



Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper

University of Oxford

Speed vs Accuracy in Times of Crisis

By Reiko Saisho

Michaelmas Term 2015

Sponsor: Self-funded / NHK

Acknowledgements	3
1 Introduction	4
1.1 Changing landscape	4
1.2 The role of public broadcasters in crisis	5
1.3 Aim and definition	7
2 The BBC and coverage of terrorism	10
2.1 The London bombings	10
2.2 Establishment of the UGC Hub	12
2.3 Dealing with rumours: accuracy re-evaluated?	15
2.4 Knowing limits: the Paris attacks	18
2.5 A new obligation: protecting eyewitnesses and staff	21
3 NHK and coverage of the 2011 earthquake	24
3.1 The Great East Japan Earthquake	24
3.2 Avoiding anxiety	26
3.3 Delivering radiation exposure	29
3.4 Delivering the uncertainty	32
4 Conclusion	35
Interviewees	38
UK	38
Japan	38
Bibliography	39
Video	44
References	44

Acknowledgements

For me, one of the prizes of being a journalist is meeting people from all walks of life, travelling through their experience, and learning that there is more to learn beyond the horizon of my knowledge and imagination. The time in Oxford was indeed one of those precious experiences and I must first thank Jun Takao, Head of International News Division at NHK and my other colleagues for giving me the time to explore beyond my daily routines. I would also like to extend my special thanks to Dr David Levy, Director of Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, for his guidance, and to Dr James Painter, Director for Journalism Fellowship Programme, and his staff for the thought-provoking lectures and seminars. They all became valuable seeds of thought for this essay. I have also benefited greatly from the oversight of an excellent supervisor, Lara Fielden. She inspired me with her breadth of thought and provided insightful feedback. I owe a debt of gratitude to all the interviewees who are listed at the end of this essay. They all have been exceptionally generous with their time and sharing their insight; every interview was introspective. Last but not least, my big thanks go to journalist fellows for being truly inspirational classmates.

1 Introduction

1.1 Changing landscape

On the late evening of 13 November 2015, not long after the first report of gunmen attacking multiple locations in Paris, video and pictures from witnesses filled the screens of broadcasters. Nik Gowing, a former presenter for the BBC World News, emblematically compared it to the day he sat in the studio announcing the news of the death of Princess Diana in the same city in 1997. 'During much of that night, there was almost no video and certainly no mobile video,' he says, 'on 13th November the visibility was there from people looking out of the window; they were recording before any traditional media were there. It is two different worlds.'

In the time that elapsed between these two events, the 24/7 rolling news channels and online services abolished the deadlines that journalists previously concentrated their efforts on. Without deadlines, news agencies and news organizations now compete to be first for breaking news, precipitating a culture of reporting events as they happen. The subsequent rise of mass self-communication further accelerated the news cycle, and the relationship of broadcasters with audience members has also changed. It was at the time of the South East Asian tsunami in December 2004 that the world's media first found themselves dependent on 'amateur' reportage to tell the story of what had transpired.¹ Half a year later, when the London underground and buses came under attack on 7 July 2005, the iconic pictures of the day were captured by travellers using their mobile phones. The BBC's newsgathering has changed completely, or 'crossed the Rubicon', to use Sambrook's words.² Now the first wave of materials rarely comes from traditional media. Rather it is the pictures and footage from accidental witnesses, or 'citizen journalists',³ that fill the screen in the immediate aftermath of an event.

¹ Allan, *Citizen witnessing*, p.9

² Sambrook, *Citizen journalism and the BBC*

³ There various definition of 'citizen journalist'. Some may identify themselves as engaged in a journalistic role, such as bloggers, others may think they are trying to contribute in a small and meaningful way (Bowman and Willis). The content they provide is referred to as 'user generated content', 'eyewitness media', 'grassroots journalism', 'open source journalism', 'participatory journalism', 'hyperlocal journalism', etc. This essay follows Allan's definition of 'a type of first-person reportage in which ordinary individuals temporarily adopt the role of a

This change inevitably transformed the time allowed for institutions, including media, to react when major events break. Gowing observes that in the late 1990s, an institution had about 24 hours to gather information and respond publicly, but now that has shrunk to a matter of minutes. He uses the phrase 'tyranny of time line' to express the pressure, but says institutions have no choice but to act swiftly and assertively.⁴

Sambrook summarizes the change in editorial decision-making:⁵

the old model of broadcasting was that the editors had time to find out what is happening, they had time to verify and check it, and once that was sorted out then they put it out to the public. In live news you don't have time to do all of that. So effectively the audience moves alongside with the editors in real time as the information comes in.

The digital era has brought numerous challenges to broadcasters: seeking new business models, investing in new technology, cultivating a new relationship with audiences while maintaining journalistic standards. These challenges are there for all outlets but are particularly acute for public broadcasters at time of crisis. This is the very moment when audiences expect a publicly funded body to get it right.

1.2 The role of public broadcasters in crisis

The footage, pictures, and witness accounts, together with emotions and opinions, now travel across social media at a push of a button. Increased connectivity provides various materials and authentic voices faster, enabling journalists to be less dependent on bureaucratic structures. Crucially, this helps journalists put the stories together when they are not at the scene of an event. However, with this huge potential, there also lies a danger that 'social media becomes a significant platform for news to be spread and inevitably the same channels amplify misinformation, allowing rash judgements and prejudices to boil to the surface, fuelling fear and ignorance'.⁶

journalist in order to participate in news making, often spontaneously during a time of crisis, accident, tragedy or disaster when they happen to be present on the scene'.

⁴ Gowing, *'Skyful of lies' and black swans*

⁵ Sambrook, interview

⁶ Lee, *#Paris: The power, the horror, and the distortions*, BBC

At this time when we are deluged with information, it is important for news organizations to maintain their journalistic standards – accuracy, objectivity, impartiality among many other ethical values – to maintain the trust of the audience. Accuracy, in the author’s view, is crucial in times of crisis. This is when audiences want information to decide their next course of action.

The arrival of satellite and cable TV followed by the digital revolution has changed the near-monopoly situation of broadcasters in the UK. Now audiences are provided with a wider choice of programs via various platforms and the traditional media are struggling to retain their share of viewing. Yet audiences still stand behind the credibility and trustworthiness of the news – values taken seriously by the BBC as the only publicly funded broadcaster in the UK. Eighty per cent of Britons receive their news from the BBC and in this context of dominance, the relative attention the BBC gives to a story, or a point of view, matters enormously.⁷ The audience expects a high standard as well. When asked about the importance of the public broadcaster, 85% answered that they needed ‘news programme to be trustworthy’.⁸

In its editorial guidelines, the BBC expresses its commitment and determination to achieve accuracy,⁹ describing it as fundamental to the trust of their audience. It also outlines its special responsibility when reporting conflicts, that at such times it needs to be scrupulous in applying its principles of accuracy and impartiality.

Furthermore, the organization aspires to unify the population by providing content equally to all. In a speech given after the 9/11 terror attack, Stephen Whittle, former Controller of Editorial Policy for the BBC, expressed the aspiration of the broadcaster to be ‘social glue’ at time of difficulty:¹⁰

⁷ Higgins, *This New Noise*, p.145

⁸ Ofcom, *Public Service Annual Report*, 2015

⁹ BBC Editorial Guidelines, Section 3. BBC defines accuracy as ‘due accuracy’. It says that ‘due’ means there is no absolute test of accuracy; it can mean different things depending on the subject and nature of the output, and the expectations and understanding of the audience. In the Neil Report concluded after the Hutton Inquiry, the first of the five basic editorial values is ‘truth and accuracy’. It expect the BBC to establish the ‘truth of what has happened as best as we can’ through well-sourced information, sound evidence, fact checking, precision in the use of language, provision of context and avoiding unfounded speculation.

¹⁰ Whittle, Speech at IIC Broadcasting Forum, 2002

Even if we are more diverse and fragmented society than in the 20s or 30s, with a plethora of media choices at our disposal, there is still a need for a place where people feel they are being told *the* truth about what is happening; where they can rely on impartial analysis to help them make sense of events.

In Japan, accuracy is also regarded as fundamental to good journalism in both broadcasting and newspapers alike. The Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association, whose over 130 members include all major newspapers, agencies, and broadcasters, states that ‘reporting must be accurate and fair, and should never be swayed by the reporter’s personal conviction or bias’.¹¹

This ethos is most strongly felt by the country’s only public broadcaster, NHK, particularly at the time of disasters. In a country where not a single year passes without earthquakes, typhoons, or volcanic eruptions, the organization is endowed with two mandates: the first is to inform the audience, giving an accurate account of the event; the second is in its role as a ‘public institution’ as designated by Disaster Countermeasures Basic Act, to ‘contribute to disaster prevention’.¹² In the NHK newsroom, this provision is translated as a duty to diffuse the initial impact and mitigate further damage by providing information, and the corporation’s guidelines stipulate that ‘it is paramount to deliver accurate information quickly’. In the immediate aftermath of an earthquake, for example, NHK will automatically put on air the first reading of the tremor sent via a dedicated line from the Japan Meteorological Agency. At this point, the emphasis is on speed: how quickly the broadcaster can alert audiences to the imminent danger.¹³

1.3 Aim and definition

This paper attempts to examine how media organizations resolve the conflicting demands of accuracy and speed in crisis reporting. The BBC has clearly laid out in its editorial guidelines that ‘accuracy is more important than speed’ and this is certainly echoed in the NHK

¹¹ Japan Newspaper Publisher and Editors Association, *Canon of Journalism*. Unlike the UK provision, the code of practice does not use the ‘due’ accuracy phrase.

