

Chapter 7

Media

Media

Picture transformed into drama

By Shoko Hayashi, 40s, Kobe

I anxiously attended the lecture, "Understanding media," the other day. I attended it because the material for the lecture was news programs on the Great Hanshin Earthquake. I watched two programs by Yomiuri and Kansai television stations filmed the day after the quake. I had not seen them at the time. The victims who didn't receive much damaged probably did watch them. These two programs appeared to have been made for and sent to the viewers in Tokyo by Tokyo staff who ran to the Hanshin area as soon as they heard about the disaster, without considering that viewers could include victims themselves.

At first Yomiuri station played music that elicited sympathy of the audience, even though it was straight news program. In a scene of people shopping at a supermarket, the picture was fast-forwarded, which made the audience laugh. But it was not supposed to be funny.

Then with the music still playing in the background, there was a long shot of burning area of the Nagata Ward still smoking the day after the quake. Many bodies were surely still under the rubble at that time, and it appeared only as a drama. As a victim of the earthquake, I got angry at such footage.

On the other hand, Kansai television station didn't use any music, and provided some information for victims, only little of which Yomiuri introduced. I felt a sense of incongruity as Kansai introduced the Self-Defense Forces as playing an active role in the earthquake rescue by transporting relief supplies. This is certainly true, but highlighting only the SDF is characteristic to Kansai station, which according to the lecturer is sensitive to the government.

In particular, I can't forget the images focusing on gender roles on both news programs. In both, women take care of children, cry in a mortuary and receive supplies. Men were portrayed as having an active role in rescuing, supplying goods, leading people to shelters, and protesting against the government. In fact, both men and women worked together to rescue people and took care of children in the aftermath of the earthquake. Because the media had preconception of specific gender duties, they depicted their desired images and cut out the rest.

Watching those programs, we should not forget that this disaster turned into a

drama only for those viewers who had not experienced the quake, nor that the media was responsible for this dramatization.

News reported and not reported

By Akiko Wada, 50s, Toyonaka

It felt as if the world had violently gone into spasms. That was how we felt the shock of the massive January 17 earthquake.

While I thought that the cherry blossoms would not bloom this year, nature brought changes, as usual, and I was granted the sign of seasons shifting.

The earthquake victim toll that had appeared everyday in the papers seemed to vanish from the pages overnight. Now the sensationalized coverage of the Aum Supreme Truth (Aum Shinrikyo) dominates media coverage.

Because municipal roads were torn to pieces and phone lines were down after the quake, we turned to television to get information and have an image of what was really going on around us. My home was damaged only partially, but so many people have since moved out, and many partially destroyed homes remained in my neighborhood. I raced through the channels, hoping to catch a glimpse of my town, but there was little to no information on Toyonaka. I often heard that even people in Osaka had no idea how badly Toyonaka was damaged because reports were primarily focused on Kobe. While it is natural that the media would concentrate on reporting the worst damaged area, I was anxious and afraid that victims in other areas were suffering as well. I learned from this event the power and threat of the media, which is believed to document all events. The disaster was broadcast as though it was a scene or spectacle for the media. Every network repeatedly broadcast the same location. I wonder just how useful the commentary of Tokyo reporters was in the face of the disaster. The in-depth information and updates of each affected area via network cooperation have been more beneficial to the victims and their futures.

The difference between live coverage and print media is that the scene on television contains a strong message in and of itself. In the footage, we saw passionate volunteer activities that went far beyond gender roles.

One show introduced some life styles in the shelters. We saw a young male student who babysat, changed diapers and took a long time to prepare dumplings for the shelter residents because he thought they didn't have enough to eat there. The young man did these chores matter-of-factly.

Yet, in a column on February 20, a male scholar stated in Yomiuri newspaper that the Hanshin tragedy only confirmed how useless the feminist argument was; he

claimed that after the quake men and women naturally reverted to their specific gender duties. In reality, I saw the opposite.

It is only natural for a human being to help anyone in extreme adversity regardless of gender or race.

After the earthquake, media boasted, "Fathers gain respect" or "Family ties strengthened." These positive spins benefiting Japanese men were emphasized repeatedly. In the face of crumbling male values in general, it appeared that the media attempted to give the male-dominated society a renewed positive image.

These words cannot be allowed

By I.T., 30s, Kobe

Reading this column, I could hear the voices of cheap men who further attempt to attack feminists by taking advantage of the Hanshin earthquake.

Women didn't simply stare at the victims under the rubble, nor did men offer support and food to victims in need.

I realized from the earthquake that an effort to help each other in the state of mass confusion and disaster was expressed differently on a basis of individuals, not of gender roles.

I couldn't believe that this particular scholar actually set foot in the disaster area. Having read the article, I felt that the media exploited this disaster in their attempt to call feminism another trend.

The theory of this scholar -- who leads the media's exploitation -- clearly shows that Japanese men with authority try to bring things back to their favor.

In an economic recession, female college graduates and part-timers are first affected in terms of fewer employment opportunities.

We need to gradually change the current social structure, which hinders women's financial achievement. This sort of statement that hurts women under a disastrous hardship should not be allowed.

The excerpt of a column written by a professor at O University, to which Ms Akiko Wada and Ms I.T. objected:

Someone called feminism a concept of the bubble economy.

