighting or anything.” (March 12)

In this way, the Japanese people were portrayed positively as working calmly and peacefully toward the reconstruction of Japan. However, the news coverage soon changed. The NHK report noted:

After the series of explosions inside the structures housing the nuclear reactors at the Tokyo Electric Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, overseas media grew increasingly disgruntled by and distrustful of the Japanese government and Tokyo Electric regarding the release of information about what had happened; the tone of reporting turned quite critical. (Kowata 2)

Similarly, Koichi Goshima (2011) wrote that the disaster did not seem to create heroic narratives, although it did create narratives about the values and attitudes of the common Japanese people:

Of course, after the earthquake, words like “unexpected”, “beyond all prediction”, “nightmare” and “horror movie” came out, showing the signs of the beginning of a “tragedy”. Next, there was no story in which a hero appeared aiming at reconstruction by unifying the people, rather complaints that the road to recovery was steep. While a hero did not emerge, the values and effort of the Japanese people did, and the attitude of the general public in Japan during the reconstruction was portrayed positively. On the other hand, the actions of the Japanese Government and TEPCO towards the reconstruction of Japan were criticized. (12)

One example of this negative turn is the story by Ken Belson in *The New York Times*. Belson (2011) wrote about the general public’s willingness to wait and persevere, even in the face of doubt in the government—doubt for their own safety and the safety of their families:

While workers struggle to avert nuclear meltdowns at stricken power plants 170 miles to the north, residents of Tokyo are wondering whether to trust the government's assurances that they are out of harm's way. . . .

*But most Japanese are trying to uphold the ethic that they are taught from childhood: to do their best, persevere and suppress their own feelings for the sake of the group (emphasis mine).*

In this example, it could be argued, not only is the government (and TEPCO) being treated negatively, the citizens of Japan are being treated negatively as well. In a form of “good mouthing,” the Japanese are being “praised” for suppressing their own feelings in a situation when they should not. Ironically, then, the same behavior that was being praised in the first story is now being treated as bad in the second. The explanation for that change may come from the nature of the narratives involved.

## Discussion

Narratives are stories and stories have types, or genres, into which they fit—making it possible for the audience to make sense of the story as it unfolds. The genre helps us to understand the action and the actors as well as the setting and the motivations of those actors. The simplest explanation for why the same behavior is laudable in one case and not in another (just three days later) comes from the sense of the genre.

Richard Treitel (nd) quoting Nancy Lebovitz offered a very short description of several different genres of fiction:

Nancy Lebovitz offers thumbnail definitions of various genres:

Science fiction: the unknown is to be understood and thereby changed

Fantasy: the unknown is to be loved for its strangeness

*Horror: the unknown is to be feared*

*Disaster: the unknown is to be endured*

(emphasis mine).

This very short and concise explanation of the difference between horror and disaster makes the different treatment of the same behavior clear. In the case of disaster, the hero must survive. Thus, remaining calm and peaceful is virtuous. In the case of horror, however, the hero must be afraid and act on that fear. In the horror genre, being calm is foolish and invites death and destruction.



Figure 1 Chan Lowe, "Japan Earthquake Aftermath"



Figure 2 Nate Beeler, "Disaster Emerges"

Consider two political cartoons discussing the events surrounding the Tohoku earthquake. Figure 1 shows a couple responding to the people in a disaster being calm. Figure 2, on the other hand, shows a horrific monster emerging from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant. In Figure 1, being calm is commendable, but in Figure 2, being calm means tempting death.

## Conclusion

While this analysis may suffer for want of more data (sources from the United States beyond *The New York Times* could have been included), and could certainly benefit from additional studies of international coverage of other disasters (the Hanshin earthquake, for example), it does suggest, nonetheless, that when rhetorical attempts to understand disasters are analyzed, the ways in which the disaster is being discussed plays an important role in how the people reacting to that disaster are being discussed. It is hoped that continued study of the identity and identification of the people who deal with disasters will lead to a better understanding of the rhetorical concerns those disasters create. Hikins (2010) similarly called for a new kind of disaster scholarship:

In the case of disaster mitigation, this new brand of scholar is equipped to deal with disaster's human consequences, using methods not typically available to most technical specialists. If we are to avoid the effects on communities even greater than ones measured in gallons spilled and square miles devastated, and if we are to succeed in mitigating the problems humans now face in the Gulf disaster--and the inevitable calamities to come--we must encourage the cultivation of intellectual entrepreneurship. To do so requires that we recognize the limits of the technocentric approach. Put simply, we must learn how to talk better about disaster (Hikins 2010)

The Tohoku earthquake literally moved the earth. It also figuratively moved the emotions and perceptions of people around the world. As Hikins suggests, while the need to solve the physical problems created by disasters remains and is real, humanity must also find ways to deal with the human cultural, intellectual, and emotional problems that occur. While this paper is only a small step toward that goal, it is hoped that this essay will help contribute to the attempt to understand how to talk about disaster.

## References

- Beeler, Nate. "Disaster Emerges." *The Washington Examiner*. March 16, 2011. Web. Dec. 15, 2013.
- Belson, Ken. "Certainties of Modern Life Upended in Japan." *The New York Times*. March 15, 2011. Web. Dec 14, 2013.
- Fackler, Martin and McDonald, Mark. "Japan Pushes to Rescue Survivors as Quake Toll Rises." *The New York Times*. March 12, 2011 Web. Dec 14, 2013.
- Goshima, Koichi. "Rhetorical Analysis of Disaster Reporting in The New York Times—In the case of Japanese Earthquake." A paper presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Japan Health Communication Convention. Trans: Mine. Sept 17, 2011.
- Hikins, James. "Rhetoric and the Human Dimensions of Disaster: An overlooked lesson from the Gulf oil spill." *The Huffington Post*. July 8, 2010. Web. Dec 15, 2013.
- Kowata, Yoko. et al. *The Great East Japan Earthquake in Overseas Media: Survey of eight news programs in seven countries*. NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute. Sept 14, 2012. Web Dec 27, 2013.
- Lowe, Chan. "Japan Earthquake Aftermath." *SunSentinel.com* March 15, 2011. Web. Dec. 15, 2013.
- McClure, Kevin. "The Rhetoric of Disaster: The Presidential natural disaster address as an emergent genre." *Relevant Rhetoric*. Vol. 2. 2011. Web. Dec 27, 2013.
- Muecke Stephen. "Hurricane Katrina and the Rhetoric of Natural Disasters," in Potter E; Mackinnon A; McKenzie S; McKay J (ed.), *Fresh Water: New Perspectives on Water in Australia*, Melbourne University Press: Melbourne. 2007. 259 – 272.
- Treitel, Richard. "Science Fiction versus Fantasy." *www.treitel.org*. nd Web. Dec 27, 2013.