¹² Tanaka, *NHK’s disaster coverage and public value from below*

¹³ In July 1993, a tsunami struck the island of Okushiri 3 minutes after the tremor. Ever since, 3 minutes has been regarded as a threshold to kick-start emergency broadcasting, and the corporation holds an emergency broadcasting drill in its newsroom every day.

newsroom. But in a fast-moving story, when online space is flooded with information, accurate or otherwise, how do editors decide whether the information is credible enough to be put on air? What is the justification for using uncorroborated information, and under what circumstances do editors decide to broadcast those materials? How do you respond when the information turned out to be false? And how is the newsroom adapting to the changing environment with expanding online space, and has this changed the judgement or editorial values of the organization in these testing times?

The author attempts to answer these questions by analysing the response of two public broadcasters in the face of major crisis in the following steps.

- First, looking into how the BBC covered the 7 July 2005 terror attacks in London and the NHK coverage of the 2011 earthquake and nuclear disaster, both categorized as turning points in the consciousness of both organizations.¹⁴
- Analysing editors' attempt to balance the accuracy and speed in the initial response phase.
- Examining the reactions and the thinking behind editorial decisions as the events unfolded: how the editors struggled to meet the new challenges of the digital revolution.
- Looking into the failures, and application of lessons learned. References are made to some wider examples of crisis.
- Introducing some practical issues that have emerged from developments in digital newsgathering.
- Finally, attempting to draw up some thoughts for the future, as a guide to how media should respond to crisis.

The research and case studies are primarily drawn from interviews with editorial figures both at the BBC and NHK who bear responsibility in communicating the news content at times of crisis. I have also interviewed academics who specialize in communication and media relations in the UK and Japan. The interviews were conducted one-to-one between November 2015 and

¹⁴ I acknowledge the distinction between terrorism and disasters. Terrorism is manmade, intentional, and is an act of communication. The level and scope of destruction may be different. But there are parallels in that both occur suddenly, involving the lives of innocent people, and shake the sense of security in society.

February 2016, except one via Skype. The names of the interviewees are listed at the end of this paper. These interviews were supported by academic research, articles, speeches, and case studies in English and Japanese.

2 The BBC and coverage of terrorism

2.1 The London bombings

During the busy morning rush hour of 7 July 2005, London's Underground and buses came under attack, killing 52 people and injuring hundreds more. Initial reports of either an explosion or a collision between trains came at around 8:50 am. Sky News carried the first reports of an explosion at 9:16 am.¹⁵ At 9:28 am the Underground operator Metronet stated that the incident was caused by some sort of power surge. As British Transport Police announced there had been explosions on the Underground, a bomb exploded on a bus near Tavistock Square. It was becoming clear that London was under the worst attack it had suffered since the Second World War.

This was the first big breaking news story since the BBC had published its new editorial guidelines, which made explicit for the first time that 'accuracy is more important than speed'.¹⁶ BBC News 24 was noticeably more cautious than its rival Sky News, which took an early punt on terrorism, emboldened by a witness report of the bus explosion by one of its producers.¹⁷ Sky also reported the number of casualties as high as 90. BBC stuck with the reports of a power surge for most of the morning and maintained the official casualty figure of 2 for a substantial length of time. Stephen Whittle, then Director of Editorial Policy, recalls that the BBC was trying to meet its 'responsibilities in these situation that audiences expect the BBC to be reliable; not dealing with gossip or speculations, but only facts' and waited to get confirmation from its reporters at the scene.

BBC held the line [of power surge] until we could verify it and I think possibly we held it too long. But I can't remember what information was available from the BBC correspondents close to the scene who could verify what the situation actually was. And the overriding concern at the time for the Head of News and output editors was being careful with the information rather than loose: being accurate *rather* than first. It is

¹⁵ Sky News, video on YouTube

¹⁶ In the BBC's editorial guidelines it states its commitment to due accuracy while clarifying that requirements differ between genres. When it comes to news and current affairs, it clearly states that 'accuracy is more important than speed'. (Editorial Guidelines, section 3.1)

¹⁷ Sommers, *7/7 bombings marked a journalism 'tipping point' that caught news gatherers off guard*

always a terrible dilemma because every situation is different. There is no quadratic rule which enables you to learn from one situation something you can apply to the next. You have to use your best judgement of the day in the light of the information you have actually got.¹⁸

Helen Boaden, then the Head of BBC News, says it was right to wait until they had verifiable evidence. She points out the importance of being careful with fact 'especially at a time when news is increasingly led by opinion and because of the vast expansion by a lot of speculation'.¹⁹ But Boaden also admitted that the BBC had learned a lot from the experience. She said the audience research carried out by the corporation showed audiences were 'incredibly sophisticated' regarding the nature of breaking news and in the future it could afford to 'take a bit more risk'.²⁰

[In the major bulletins] audiences expect a very high level of accuracy and they are very unforgiving if we get things wrong ... but with 24-hour news people understand that stories unfold and change. As long as we are trying as hard as humanly possible to get it right they are happy.

Tim Suter, founding partner in the UK's media and communication regulator, Ofcom, agrees that editors need not wait for definitive verification:²¹

[editors should ensure] the reporting they put out is accurate, in so far as they can make sure they are accurate, and where they cannot verify it, that they are taking every step possible to ensure that the audience is not misled by the information they are giving You don't have to be restricted only to what you know to be true because that will knock out most of the reporting ... The individual journalist is always relying on a source or sources and is going to be making a series of judgements about the reliability and accuracy and authenticity of that source ... It is always a kind of editorial judgement about the extent you rely on what you are being told. At the time of disasters, those judgements should be faster and they may be more charged.

¹⁸ Whittle, interview

¹⁹ Wells, *Have I got news for you*

²⁰ Cozens, *BBC will 'take more risks'*

²¹ Suter, interview

Boden's explanation indicates there has been shift in the thinking of 'accuracy versus speed' and indeed the London bombings are considered as a watershed moment for the broadcaster.²² Yet, with the corporation's special status as a publicly funded broadcaster, she concedes the BBC cannot 'stick its neck out in the way that rivals can and do':²³

You don't wake up in the morning thinking 'let's be second'. But ... if you push me, if it came to the crunch, we would probably pause longer than our competitors to firm things up.

The 7/7 London attack is still used as an example of the journalist's conundrum of resolving 'speed versus accuracy' at the BBC Academy.²⁴ 'It is always a finely balanced judgement' it admits, and continues to say 'the pressure is even greater now that reports spread so rapidly via social media.'

2.2 Establishment of the UGC Hub

The 7/7 attacks proved to be a watershed for the BBC's newsgathering too. The newsroom across London was deluged with pictures and footages sent directly from the scene. Ordinary members of the public had turned reporters and photographers. At the BBC, within 6 hours of the event, 1,000 photographs, 20 pieces of amateur video, 4,000 texts and 20,000 emails came pouring in.²⁵ Footage taken by mobile phone cameras, such as the dim and shaky picture capturing commuters trapped underground, was not only seen as more compelling but also more important because it documented the event as it happened.²⁶ One piece on the evening news was produced entirely from extracts of what the corporation now calls user-generated content (UGC) – a moment Richard Sambrook, former Head of BBC Global News calls crossing the Rubicon.²⁷

Our reporting on this story was a genuine collaboration, enabled by consumer technology — the camera phone in particular — and was supported by trust between

²² Gibson, *Rolling with the punches*

²³ Wells, *ibid.*

²⁴ BBC Academy, *Truth and accuracy*

²⁵ Boaden, *The role of citizen journalism in modern democracy*

²⁶ Allan, *Citizen witnessing*, p.93

²⁷ Sambrook, *Citizen journalism and the BBC*

broadcaster and audience. And the result was transformative in its impact: We know now that when major events occur, the public can offer us as much new information as we are able to broadcast. From now on, news coverage is a partnership.

But what about authenticity? How do we know where the unsolicited footage comes from?

Later, when Matthew Eltringham, former Assistant Editor of Social Media Development, analysed the information sent from the audience, he found that actually BBC had credible intelligence of every single one of the four bombs by 9:58 am — when all media including BBC were still reporting the cause of event as power failure.²⁸ This erroneous report prompted one eyewitness to send in his picture of the bus roof being blown off because he thought this was clearly not an electric failure.

Eltringham says 7/7 was a 'turning point' for the UGC Hub which was introduced as an experiment following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami to build a relationship with its audience. Social media developed into a tool to get audiences to share their material, but also as a tool for breaking and researching stories.²⁹ As part of the reorganization of BBC News during 2007 and 2008, the UGC hub was moved from the seventh floor of Television Centre to the new multimedia newsroom, and in autumn 2009 the first Social Media Editor was appointed.