This seems to imply our that feminism ideology appeared during the bubble economy to attack the male community and simply spread feminists' doctrine. The criticism also sounded like a sneer at the unreliability of potential left-wing feminists after the collapse of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries.

The statement doesn't have to be right or wrong. The Great Hanshin Earthquake exposed the inability to free human beings by eliminating gender roles.

This is a story about many men gathered in shelters during an announcement requesting uninjured men to dig out buried victims.

Why were men needed? A rescue needs physical strength. Men were suited for the task. It is not that men were superior to women.

As shown in this example, gender roles were naturally evidenced in tasks after the quake. Men worked at physical labor and women cooked and gave medical treatment. Such typical roles are derived from simple animal instincts that humans obey, and not from anything as complicated as societal oppression or historical restriction. The reality revealed by the disaster blows the mere theory that gender roles are a result of the bubble economy.

Mass media focusing men

By Yoko Yamamoto, 30s, Itami

My family evacuated our partially destroyed apartment and went to a school. But after about two weeks, all of us caught influenza and reluctantly went back to the apartment, where no running water was available.

I watched television and read newspapers quite after we returned to make up for the lack of information we had while we were at the school. At first, I was surprised at the severity of the damages. After a few days, I became aware that very few women were seen on television and in the newspapers. Media reported on the people who were working hard day and night for rescue and restoration. All the information from the media made me think that an emergency like this must really require manpower and it was men who support our lives.

I remember seeing "reliable fathers" and "kind and considerate mothers" here and there in the shelters. I felt uncomfortable there because I was apparently "inconsiderate" and I spoke directly to my husband.

I felt sad that the world is ruled by the consciousness of gender distinction and of manly and womanly behavior. I have discussed various kinds of women's problems with many friends, and I had thought the world has been changing little by little. But the earthquake has blown away all the progress.

As my life settled, I gradually made contact with friends in Osaka and Kobe. Reading information from female perspective, I came to realize that women played an active role throughout the entire rescue. Since women began to communicate and exchange information with one another, I became more positive. When I recall the mass

media coverage of the earthquake and the gender distinctions it made, I realized that the prejudiced perception of men and women is a reality.

We still have a long way to go a long way before women can live cheerfully and independently without being tied to what is considered the role of women. Although the steps are slow, I would like to take firm ones.

Keeping humanity

By Reiko Yamamoto, 40s, Takarazuka

Waves of vivid blue vinyl sheets suddenly appeared in a desolate wintry town. While covering scars left by the earthquake, the sheets revealed damage spots vividly.

Three months have passed, and the artificial blue of the sheets has turned into the tender green of spring. The vacant lots have to become more remarkable. The ground was leveled, and there is nothing left to let us know that someone once lived there. A house I saw on the way to work is gone, without leaving any trace, when I come home. The sight squeezes my heart and makes my work-worn steps heavier.

As time goes by, the part of my mind that the quake once occupied becomes smaller. Fortunately, my home didn't suffer from the disaster. Only two bookshelves fell down. But my office was such a mess that I didn't know what to do and where to start. Thousands of cracks on the wall. Pieces of broken glass scattered indoors and on the streets. Broken clocks pointed to the same time. All these scenes have accumulated in my memory.

On the day of the quake, the television turned into a mere square box, and radio was the only information source. Development of mass media has expanded our sense of sight. We cannot easily imagine a picture only with audio clues. A phone call from my hometown told us in a shrill, nervous voice about the fire around Kobe destroying an expressway. We couldn't see how things stood; but, we were in the middle of the stricken area. My parents -- who experienced earthquake damages via media images -- had a better sense of the crisis than we did.

While we could not get necessary information for daily life from television, a flood of the same pictures of the stricken areas was shown to us over and over. When I became used to the blown-up image of disaster areas, my sense was paralyzed. I felt as though I was threatened by an unspeakable fear of compulsion. That applies to both sides of information-sender and receiver. We live in an era where we can see space dust if we wanted to. Such an unbounded desire impairs the dignity of humans and blunts the sensibility, which fails to distinguish imaginary and the actual worlds. While everything is transformed into information, I would like to take good care of my

sensibility as the last way to maintain humanity.

No more family love

By Y.H., 40s, Kobe

We were wondering what to do about the planned Hyogo Women's Forum in spring. We shifted the venue to Akashi and decided on a sort of open forum for female earthquake victims. Many more participants than we expected turned out to share their stories.

A single woman commented that she felt uncomfortable with the claims of men in her office, such as renewed family love, system order, and volunteer spirit after the quake. I could totally relate to what she was saying. Even as the media constantly played the positive theme of strengthened family love, I thought about a great number of women that held equally bitter and upsetting feeling toward media.

With no kin in Kobe and a completely destroyed home, the woman speaking had received an outpouring of warmth and support from her friends and had at last come to think of Kobe as her hometown.

Regarding renewed family bonds, many women at the forum claimed that the families with no real bonds before the tragedy only experienced an increased gap between members.

Through the earthquake experience, I felt the importance not only of the framework of marriage and family but of daily friendship in my community.

It is frightening to be pressured by someone about order, system, and volunteer spirit.

Some people questioned the Japanese government about leaving so many of its citizens homeless. They wondered about trusting the government, in which their tax money is invested. Others felt the necessity of women's participation in reconstruction because it was the towns built by men that collapsed. I don't recall that media informed the public of these women's voices. Was it only I who felt that the media manipulated and created desired images of victims?