Chapter 15
NHK WORLD-JAPAN’s Challenge to Create BOSAI Culture in Japan and Across the World

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Abstract  BOSAI is a Japanese word to express various efforts to mitigate disaster risk. This chapter documents how NHK broadcasters have developed programs and other contents in order to spread BOSAI know-how from the program producers’ point of view. NHK WORLD-JAPAN is an international segment of NHK, the Japan Broadcasting Corporation. Its service primarily targets overseas audiences and its content is multilingual. In 2017, NHK started a radio program series of BOSAI, or disaster preparedness. The production team has since sought effective approaches to encourage people to take real action to reduce disaster risk, by expanding its services from broadcasting to online contents, SNS, events, etc. In this chapter, based on the experience of NHK WORLD-JAPAN, the authors focus on the concept of “participatory coverage,” inspired by “action research” in the academic world. “Participatory coverage” means that the media and citizens work together to improve society through the process of content production and by utilizing the content. This is especially important in the field of disaster preparedness, where taking action is indispensable to protect lives. The chapter also recognizes a TV program as an example of “participatory coverage,” because the collaborators continue learning BOSAI on their own even after the program was over.

Keywords  BOSAI · Disaster preparedness · NHK WORLD-JAPAN · Participatory coverage · Action research

15.1 NHK WORLD-JAPAN, History and Current Service

NHK began international broadcasting in 1935, through shortwave radio service, both in Japanese and English (NHK 2015). This served as propaganda during World War II in 24 languages at most, but was ordered by the Allied Powers’ General...
Headquarters (GHQ) to stop at the end of the war. The service resumed in 1952 as “Radio Japan” based on the principles of freedom and democracy. Radio Japan aired news and programs about Japan in different languages to language-specific areas. Radio Japan was one of the few resources for listeners living abroad to learn about Japan.

While providing international service with short wave radio, NHK added new services to adapt to the changing global media environment. In 1996, NHK’s international broadcasting was renamed NHK WORLD. This included both Radio Japan and new TV service in English. It changed its name again to NHK WORLD-JAPAN in 2018. As of 2020, NHK WORLD-JAPAN has radio service in 17 languages, internet service in 18 languages, SNS in several languages, TV in English, in addition to Japanese services for Japanese living overseas.

NHK WORLD-JAPAN covers various topics to meet the needs of diverse audiences. For example, it has programs of current affairs, human portraits, Japanese pop culture, Japanese language lesson, cooking, economics, travel information, science and technologies, etc., both in the Radio and TV service.

In its official promotion brochure in 2019, NHK WORLD-JAPAN explained one of its missions as the following:

As the world’s gateway to Japan and Asia, we reveal the diversity of our culture, traditions and innovations and bring you the latest in business, cutting-edge technologies and creativity from across the region. We treasure our connection with the people who live, work and travel here.

(To avoid confusion, this paper will use the 2020 name “NHK WORLD-JAPAN”, in all descriptions including the past when it was called “Radio Japan” or “NHK WORLD”.

15.2 BOSAI Radio Program

Disaster has long been one of the main topics of Japanese media in general. There is wide range of coverages including emergency information, documentaries, educational programs for children, etc. Around the memorial days of serious past disasters, such as the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in January 1995 and the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011, there is much media coverage to pray for victims, remember the need to be prepared and discuss countermeasures for potential disasters. In addition to this, there are always news and programs about disaster preparedness all year round. This is an important part of Japanese media culture.

In parallel, NHK WORLD-JAPAN has covered similar stories as part of its mission to inform overseas listeners about what is currently going on in Japan. In April 2017, a new goal was set to raise awareness in disaster preparedness across the world. In order to provide practical information for overseas listeners, NHK WORLD-JAPAN launched a series of radio programs “BOSAI, Measures for Saving Your Life.” The
series tells listeners how to be better prepared by providing knowledge and skills that Japan has acquired through experience in the past disasters.

When launching the series, the production team carefully chose the program’s presentation style. The message should be easy to understand and enjoyable so that listeners would find disaster issues interesting. Therefore, the programs are carried out in casual conversation style with two people, one of which is the presenter and the other is asking questions. In addition, the presenter gives the “BOSAI quiz” in the latter half of the program. The presenter asks a question with three potential answers, and the right answer is given followed by an expert’s comments.

Another point that the BOSAI team needs to be careful about is that program’s information should be correct in every place in all locations of the world. For example, Japanese children are taught to immediately hide themselves under desks when earthquake hits. This is because Japanese school buildings are highly resistant. But the decision could be different depending on the place and situation. The scripts were written carefully so that people in any area can learn and think about the best strategy in their own environment.

The BOSAI series has so far covered disasters such as earthquakes, tsunami, floods, volcanos, and lightning. It has also introduced various styles of BOSAI education at schools and communities in Japan. The series has received positive feedbacks from listeners, especially from Asian countries where earthquakes and heavy rain are frequent.