The bottom-up contributions from members of the public brought huge opportunities as well as new challenges,³⁰ not least to maintain its journalistic standard of accuracy. Sambrook describes the UGC material as 'information overheard in a café' and emphasizes that professional journalistic disciplines such as checking, verifying, and analysing must be applied before it becomes a piece of journalism.³¹

²⁸ Eltringham, *UGC Five years on*

²⁹ Eltringham, *ibid.*

³⁰ Allan says that citizen journalism continues to spark intense debate as 'how best to negotiate its benefits and hazards alike'. Those who welcome citizen journalism see it as a 'paradigm shift' from traditional reportorial principles such as 'he said' 'she said' formulaic appeals of objectivity, over-reliance on official sources. etc., compared to the 'journalism by the people for the people' using language of democratization and providing alternative values using its raw, immediate and subjective content.(p.94)

³¹ Interview, 24 November 2015

Indeed, the BBC is eager to maintain its journalistic reputation for accuracy. In its latest editorial guidelines it urges ‘particular care’ when sourcing material from the internet.³² Journalists are warned that ‘even a normally reliable source of information on the web may not always be accurate’ and to be ‘alert to the possibility of hoax websites’. The accompanying guidance note lays out in detail what the journalists are expected to do in order to ensure accuracy: gathering material from first-hand sources, cross-checking and validating the authenticity of digital material. They are even advised to follow ‘common sense procedures’ such as checking that the weather on the piece of video matches the weather at the time of the event.³³ The UGC Hub also works closely with local TV and radio services, BBC Monitoring, BBC World Service language services, and the Foreign Office to check geographical features and accents of spoken language.³⁴

Ben O’Loughlin, who specializes in communication, concludes that the rise of social media has changed the role of different kinds of journalists who now increasingly act as verifiers for enormous amounts of content from the public.³⁵

The social media deluge has paradoxically increased the importance of verification. When people see something on social media, they go to the mainstream media to find out if that is really happening. And that is when the mainstream public service media has to be right.

David Jordan, Director of Editorial Policy at the BBC, accepts this responsibility on his part. He says while ‘the BBC still aspires to break the news and do the investigative news, the role of “trusted guide” is very important’:³⁶

In this world of seemingly unending huge amounts of information available, people are going to need an organization that can be relied upon. Even if it isn’t what people necessarily turn to for their biggest excitement, in the time of national crisis people turn to the BBC because they want reliable information.

³² BBC Editorial Guidelines, section 3.4.4

³³ BBC, *User Contributions in News Output*

³⁴ Barot, *UGC: Source, check and stay on top of technology*

³⁵ O’Loughlin, interview

³⁶ Jordan, interview

2.3 Dealing with rumours: accuracy re-evaluated?

As news organizations now have to deal with almost infinite amounts of information in the online space, there are occasions when journalists are not spared enough time to check, triangulate, and collaborate in order to reach the conclusion that they have an accurate account of what is happening. Do broadcasters have the choice to stand aside?

In 2007 the BBC Trust, the corporation's governing body, published a report outlining its approach to impartiality in the digital age. While acknowledging the danger of dealing with rumours, it emphasizes that there is no choice but to engage.³⁷

CNN famously broadcast an eyewitness account shortly after Princess Diana's fatal car crash, only to discover later that the so-called bystander was a practised hoaxter. The speed at which UGC and VNRs can now be disseminated imposes harsh pressure on newsroom decision-making about their credibility and reliability. But any decision not to transmit can result in the broadcaster feeling out-classed and overtaken, as the wildfire spreads informally on mobile phones and the internet. That wildfire generates its own excitement.

The BBC's editorial guidelines echo this, saying that while material is in principle checked before it goes out on air or is put online, there are exceptions in 'some cases of breaking news' when they see 'a very tight turnaround between receiving and reviewing material and broadcasting it.'³⁸ And editors too admit there are times 'When we have done all we can to check but still cannot be 100% sure, we will sometimes still decide to use the material'.³⁹

But sometimes this approach has taken a toll and editors have been criticized for mistakes. For example, in the 2008 Mumbai attack, the BBC posted a false rumour from Twitter claiming that the Indian government had asked people to stop tweeting about military operations for fear of helping the gunmen. The BBC journalists immediately posted this false rumour on the automatic Twitter feed of the 'As it happens' website. This triggered debate about the BBC's principle of impartiality and accuracy. The *Independent's* columnist Tom Sutcliffe wrote that 'given that several tweets instructively contradicted the official line on what was happening,

³⁷ BBC Trust, *From seesaw to wagon wheel*, p.16

³⁸ Ibid, Guidance in Full

³⁹ Herrmann quoted in Belair-Gagnon, Social media at BBC news, p.43

you might argue that this enlistment of an army of virtual stringers improved the BBC's coverage' but 'they'll pass on rumours as readily as a fact, and there is absolutely no way of telling which is which.'⁴⁰

Steve Herrmann, editor of BBC Interactive, looks back on the decision to post it:

*Should we have checked this before reporting it? Made it clearer that we hadn't? We certainly would have done if we'd wanted to include it in our news stories (we didn't) or to carry it without attribution ... But should we have tried to check it and then reported back later, if only to say that we hadn't found any confirmation? I think in this case we should have, and we've learned a lesson.'*⁴¹

Allan analyses this as follows:

*Herrmann believed it was justifiable for the BBC to be sharing what it knew as quickly as possible, even before facts had been fully checked, as a general principle. In this way users gain an insight into how a major story is being put together, even when it entails having to accept some responsibility for assessing the quality – and reliability – of the information being processed.'*⁴²

In 2011, Eltringham articulated an approach to combine the BBC's reputation for trustworthiness while processing information from non-journalistic sources in what he named the 'line of verification'.⁴³ On the 'light side' of the line is material which is deemed to be accurate by the BBC, confirmed by two independent sources. On the 'dark side' of the line are 'rumours, gossip, facts, and factoids' circulating on the internet. Previously the 'dark side' would not be reported by the BBC, but the internet and social media have changed things.

You, the public or the audience, already know about the stuff on the dark side of the verification line because it exists all over the places online where you spend so much time. It is valid to report – or at the very least engage with – this non-validated stuff

⁴⁰ Sutcliffe, 'Twittering is not the way to provide news', *Independent*

⁴¹ *Guardian*, 'BBC admits it made mistake using Mumbai Twitter coverage'

⁴² Allan, *ibid.*, p.116

⁴³ Eltringham, '*The line of verification*': a new approach to objectivity for social media

*because it is already a part of the communication around the story. It is more than just a rumour. It is informal narrative of the story.*⁴⁴

There is a fundamental redefinition of broadcasters and viewers. Now that viewers can have access to infinite information, the journalist's role as an explainer and truth teller has become more important than ever. A public broadcaster has to pursue being relevant to the audience without compromising accuracy.

Jordan draws a line between 'information that the BBC stands behind as an organization' and rumours:⁴⁵

The information we stand behind as an organization has to be accurate. That is not the same as dealing with rumours and counter-rumours. It is reflected in your coverage but in a way that this is absolutely clear that this is rumour and is unsubstantiated and we cannot stand behind it. This distinction is critical because that allows you to give accurate information to the audience but also acknowledge that there are other things going on. You should not look as though you don't understand what is happening.

Daniel Bennett, an academic who has explored the impact of new forms of online reporting at the BBC, concludes in his book that the 'nature of accuracy has been re-valuated in light of immediate digital publications' in the digital era, and suggests that the future of the corporation will be shaped by balancing the 'the challenges posed by the news-making practices of a digitally networked society and its existing editorial practices and values'.⁴⁶

As journalists deal with more unverified materials, that means there are more chances of getting things wrong. How then do journalists deal with corrections and maintain their reputation?

Jordan says the key is 'transparency and openness'. He explains this by referring to the corporation's 'editorial crisis' triggered by the reporting of the intelligence dossier on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Eltringham, *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Interview

⁴⁶ Bennett, *Digital media and reporting conflict*, p.8

⁴⁷ Interview

It is very important to be frank about your failings. It is important to say 'look, we have got this wrong and we are now going to get it right.' In terms of the crisis the BBC had over the years, the fact that we came out and disclosed fully what went wrong and put in place mechanisms to address that, it reassured people we are capable of learning lessons and we would not do it the next time.

The BBC Trust report echoes this by saying the audience 'still want producers to do the work, but they understand more and more of the process, and are adept at second-guessing decisions'. It admits that the openness entails a risk of unfavourable publicity but that is 'part of the heat in the BBC kitchen.'⁴⁸

In line with this guiding principle of 'transparency and openness', the BBC has developed ways of acknowledging their mistakes. When a journalist posts a tweet containing erroneous information, the tweet will remain on the thread. Instead of deleting the tweet, the journalist generates a new tweet to supplement the original (erroneous) information, acknowledging the mistake by adding new information to the tweet.⁴⁹

Suter acknowledges the importance of correction and adds that in the current rolling production service the correction should match the impact of the original misinformation:⁵⁰

The obligation is that if [your interpretation] changes, make sure you are alerting the audience as appropriately as possible that your interpretation has changed. And that will also include awareness of potential impact on the audience of the original information that now turns out not to be true. So if you broadcast at a time when a large number of people are watching, therefore a large number of people are swayed in their view, just publishing a correction at 2 am is unlikely to be sufficient regarding the number of audiences you have misled.

