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Current status and challenges for the future in broadcasting disaster-prevention information in television news

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¹TBS NEWS

In the event of natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunami, volcanic hazards, and typhoons that could claim many lives of people and assets, all media across Japan, particularly, the television, broadcast the news. The majority of information, however, is on damages, and confirmation of what happened there. In fact, mobilizing reporting teams and transmitting the information from the disaster area to the nation is an effective way to raise public awareness. But, when I think about today's theme, I don't think the television news, particularly the key stations of news networks, are fulfilling their missions. The year of 2010 was a turning point in reviewing media's roles in earthquakes, volcanic hazards, and other disasters. Concerning earthquake, looking at Japan alone, it was the 15th anniversary for the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, and 50th anniversary for the Chili Earthquake. As for volcanic disasters, 2010 was the 10th anniversary for the eruption of Miyake-jima Island. In Hokkaido, it's been ten years since Mt. Usu was erupted in 2000. To disseminate information for disaster prevention rather than disaster information, and to inform the latest scientific technology for disaster prevention, it should have been significant for us to produce special program or broadcast feature stories in our news programs for such purposes. Unfortunately, we hardly launched such projects last year.

What's happening behind all this? I believe public interests are one of the external factors. People are more interested in uncertainties about the future, such as economic trend, pension plan, and social security services. (Sources: Survey on awareness of disaster information by CIDIR, Tokyo University, 2010) Television tends to broadcast what the viewers are more interested, and they are relatively less motivated and less opportunities to produce program that would contribute disaster prevention. There is also an internal factor that has been pointed out for some time. News departments of commercial broadcasters have not yet established the system to cover the disaster. Most of the commercial broadcasters do not have science news section, and only have limited opportunities to train science reporters systematically. TBS-TV, which I work for, organized science news section on the outbreak of new influenza virus H1N1 last year. But those science reporters have other duties as well, and the quality of the science news depends on efforts of those individuals who are also busy with their routine works. I believe media need to cooperate with researchers and research institutions to create opportunities to train those science news reporters.

Digitalization of terrestrial broadcasting will be completed in July, 2011. The technological development in broadcasting as such obviously will bring changes to environment surrounding broadcast of disaster information. In fact, experiments to use television as a multimedia-platform in transmitting disaster information are underway. In the event of disasters, the information will be transmitted not only on terrestrial broadcast, but also on the Internet, social networking services such as Twitter, One-Seg and other types of broadcastings on mobile devices. On terrestrial broadcasting, two-wave simultaneous broadcast is under study. Under that system, one wave transmits disaster information, and the other wave transmits the information affecting livings of people in disaster-hit area with radio, or on radio simultaneously.

There is certainly a limit on broadcasting disaster-prevention information on television. Yet, television is still a powerful media, and expected to play an significant role on such occasions. In my presentation, I would discuss current status and challenges for the future introducing latest cases on our broadcasting and specific future plans.

Keywords: disaster information, disaster-prevention information, TV coverage, science program, multi-media platform