2.4 Knowing limits: the Paris attacks

In the age of viral news, it sometimes seems as though the important thing is how many eyeballs you manage to attract. This eagerness may cause media organizations to succumb to broadcasting hoaxes. Sometimes a list of mistakes could itself become news, such as an article

⁴⁸ BBC Trust, p.75

⁴⁹ Belair-Gagnon, *ibid.* p.41

⁵⁰ Interview.

Buzzfeed carried 6 hours after the Paris attack in 2015.⁵¹ One of the items on this list was a rumour broadcast by the BBC claiming there was a fire in the refugee camp known as the Jungle. The presenter said:⁵²

We're getting unconfirmed reports ... and I must stress that they are unconfirmed reports from social media – that the camp known as the Jungle in Calais, which is a home to many, many migrants who try to make way across the Channel, that the camp is on fire ... the suspicion is that this could be a revenge attack ... but I would urge you to listen to that with a huge amount of caution ... we need to get that confirmed by the BBC correspondents ... but social media report suggests that the Jungle in Calais is on fire ... and the suggestion is that, and it is only a suggestion, is that it is a revenge attack.'

Within 20 minutes of the broadcast, the mistake was identified and the presenter interrupted two-way from Paris to correct the information. She explained the 'picture seems to be an old one taken some time ago' adding 'it is not pertinent to tonight or anything that has been happening in Paris.'⁵³ The same information was also put on the presenter's Twitter feed. To the author, the wording and caution given by the presenter were carefully crafted and adequately abiding by the BBC's rules.

But Jordan seems to expect a higher standard of judgement from his editors. He admits the 'atmosphere in the newsroom could get heated in the fast moving stories' but he says the editors must be 'careful of what kind of rumours you are prepared to report':⁵⁴

I think we should think twice about reporting if it is only a rumour ... because it had lots of implications ... and in this case it was premature and I think the fact we took it down very quickly is an indication that actually people thought it was a mistake to start speculating without real hard evidence of something like that, because it does have a lot of implications and it could have led to other things going on the basis of false information.

⁵¹ BuzzFeed, 'Social media rumours about the Paris Attacks you should not believe'

⁵² Comment by Martine Croxall on News 24, 13 November at 23:33

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Interview

But broadcasters are learning from each of these cases and quickly applying their experience in practice. As the siege of the Balaclan theatre continued, the presenter was very mindful to avoid gruesome descriptions of how hostages were ‘executed one by one by the attackers’, even though this was circulating widely in the social media. Jordan says it possibly reflects the discussion after the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris on 7 January 2015, and acknowledges that it was ‘wise to resist the temptation to describe what is going on in detail.’

During the January attacks, media outlets – French broadcasters in particular – were criticized for the ‘lack of most basic precautions’ by revealing the location where hostages were hiding during the siege of the kosher supermarket.⁵⁵ There was even an indication that the jihadist group was monitoring the live coverage shown by different networks. The case had reverberations in the UK, according to Jordan, and he says that the broadcasters should be reminded to be ‘circumspect about just broadcasting anything’ under similar circumstances.

Looking to the future, Jordan predicts ‘there will constantly be issues on UGC and it is going to get worse and bigger’. He says the way to deal with the issue is ‘to be careful and think if the story reflects the value of the BBC.’ One example he referred to was a recent story of a Vietnamese woman which was picked up from social media and turned into a story on the BBC website.

It was about an alleged name of an alleged Vietnamese woman which sounded rude and funny and we ran a story about that which turned out to be a hoax and was withdrawn. We ran the story primarily on the basis it seems that the story was running very big on the social media and it got picked up and turned into a story on our website. Some checks were made, and it was thought to be a genuine story. But the important thing is that it wasn't the kind of story the BBC should have been doing. So we have to be careful we don't disregard the BBC's editorial values in the face of suggestion that a story is 'big', as people say. At the time of 7/7, social media was nascent and didn't have the level of impact [it has now]. Things have grown hugely in the subsequent years, and there are huge challenges.

⁵⁵ Schechner, *France to investigate if media coverage of Paris shooting comprised investigations*; Shanker, *Kosher supermarket hostages sue French media for live coverage of hideout during Paris attack*

2.5 A new obligation: protecting eyewitnesses and staff

As newsrooms rely more and more on the materials delivered from a bystander or witness who happens to be caught up in the scene of an event, the issue emerges of how to protect their safety. Sam Dubberley, cofounder of Eyewitness Media Hub, a non-profit organization founded in 2014, emphasizes that the majority of people are trying to perform their civic duty by either reporting an event to the media or sharing it on social media. Therefore, Dubberley says, the news organization has a clear duty of care and responsibility for their safety.

BBC is mindful of the '15 minutes of fame' contributors are attracted to. In 2005, when a huge explosion occurred at the Buncefield oil depot in Hertfordshire, the corporation was approached by number of people, including children, who offered to return to the scene and capture 'better pictures' – putting themselves potentially at risk.⁵⁶

The BBC's guidance notes⁵⁷ make it clear that 'it is vital' not to 'encourage audience to risk their personal safety' and to consider cautioning those at different levels including 'reminders from presenters at relevant intervals.'

Yet the ethical issues surrounding the handling of user-generated content could be more complicated than this. Dubberley cites an example of the video capturing the final moments of the first police officer at the scene of the Charlie Hebdo attack. The witness and uploader took the clip down 15 minutes later but that did not stop the circulation of the footage via YouTube. Despite his request to news organizations not to show the moment of death, many around the world did.⁵⁸

There is also an issue of how to protect newsroom staff. Ten years ago, only a limited number of journalists were exposed to the most graphic sights of war or disasters, mainly those working on the front line or involved in editorial decisions in the newsroom. Now, almost any journalists in the newsroom can find themselves monitoring the same kind of material. A professional cameraman, who is arguably more aware of the power of the images, would shoot from a wider angle to avoid exposing the most gruesome moments. Raw materials delivered

⁵⁶ Sambrook, *Citizen journalism*

⁵⁷ BBC, *Guidance notes, user contributions in news output*

⁵⁸ Interview, 25 November 2015

through online media, on the other hand, tend to be more graphic. They give emotional power to the storytelling, but this has an impact on audiences and the staff in the newsroom alike.

In the past, when we talked about journalists and mental stress, the typical case was a front-line reporter covering conflicts and wars.⁵⁹ Now a new body of evidence is emerging that journalists who are exposed to trauma at second hand could be at greater risk than journalists on the ground. Anthony Feinstein, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Toronto, monitored over 100 journalists working with user-generated content in three international news organizations and found that people who viewed disturbing images frequently but for short periods of time were more likely to develop symptoms of psychological distress than those viewing the material for a prolonged time.⁶⁰ This study, allegedly the first of its kind, concluded that frequency, not duration, is more emotionally distressing to journalists and called on news organizations to offset the inherent risk.

Another study by Eyewitness Media Hub has underlined this trend.⁶¹ An analysis of the mental health of staff working for news, human rights, and humanitarian organizations found that 40% of 209 respondents said that viewing distressing eyewitness media has had a negative impact on their personal lives. Asked about what kind of material they found traumatic, many answered 'repeated, cumulative exposure', and this was particularly strongly felt among those who have specific skills or knowledge or speak a particular language.⁶² Many others mentioned 'sounds' – children in distress, hearing violence, or utterance of dying words. Timing was also important – distress increased when distressing content was shown suddenly, without notification.⁶³

Some media organizations, such as the BBC and the Australian ABC have support systems, but these are not widely available across the industry. The Eyewitness Media Hub study found that only 23% of respondents had access to peer support, 24% had relevant training, and 31% had

⁵⁹ According to the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, quoted in Taibi, *It's not just war reporters*, nearly one-third of war journalists will suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder during their careers; approximately six times more likely than workers in a career other than journalism.

⁶⁰ Feinstein et al., *Witnessing images of extreme violence*

⁶¹ Eyewitness Media Hub, *Making secondary trauma a primary issue*

⁶² Ibid. p.25

⁶³ Ibid. p.21

regular debrief with their managers. Dubberley says organizations should recognize the duty of care and provide adequate training and support, just as journalists who go to conflict zones undergo hostile environment training.

The realization that this is a serious management issue and it has to be managed well is important. We know we need to use the eyewitness material more so we need good managers to allow us to use it. What we have to think about is, are we allowed to be distressed when seeing these images? It is accepting that and managing it properly.

3 NHK and coverage of the 2011 earthquake

3.1 The Great East Japan Earthquake

At 2:46 pm on 11 March 2011, a record magnitude 9.0 earthquake occurred off the north-east coast of Japan setting off a tsunami which washed over 600 kilometres of coastal cities causing over 18,000 deaths and the destruction of 260,000 houses. The tsunami inundated the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, owned and operated by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), causing explosions in three of its six units. A huge amount of radioactive material was emitted into the environment, causing enormous public health concern. The accident was later declared as 'Level 7' (major accident, the highest level) on the International Nuclear Event Scale.

After the earthquake, NHK switched all its channels to emergency broadcasting within 2 minutes and the main channel ran 24-hour news coverage for 8 days. Japan is a disaster-prone country and Japanese newsrooms are relatively well equipped to respond to such events. NHK is connected with the Japan Meteorological Agency by a dedicated line and receives information such as Earthquake Early Warning (EEW),⁶⁴ details of the quake, and tsunami warnings, all of which are automatically generated as transcripts and graphics.

NHK has about 500 remote-controlled cameras installed at major infrastructures across the country and also some located on the coastline which captured live images of the tsunami engulfing everything in its path. Although these images indicated severe damage, specific information was not forthcoming either from official sources⁶⁵ or from NHK's own correspondents on the ground. Power was cut off in the whole northern region and communication lines were overwhelmed. Rescue teams, who usually function as credible

⁶⁴ The Early Earthquake Warning system was introduced in 2007 to mitigate earthquake hazards. The Japan Meteorological Agency operates more than 1000 seismographs across the country and when primary waves are detected, it estimates the epicentre and seismic intensity. The agency issues an EEW when the estimated maximum is above a certain level.

⁶⁵ The press club in Japan is often criticized as leading to over-reliance on government sources and 'churnalism'. Kenta Yamada, a professor of media, says journalists become more dependent on official sources and put them above other sources in times of national crisis when the situation is fluid and information is scarce. Kenta Yamada, 3.11 to Media, Transview, p.48

sources of information, were struggling to make their way into the flooded towns. As night fell the batteries of NHK's remote-controlled cameras ran out.

Kenji Sugai, who was head of the disaster reporting team in the current affair division, remembers the desperation in the newsroom as it struggled to update information.⁶⁶

We just couldn't manage to talk to anyone who could confirm even the smallest detail for us. I have reported disasters for 20 years but never experienced something like this ... and the lack of credible information itself was an indication that something unprecedented was happening.

Sugai recalls the moment when the head of the news division quietly approached him and asked if there was any other way of obtaining information. He knew his boss was implying the information circulating online, which continued after the tremor, albeit sparsely. But the corporation had no experience of quoting information from the internet without cross-checking either from their own correspondents or from official sources. Sugai admits he wavered a bit, but eventually responded that they should wait for the police or the self-defence force to come up with the latest information.

But as the night went on, there were hardly any updates. Then unsubstantiated information such as 'hundreds of bodies washed onshore on the outskirts of Sendai' and 'ten thousand missing in Minamisanriku' started to circulate around the municipalities' networks. Despite the lack of verification by the corporation's reporters, this time Sugai decided to break the conventional rule of the newsroom.

I know we were not following the verification procedure and cross-checking but I thought the priority was to inform the audience that something of unprecedented scale, so huge, so grave was happening. I wanted our audiences to remain vigilant so that there would be no further casualties, and call on nationwide support for the victims. Looking back, the actual casualty figures were not correct. But in emergencies, we cannot wait for 100% checks. We have to make different judgements.

Later that night, Yoshinori Adachi, a tech-savvy reporter who was managing one of the few official NHK Twitter feeds that then existed, spotted information about fire spreading in the city

⁶⁶ Sugai, interview

of Kesenuma near the coastline. It was posted by the local municipal authorities. The editors took a step further and decided to broadcast the information after checking the past tweets from that account, and deciding it was credible enough. Because no automated system was available, the first tweet information used for NHK's news was delivered on a handwritten board.

Once NHK had 'crossed its Rubicon' of using social media, its impact was quickly recognized at the senior level of newsgathering. A team dedicated to monitoring web content was quickly formed, given the name 'Social Listening Team'. The team now operates 24/7 and editorial guidelines for social media were issued in 2015.

Five years on from the earthquake, Kazuto Tsujimura, Head of Disaster Planning, explains that video and photos from bystanders are now an integral part of disaster coverage. NHK's reporters will never fail to contact official sources to confirm the occurrence of a major event. Yet there are cases like hurricanes when it takes hours for metrological agencies to establish what is happening. In such cases, NHK will broadcast initial information about the event using photos taken from multiple angles. Tsujimura says that 'every crisis bring new developments' and adds 'we now know the audiences at the scene will be ahead of us, and the broadcaster's role is to be a place to come to check if the information is accurate or not'.⁶⁷

3.2 Avoiding anxiety

The Fukushima nuclear accident, the world's worst since Chernobyl, caused massive radiation leaks and forced the evacuation of more than 160,000 people, many of whom have yet to return to their homes. The way the government and the scientific community have dealt with the issue has been heavily criticized. Kiyoshi Kurokawa, who led the National Diet's inquiry, concluded the event was a 'profoundly manmade disaster'⁶⁸ and lambasted the government for choosing 'to release information purely from a subjective perspective, rather than reacting to the needs of the public'.

Mr. Edano, the cabinet secretary, repeatedly stated that there were no immediate health effects from the release of radiation, giving the public a false sense of security. The necessity and urgency of the evacuation was never adequately explained from the

⁶⁷ Interview

⁶⁸ The National Diet of Japan, *The official report of the Fukushima nuclear accident*, p.9

residents' point of view, and the government never followed up with evidence that would support his statements. This caused a great deal of anxiety among the public.

The media did not come through unscathed. Legacy media was seen as uncritically repeating the information released piecemeal by the government. In a survey carried out half a year on from the quake, 75.5% of respondents said the newspapers' earthquake coverage was satisfactory, but only 38.9% were satisfied with the reporting of nuclear leakage.⁶⁹ The sentiments are echoed in comments NHK received from its audience:

'[You] should have given more analysis rather than parroting the government line.'

'Disclose everything ... we wanted to know how far we should evacuate if worst comes to worst'.⁷⁰

Martin Fackler, former bureau chief of the *New York Times*, recalls how he struggled to obtain information for the first few days as the situation worsened. Fackler expresses his frustration:

The government was telling us nothing, TEPCO was telling us nothing. We had very little information from the scientific community in Japan. Here we are trying to figure this out, and then we had first one, then two, then three explosions.⁷¹

However, Geoff Brumfiel, who reported on the crisis for the scientific journal *Nature*, gives a different perspective. As he followed the information from London, he is quoted as saying he was surprised at how quickly the information was coming and how much there was:⁷²

TEPCO was providing preliminary radiation numbers within 24 hours of the accident, and real-time updates on conditions at the reactor.

Brumfiel points out that the real problem was not the lack of information but lack of communication. He observes that the media outlets had only a few reporters with expertise in radiation physics and therefore they struggled to digest the information and understand what the risk actually was.⁷³

⁶⁹ Central Research Service, *National Survey on Media*

⁷⁰ NHK Special, *NHK and the Great East Japan Earthquake*

⁷¹ Fackler, quoted in Pacchioli, *Communication in the Fukushima crisis*

⁷² Brumfiel, in Pacchioli, *ibid.*

⁷³ Brumfiel, in Pacchioli, *ibid.*; also Endo, *How the media covered megaquake and nuclear accident*, p.125

NHK has several reporters in its science division who had been covering nuclear issues for years. They were literally overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information and the speed of developments. Ken Todoriki accepts that

*the nature of nuclear disaster prohibited reporters gathering information on the ground, and we had to rely on information from the cabinet and governmental agencies.*⁷⁴

The broadcaster cut in live when the government was giving a press conference, followed by commentator's or reporter's analysis. Although some efforts were made, such as the broadcast warning residents in the Fukushima area 'to stay inside, close doors and windows and turn off the air conditioner; cover mouth with masks and handkerchiefs' earlier than the government decision,⁷⁵ the government's press conferences occupied a vast amount of air time, leading to criticism that the mainstream media were uncritical of the government.⁷⁶

The backdrop to the coverage is the value placed by the government on social order and stability. One evident example can be seen in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication urging internet providers to respond to 'inaccurate information and rumours that may trigger anxiety in the disaster-hit areas'.⁷⁷ This 'avoid panic' mantra is widely shared in the media. There is a well-known episode from the 1923 Kanto earthquake when 6,000 people were lynched after a rumour spread that mobs were poisoning the wells.⁷⁸ Realizing that the only way to confront panic is by accurate and timely information, the public broadcaster was established in the following year.

The responsibility of maintaining public order deeply affects editorial decision-making. One reporter at the science department news desk looks back at how he handled the unprecedented nuclear disaster and admits he was

⁷⁴ NHK, *Witnessing the Great East Japan Earthquake*, p.139

⁷⁵ *Guardian*, news blog, Japan tsunami and earthquake

⁷⁶ Japan Press Research Institute, *The earthquake, nuclear and the role of the media*, p.81

⁷⁷ Press release, 6 April 2011, http://www.soumu.go.jp/menu_news/s-news/01kiban08_01000023.html

⁷⁸ Imai, *From public broadcasting to public media*, in *Journalism facing crisis*, p.162

*very cautious not to get wrong information out, because that may cause panic, especially when you consider the nature of nuclear radiation, something one can't see ... obviously that adds extra fear.*⁷⁹

3.3 Delivering radiation exposure

One of the issues later scrutinized within the corporation was the debacle over the government's simulation of dispersed radioactive materials. The System for the Prediction of Environmental Emergency Dose Information, widely known by the acronym SPEEDI, was developed by the Japanese government following the 1979 Three Mile Island nuclear accident in the United States. The system was intended to project, on basis of meteorological data, how radioactive fallout could potentially spread. Residents near the nuclear plant were anxious for such data to decide whether or not to flee their homes, and in which direction. But the government withheld the data for almost 2 weeks after the explosion, even as foreign agencies such as France's *Institut de Radioprotection et de Sureté Nucléaire* or Germany's *Deutscher Wetterdienst* carried their own simulations.⁸⁰

When the government eventually disclosed the prediction, the map showed intense fallout to the north-west of the nuclear plant. This meant that some residents who had decided to evacuate had headed straight into the path of the fallout instead of moving away.⁸¹ This caused public fury, directed towards the media as well as the government. As Fackler says, the public suspected

*the media should have known the facts – or worse, had known but deliberately withheld the information and sided with the governments against the public.*⁸²

NHK's science correspondent was aware of SPEEDI and went to ask the government about it on 12 March as a huge explosion took place. The government source replied that the ability of the system was compromised because of the power outage.⁸³ The reporter wrote a short report

⁷⁹ NHK Special, *ibid.*

⁸⁰ Japan Press Research Institute, *ibid.*, p.74

⁸¹ Hayashi, *How Japan stumbled in forecasting fallout in one town*

⁸² Fackler, *Media and Politics in Japan: Fukushima and Beyond*, speech at Chatham House, 6 November 2014

⁸³ Kondo, interview

explaining this system malfunction.⁸⁴ However, the media chased up the story and on 23 March *Asahi Shinbun*, a major newspaper, revealed that the government had been using SPEEDI since the immediate aftermath of the explosion but withheld the data.⁸⁵ On the same day the cabinet secretary was pressed to explain this to the public and admitted that the SPEEDI data indicated ‘there are some areas where the reading exceeded 100 millisievert outside the 30 km evacuation zone’.⁸⁶ However he maintained that ‘further analysis is needed’ and ‘the data does not mean that residents should evacuate immediately’.⁸⁷ In a press conference held by the Nuclear Safety Commission, the chairman emphasized that the ‘data is based on limited readings, and further monitoring is needed’ and urged the media ‘not to use the map to show how dangerous it is in certain areas.’⁸⁸

When editors at NHK discussed how to handle the SPEEDI map, some put great weight on the words of the government and took a cautious stance. They were concerned about the possibility of raising anxiety by broadcasting what was explained as unestablished information. Others disagreed, but in the end the broadcaster released the map 10 days later.⁸⁹

Several months later, NHK set up a task force to review its coverage of the crisis and extract lessons from it. Yasuhiro Kondo, a science editor who chaired the meeting, says there was an intense discussion on whether or not to compromise accuracy to deliver the information the audience the most needs.⁹⁰ Referring to how the Japanese Information Act allows the release of information when the life and safety of individuals is at stake, the team concluded that in the future, the corporation will not dismiss information just because it is not verified.

If we follow our conventional way of verification – pursuing absolute accuracy and even truth – there will be times when we cannot broadcast the information people needed

⁸⁴ NHK news, 16 March 2011

⁸⁵ *Asahi* newspaper, 23 March 2011

⁸⁶ The data released by the government was not the prediction of fallout, but a simulation of how radioactive iodine might accumulate in the thyroid gland of a 1-year-old child who had stayed outside all day from 12 March to 23 March. 100 millisievert is considered to be a benchmark for taking a stabilizer.

⁸⁷ NHK news

⁸⁸ NHK Special, *ibid.*

⁸⁹ NHK Special, *ibid.*

⁹⁰ Interview

most. But what if it is to do with the safety and security of our audiences ... we can't ignore it. But when broadcasting, we will be careful and explain about the uncertainty surrounding that information and warn that it may change in the future and we will follow up on that ... by doing so, we will gain the trust of the audience.

Some academics suggest the fear of anxiety and panic is overstated – and point out that it was the leadership figures who had panicked, not the ordinary citizens. Many referred to Rebecca Solnit's book *A Paradise Built in Hell*, where she introduces the term 'elite panic'. She argues that in time of crisis, the leadership and the establishment tend to have misguided fears of civilians being frightened and disoriented. Out of that fear, elites end up responding repressively, and this is amplified by complicit media output.⁹¹ Solnit shows unwavering trust in human nature and concludes that it is in times of crisis when humans show remarkable spirit of generosity and cooperation.

Ben O'Loughlin, a specialist in communication, agrees about the strength and ability of audiences:

A patchwork of different information may be complicating but it will provide more information and the audiences will be more informed. They will have more competing information that will allow them to decide whose information they will trust more. If not left in the dark, I believe they will do the right thing.⁹²

Kondo, who moved on to take up the job of Head of Online News, predicts dramatic changes ahead:⁹³

Reporters' ability to verify will be more tested, especially in certain fields such as science. For example, think about how we are reporting the outbreak of Zika virus ... things are not established. When reporting issues with many unknowns, the reporter must be able to distinguish between authentic and evidence-based information and unreliable material. You have to judge that based on your experience and accumulation of knowledge. And the organization must support those making the difficult decision.

⁹¹ Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*; also Ikeuchi, *Elite Panic*

⁹² Interview

⁹³ Interview

3.4 Delivering the uncertainty

Another point the corporation debated intensely was how to warn the audience about possible danger when the real outcome is uncertain. When an earthquake occurs, the Japan Meteorological Agency sends the preliminary reading direct to the newsroom and when the tremor exceeds a certain benchmark, NHK automatically broadcasts that information. When doing so, the corporation traditionally adopted a detached approach so that it would not trigger panic on the part of the audience. Newsreaders would deliver the information in a rather monotone voice, being mindful to distinguish facts from prediction. They would often express reservations using phrases such as 'it is expected' or 'may happen'. They would urge the audiences to 'stay vigilant and evacuate if necessary', but would always remind the audience to 'remain calm'.

In the wake of the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 the tsunami warning was delivered within seconds and newsreaders warned the audience of the danger 21 times in 30 minutes. But the message did not come across strongly enough and about 90% of the deaths were caused by drowning.⁹⁴ Since it took 30 minutes for the tsunami to reach the shore, many would have survived if they had fled to higher ground immediately. A newsreader looks back with regret and contemplates how he could have made a difference.⁹⁵

As I watched a wall of black wave absorbing everything I struggled to find the words to express what was in front of me. I felt words are powerless; I couldn't do anything to help those facing death. Now I look back and question if I had to be so careful and precise about the detailed figures. Rather we should have concentrated our effort to warn of the danger and urged people to evacuate using strong, even forceful language.

Editors also struggled to select streaming images. The first tsunami warning predicted waves as high as 3 metres in Iwate and 6 metres in Miyagi. But the images of the coastal towns captured by the remote-controlled cameras remained calm. As producers frantically switched from one camera to another, searching for an early sign of changing sea level, news of a fire in central Tokyo broke in. The live camera switched to the capital. The tremor in the city of 13 million was

⁹⁴ Cabinet Office, *Disaster Prevention White Paper*, July 2011, http://www.bousai.go.jp/kaigirep/hakusho/h23/bousai2011/html/honbun/1b_1h_1s_2.htm

⁹⁵ Shinichi Takeda, in *Witnessing the Great East Japan Earthquake*, p.49

small compared to the effect in the northern towns, but Toyko's streets and stations were packed with people trying to flee. Fire broke out and smoke was seen rising from one industrial complex storing liquid petroleum gas. The camera went back and forth from the metropolitan Tokyo area to the coastal towns. When the meteorological agency doubled the predicted height of the tsunami to 10 metres, the huge wave was already pouring into the ports of Kamaishi and Kesenuma, easily overtopping the sea wall.

The editor followed the planned tsunami warning procedure, and also used the most powerful images available – the regular production process of broadcast news. But Noriyuki Oogi, then controller, looks back to that day and wonders how he would now handle the dilemma of choosing the right tone of warning and images to illustrate the fast-developing story. 'In hindsight' he says, 'with the increasing danger of the tsunami, we should have emphasized warning our audience'⁹⁶

I still think we managed to do as we had planned. But we failed to go beyond that. We did not have the flexibility to change the delivery, nor change the language according to the changing situation. We should have emphasized the likelihood of a huge tsunami when showing footage of a port. We should have kept warning people even if it ended up as a false alarm. I should have had the stomach to keep warning people until we knew it was safe.

NHK has now revamped its use of precise language and footage in disaster reporting. Editors acknowledged that the images of a calm sea broadcast in a composed delivery style fostered a false sense of confidence among the public that the earthquake was just another minor tremor of the kind they encounter regularly. Scientists call this 'normalcy bias' – a state of denial in a time of crisis when people tend to believe optimistic information until they feel in imminent danger.⁹⁷ There were examples of municipal authorities using strong language to encourage residents to evacuate, which proved to be successful in reducing the number of casualties. NHK now adopts more forceful language even when the outcome is uncertain, and strongly suggests people should flee. NHK has shifted away from putting calmness above everything else. Sugai accepts:

⁹⁶ Noriyuki Oogi, *ibid.*, p.57

⁹⁷ Inoue, *Meireicho wo tsukatta tsunami hinan no yobikake*

What we learned is that when it is to do with lives of the audiences, we have to step aside from the regular procedure and make different judgements. In a split second we would have to question ourselves and decide: what is the priority at that specific moment, to whom and why are we delivering that information ... But what makes the biggest difference is what we deliver in peaceful times, in our regular news and programs, continuously informing the public about dangers of disasters so that they are better prepared ... that is the whole meaning of the disaster reporting.

4 Conclusion

Every editor in the newsroom routinely faces dilemmas, even while editing small stories for the daily bulletin. How can I convey the horror of this incident without using gruesome footage? How can I ensure fairness and maintain balance in a story with numerous claims and counterclaims? How can I make this phrase easier to understand without compromising detail and accuracy? The list goes on. When it comes to national emergencies, the dilemmas are more acute. Editors could be more exposed and charged. And the reality is that because journalism is the result of human endeavour, it is impossible to eliminate errors.

When I asked the interviewees about the delicate balance between accuracy and speed, everyone said there is no single solution. Every situation is different and demands different approaches. Tim Suter warns of the temptation of writing detailed rules:⁹⁸

Detailed rules are dangerous. They are quite helpful, in a sense, for the editors because there is something to fall back on if you look into the rule book that says, I am not allowed to do this or I mustn't do that ... but actually what the editors are paid to do is to balance the rules with common sense and the awareness of the story. Principles help you to adapt, deal with any given situation, but they place a lot of responsibility on the editors to make the judgement. You need the editorial confidence and give support to people who are asked to make some horribly difficult decision.

Sambrook adds:⁹⁹

One of the things you have to hang on to is big principles. You can get lost in little examples ... what is actually a little difference. You have to say what is the big principle ... what is the pillar and what is changing there. And if you can do that you can get a much stronger sense of professional journalists and the public and so on in these events.

But 'big principles' are difficult to establish. There is no universally agreed principle that would apply to everyone in all cases. Kenta Yamada suggest that one way is always to be aware that journalists are engaged in an ethical profession:¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Suter, interview

⁹⁹ Sambrook, interview

¹⁰⁰ Yamada, interview

Journalists have to continuously think and discuss about ethics – what it means to be fair, independent, objective, diverse, truthful and so on – and understand that they are engaged in an ethical profession. The absence of such awareness will lead to fallacy of putting too much weight on compliance in the organization. And what does ‘rule’ mean in this country? It often leads to rules set up by the government.

According to Yamada, this is especially important in Japan where consensus and conformity are so respected. Such a mentality could be felt in journalism through the press club system.

Looking around the world, newspapers that routinely generate outstanding journalism are not rule based but governed by values. Luckhurst and Phippen say ‘ethics are a potent weapon’, and when judiciously applied could turn principle into practice. They maintain that, unlike rules which are too easily regarded as little more than an incentive not to get caught, ethics will remain appropriate in the infinitely variable circumstances that arise in real newsrooms.¹⁰¹

The digital revolution and the rise of social media have brought about a huge conceptual change in journalism. By looking into cases in the UK and Japan I have attempted to illustrate how editorial decision-making has also been reshaped, especially in the traditional dilemma of ‘speed versus accuracy’. I observed that:

- Accuracy is still core and fundamental to good journalism, but when dealing with a fast-moving story in the current digital era, it is not perfect accuracy per se that matters.
- Being relevant is important. Publishing stories when the audience want them, not when journalists have finished verifying them, is important. The audience know more and the media will lose control of the story.
- The test is whether journalists have make appropriate efforts and taken reasonable steps to verify and triangulate the pieces of information available at that time.
- Distinguish between what you have managed to verify and unsubstantiated information.
- Know when is the crucial moment to broadcast information even if it is uncorroborated, and when to hold back. Think of the values that you stand for.

¹⁰¹ Luckhurst and Phippen, *Good behaviour can be taught*, pp.56–61

- Be a trusted guide. This is one aspect of the public broadcaster that may distinguish itself from private or newly set-up platforms.
- Audiences want to know how journalists arrived at the information. Be transparent about the process and be honest about what you don't know. Make appropriate corrections.

As I continue to ponder about my 'big principles', I learned of a story about *Ishinomaki Hibi Shimibun*, a local newspaper in a town near the epicentre of the 2011 earthquake. The paper literally lost everything in the earthquake – electricity, computers, rotary press – but they went on to publish their newspaper using what they were left with: pen and paper. For the next 6 days, reporters wrote their stories on poster-size paper and posted the handwritten posters at the entrances of relief centres around the city.

Kouichi Oumi, the president of the paper, looks back and says,

When your office is under water and you've lost everything, and you are on the verge of not printing your paper for the first time in the 99 years of the paper's history ... you are faced with fundamental questions: what is our mission and for whom do we serve?

The hardship gave them clarity. And I feel that the best and the only way to establish the guiding principle is to ask yourself the most fundamental question – what is this news for – and have the courage to follow through your decision.

Interviewees

UK

- Sam Dubberley Founder, Eyewitness media, 25th Nov 2015
- Nik Gowing Presenter 10th Dec 2015
- Ben O'Loughlin Professor of International Relations, Royal Holloway, University of London, 27th Oct 2015
- David Jordan Director, Editorial Policy and Standards, BBC 8th Dec 2015
- Richard Sambrook Former Head of News, BBC 4th Nov 2015
- Tim Suter Former partner of Ofcom, 15th Dec 2015
- Stephen Whittle Former Director of Editorial Policy, BBC 5th Nov 2015

Japan

- Yasunori Adachi Correspondent of Current Affairs, NHK 6th Dec 2015
 - Yasuhiro Kondo Head of Online News, NHK 27th Jan 2016
 - Kenji Sugai Former Head of Disaster reporting team, Current Affairs Department, NHK 30th Nov 2015
 - Kazuto Tsujimura Former Head of Disaster and Safety Information Centre, NHK 1st Dec 2015
 - Kenta Yamada Professor, Senshu University 3rd Feb 2016
-

Bibliography

Stuart Allan, *Citizen Witnessing* (Polity, 2013)

Stuart Allan, *Citizen journalism and the rise of "mass self-communication": Reporting the London Bombings* (Global Media Journal: Australian Edition, January 2007)

http://www.hca.westernsydney.edu.au/gmjau/archive/iss1_2007/pdf/HC_FINAL_Stuart%20Allan.pdf#search='stuart+allan+citizen+journalism+london+bombing

Trushar Barot, *UGC: Source, check and stay on top of technology* (BBC, 17 December 2013)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/collegeofjournalism/entries/1fbd9b88-1b29-3008-aae6-1cab15e13179>

BBC Academy, *Truth and accuracy* (BBC)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/journalism/article/art20130702112133794>

BBC, *BBC launches new editorial guidelines* (BBC Press Office, 23 June 2005)

http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/06_june/23/editorial.shtml

BBC, *Editorial Guidelines:Accuracy* (BBC)

BBC, *Speeches Stephen Whittle: public service broadcasting in the new media age* (BBC Press Office, 7 February 2002)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/speeches/stories/whittleiic.shtml>

BBC Trust, *From seesaw to wagon wheel* (BBC, July 2007)

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/18_06_07impartialitybbc.pdf#search='from+seesaw+to+wagon+wheel'

Valerie Belair-Gagnon, *Revising impartiality: social media and journalism at the BBC* (Symbolic Interaction, Volume 36, Issue 4, Nov 2013)

Valerie Belair-Gagnon, *Social media at BBC news* (Routledge, 2015)

Daniel Bennett, *Digital media and reporting conflict* (Routledge, 2013)

Helen Boaden, *The role of citizen journalism in modern democracy* (BBC, 13 Nov 2008)

http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2008/11/the_role_of_citizen_journalism.html

Mercedes Bunz, *How social networking is changing journalism* (Guardian, 18 September 2009)

<http://www.theguardian.com/media/pda/2009/sep/18/oxford-social-media-convention-2009-journalism-blogs>

Central Research Service, *National survey on media* (May 2012)

<http://www.crs.or.jp/backno/No655/6551.htm>

Glenda Cooper, *Do mainstream news outlets have a moral obligation to citizen Journalists?* (Nieman Lab, 15 July 2015)

<http://www.niemanlab.org/2015/07/do-mainstream-news-outlets-have-a-moral-obligation-to-citizen-journalists/>

Clair Cozens, *BBC news will 'take more risks'* (*Guardian*, 10 Nov 2005)

<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2005/nov/10/bbc.tvnews>

Sam Dubberley, Elizabeth Griffin, Haluk Mert Bal, *Making secondary trauma a primary issue: A study of eyewitness media and vicarious trauma on the digital frontline* (Eyewitness Media Hub, November 2015)

Economist, *The meltdown and the media* (*Economist*, 16 Jan 2012)

<http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2012/01/japans-nuclear-crisis>

Matthew Eltringham, *'The line of verification': a new approach to objectivity for social media* (BBC, 21 Jan 2011)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/collegeofjournalism/entries/c5d1a256-f8af-3c65-b59c-e61fe223f200>

Matthew Eltringham, *The new frontline is inside the newsroom* (BBC, 28 March 2011)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/collegeofjournalism/entries/95fe7dae-3ca2-3200-b1b8-306783a2047e>

Matthew Eltringham, *UGC five years on* (BBC, 6 July 2010)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/collegeofjournalism/entries/1cc3d19f-5cb7-3f14-b598-76833d680c61>

Emergency Journalism, Report- *'Connecting the last mile: the role of communications in the Great East Japan Earthquake'* (European Journalism Centre, 14 March 2013)

<http://emergencyjournalism.net/report-connecting-the-last-mile-the-role-of-communications-in-the-great-east-japan-earthquake/>

Kaoru Endo, *How the media covered megaquake and nuclear accident* (Tokyo Denki University Press: 2012)

Eyewitness media hub, *Making secondary trauma a primary issue* (Eyewitness Media Hub, 15 Jun 2015)

<https://medium.com/@emhub/making-secondary-trauma-a-primary-issue-24a802abe461#.zffbl8dw9>

Martin Fackler, *Media and politics in Japan: Fukushima and beyond* (Chatham House, 6 Nov 2014)

https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20141106Summary.pdf

Anthony Feinstein, Blair Audet, Elizabeth Waknine, *Witnessing images of extreme violence: a psychological study of journalists in the newsroom* (*Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 6 Aug 2014)

Mark Frankel, *#Paris: UGC expertise can no longer be a niche newsroom skill* (BBC, 20 November 2015)

http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/collegeofjournalism/entries/fbb87059-ab13-4b79-b5ad-5a47a417fb8a?ns_campaign=bbc_college&ns_linkname=corporate&ns_mchannel=social&ns_source=twitter

Owen Gibson, *Rolling with the punches* (*Guardian*, 14 Nov 2005)

<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2005/nov/14/mondaymediasection>

Nik Gowing, *'Skyful of lies' and black swans* (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2009)

Guardian, *BBC admits it made mistake using Mumbai Twitter coverage* (*Guardian*, 5 Dec 2008)

<http://www.theguardian.com/media/pda/2008/dec/05/bbc-twitter>

Guardian, *BBC unveils new ethics code* (*Guardian*, 23 June 2005)

<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2005/jun/23/broadcasting.bbc1>

Yuka Hayashi, *How Japan stumbled in forecasting fallout in one town* (*Wall Street Journal*, 11 Aug 2011)

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304567604576453342206030686>

Charlotte Higgins, *This New Noise* (Guardian Books: 2015)

Satoru Ikeuchi, *Elite panic* (*Yohiuri Shinbun*, 30 Nov 2012)

Yoshinori Imai, *From public broadcasting to public media in Journalism facing crisis* (Waseda University Press, 2013)

Hiroyuki Inoue, *Meireicho wo tsukatta tsunamni hinan no yobikake* (Hoso kenkyu to chosa, March 2012)

https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/summary/research/report/2012_03/20120302.pdf

Ishinomaki Hibi shinbun ed, *6 mai no kabeshinnbun* (Kadokawa SSC, July 2011)

Japan Cabinet Office, *Disaster prevention white paper* (Cabinet Office, July 2011)

http://www.bousai.go.jp/kaigirep/hakusho/h23/bousai2011/html/honbun/1b_1h_1s_2.htm

Japan Press Research Institute, *The earthquake, nuclear and the role of the media* (Japan Press Research Institute, 2013)

Ginko Kobayashi, *After tsunami, Japanese media swept up in wave of distrust* (European Journalism Centre, 13 March 2013)

<http://ejc.net/magazine/article/after-tsunami-japanese-media-swept-up-in-wave-of-distrust#.Vt7sxX2LTIU>

Dave Lee, *#Paris: the power, the horror, and the distortions* (BBC, 14 November 2015)

<http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-34819181>

Cathy Loughran, *#CharlieHebdo: Minute-by-minute decisions over UGC* (BBC Academy, 13 January 2015)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/collegeofjournalism/entries/7ad37c6f-c97e-4d6f-a8e6-2cee8a4136ad>

Tim Luckhurst, Lesley Phippen, *Good behaviour can be taught* (*British Journalism Review*, Vol.25 No.1, 2014) <http://www.bjr.org.uk/archive+good+behaviour+can+be+taught>

National Diet of Japan, *The official report of the Fukushima nuclear accident* (2012)

https://www.nirs.org/fukushima/naic_report.pdf

NHK, *Witnessing the Great East Japan Earthquake*, (NHK, August 2011)

Brendan Nyhan, *Fast and wrong beats slow and right* (*Columbia Journalism Review*, April 22 2013)

http://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/speed-induced_misinformation_boston_bombings_coverage.php

Ofcom, *Public Service Annual Report 2013* http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/broadcast/reviews-investigations/psb-review/psb2013/PSB_Annual_Report.pdf

David Pacchioli, *Communication in the Fukushima crisis* (*Oceanus Magazine*, 9 May 2013)

<http://www.whoi.edu/oceanus/feature/communicating-science>

Tom Phillips, Adrian Senecat, Jim Waterson, *Social media rumours about the Paris attacks that you shouldn't believe* (*BuzzFeed*, 14 Nov 2015)

<http://www.buzzfeed.com/tomphillips/paris-attacks-social-media-rumours#.ey7xLqBka>

Hong Qu, *Social Media and the Boston bombings* (*Nieman Reports*, Spring 2013)

<http://niemanreports.org/articles/social-media-and-the-boston-bombings/>

Tom Regan, *On the web, speed instead of accuracy* (*Nieman Reports*, Spring 1998)

<http://niemanreports.org/articles/on-the-web-speed-instead-of-accuracy/>

Alastair Reid, *Accuracy vs Speed: how the BBC and ITV approach breaking news* (*News Rewired*, 20 Sept 2013)

<https://www.newsrewired.com/2013/09/20/accuracy-or-speed-how-the-bbc-and-itv-approach-breaking-news/>

Alastair Reid, *10 ways journalists and newsrooms can limit the impact of graphic images* (*First Draft News*, 4 November 2015)

<https://medium.com/1st-draft/10-ways-journalists-and-newsrooms-can-limit-the-impact-of-graphic-images-ffbfa06b36fe#.80pphi4vq>

Richard Sambrook, *Citizen journalism*, in *International news reporting: Frontlines and Deadline*, ed. by John Owen and Heather Purday (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008)

Richard Sambrook, *Citizen journalism and the BBC* (*Nieman Reports*, Winter 2005)

<http://niemanreports.org/articles/citizen-journalism-and-the-bbc/>

Sam Schechner, *France to investigate if media coverage of Paris shootings compromised Investigations* (*Wall Street Journal*, 13 Jan 2015)

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/france-to-investigate-if-media-coverage-of-paris-shootings-compromised-investigations-1421081846>

Jonathan Seitz, *Journalism & the Boston Marathon Bombings* (*Nieman Reports*, Spring 2013)

<http://niemanreports.org/articles/journalism-the-boston-marathon-bombings/>

Sneha Shankar, *Kosher supermarket hostages sue French media for live coverage of hideout during Paris attack* (*International Business Times*, 3 April 2015)

<http://www.ibtimes.com/kosher-supermarket-hostages-sue-french-media-live-coverage-hideout-during-paris-1868930>

Rebecca Solnit, *A paradise built in hell: the extraordinary communities that arise in disaster* (Viking, 2009)

Josh Stearns, *A crash course in verification and misinformation from the Boston Marathon Bombing* (stearns.wordpress.com, 9 May 2013)

<https://stearns.wordpress.com/2013/05/09/a-crash-course-in-verification-and-misinformation-in-the-wake-of-the-boston-bombing/>

Tom Sutcliffe, *Twittering on is not the way to provide news* (*Independent*, 2 Dec 2008)

<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/columnists/thomas-sutcliffe/tom-sutcliffe-twittering-on-is-not-the-way-to-provide-news-1047115.html>

Cathrine Taibi, *It's not just war reporters* (*Huffington Post*, 19 May 2015)

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/19/secondhand-trauma-journalists_n_7305992.html

Takanobu Tanaka, *NHK's disaster coverage and public value from below: analyzing the TV coverage of the Great East Japan disaster* (*Keio Communication Review*, No. 35, 2013)

<http://www.mediacom.keio.ac.jp/publication/pdf2013/takenobu.pdf>

Etsushi Tanifuji, *Kiki to mukiau journalism* (Waseda Daigaku Shuppanbu, 2013)

Stephen Whittle, *Journalists as citizens* (*British Journalism Review*, Vol. 16 No. 4, 2005)

http://www.bjr.org.uk/archive+journalists_as_citizens

David Weinberger, *Transparency is the new objectivity* (Blog, 19 July 2009)

<http://www.hyperorg.com/blogger/2009/07/19/transparency-is-the-new-objectivity/>

Lee Wilkins et al, *Reporting disasters on deadline* (Routledge, 2012)

Stephen Whittle, *Public Service Broadcasting in the new digital age* (BBC, 7 February 2002)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/speeches/stories/whittleic.shtml>

Kenta Yamada, *3.11 to Media* (Transview, 2013)

Anthony Zurcher, *Journalistic ethics at internet speed* (BBC, 26 May 2014)

<http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-echochambers-27553248>

Video

Sky News, <http://news.sky.com/video/1509501/as-it-happened-how-7-7-news-broke>

NHK and the Great East Japan Earthquake (NHK Special, 22 March 2012)

<http://www6.nhk.or.jp/special/detail/index.html?aid=20120322>

References

BBC Editorial Guideline

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines>

BBC Social Media Guidance for Staff

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/26_03_15_bbc_news_group_social_media_guidance.pdf

BBC User Contributions in News Output <http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidance/user-contributions-news/guidance-full>

Japan Newspaper Publisher and Editors Association, Canon of Journalism

<http://www.pressnet.or.jp/english/about/canon/>

NHK Editorial Guidelines

<http://www.nhk.or.jp/pr/keiei/bc-guideline/>