### 15.3 Launch of BOSAI Website

After one year, the production team began questioning “Is it enough to only provide information via programs?” Radio programs do provide useful information. But the team members were not sure if it actually was encouraging listeners to take actions to protect their lives. Radio programs are generally listened to live. But when finished, the listeners cannot check what they heard. So the BOSAI team decided to make a BOSAI portal website with program archives. This was the starting point of years of trial and error by NHK WORLD-JAPAN to look for effective approaches to create disaster-resilient societies. Throughout the process of developing the content, the BOSAI team has repeatedly questioned “What is the role of public media?” A famous term in the field of disaster risk management “last one mile” means the importance of reaching to each individual at each last corner of society. However, mass media in principle is not good at local and personal communication. Its expertise is mass communication, especially to the people who are already interested in the topics for some extent. So the BOSAI team tried to find the ways to reach “last one mile” by expanding its role from program making to providing various contents to create learning environment for people.

The BOSAI portal website was launched in August 2018 in English (NHK WORLD-JAPAN 2018a). In addition to program archives, the team put some educational materials on the website, to help people to learn by themselves.
One of the web contents is the BOSAI QUIZ, which is a series of question and answer screens with illustrations (NHK WORLD-JAPAN 2018b). It is a visualized version of the BOSAI QUIZ, in the latter half of radio program. People can read the question and three answers on the screen. By touching either of the answers, red circle pops up on the right answer and the answer screen slides in. The screen also has an expert’s comments in both audio and text. These contents are designed to enable children with their families at home, students with teachers at schools, people with neighbors at community events to learn about disaster risk reduction. The quiz sheets can be accessed for free. Printout can be shared so that people can enjoy them anywhere without internet access. The BOSAI team hopes that these quizzes motivate people to do further activities, for example, making their evacuation plan, preparing their evacuation bags, or learning the path from their home to a shelter.

Another content of the BOSAI website is “HOW TO CRAFT SAFETY,” short video clips (NHK WORLD-JAPAN 2018c). This was originally created by NHK’s domestic news section in 2017 and NHK WORLD-JAPAN translated it into English. They are also translated into Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, and Indonesian. These short videos, 25 in all, provide tips on how to get through emergencies using things at hand. For example, the videos show how to make tableware from newspaper, a bed or a toilet using cardboard boxes, a rain poncho from a garbage bag. The BOSAI team made paper manuals for 10 of the 25 videos and put them on the website so that people can access for free. By using these manuals, the BOSAI team is hoping, people can make the items shown in the video by themselves.

The other content of the website are videos of the TV series titled “BOSAI: An Educational Journey.” In the programs, a newscaster of NHK WORLD-JAPAN goes on a journey to learn about disaster preparedness. This series also includes “Message from an Expert,” interviews with experts which are specially edited for the website.

15.4 BOSAI Events

By launching the BOSAI radio series and website, it became possible for NHK WORLD-JAPAN to hold events or workshops on disaster preparedness using the online educational contents. For example, the Thai language service team held a promotion event in Bangkok in 2017. Viewing and a demonstration of “HOW TO CRAFT SAFETY” was a main attraction. In 2018, BOSAI team joined a campaign to promote NHK WORLD-JAPAN targeting south Asian viewers and listeners. It conducted BOSAI quiz sessions for children of an Indian school in Tokyo.

The design of these events varies depending on the purpose and situation. In many cases, participants learn by answering quizzes and making materials after watching videos. The BOSAI team found that this is a good way to develop interest in BOSAI. But at the same time, the team thought that these BOSAI contents could be used more effectively and to inspire.

One of the examples is an event for listeners by NHK WORLD-JAPAN’s Vietnamese team. It was held in Nagoya in 2018. They chose a video clip which showed
how to make rain ponchos from garbage bags. However, they chose not to show the video until the very end of the event. First they ask participants to form groups of three people and discuss ways to utilize garbage bags to protect themselves from rain. Then, the participants gave presentations of their ideas and one of the groups was received an innovation award. Viewing of the video came after all these activities were over.

This is a good example of urging people to think by themselves in an enjoyable way. Thinking is an important process because people actually need to think by themselves in an emergency. Even if they learned how to make poncho from garbage bag from a video that knowledge might be useless if there were no garbage bag. But if people had experienced the process of thinking and finding solutions by using items at hand, they would be able to apply the skills in their own local situation.

Another example of the process where people think and localize that they learned can be seen in activities of Plus Arts, a Japanese Non-Profit Organization which promotes disaster preparedness education. It’s Representative Chief Director Hirokazu Nagata is an advisor of the “HOW TO CRAFT SAFETY.” One of the video series shows how to make tableware from newspaper. But people in Indonesia and Philippines made the dishes from banana leaves. Another video shows how to make stretcher using a pair of sticks with a blanket or jackets. However, Indonesian people chose to use the saromb, a local traditional skirt for men.

Through these activities, the team noticed the importance of encouraging people to “localize” and “personalize” the general knowledge and skills, in order to spread the BOSAI culture to the world.

Further developments of the contents were made in New York, USA, where the BOSAI team realized that “HOW TO CRAFT SAFETY” had significant potential to inspire people who were not interested in disaster preparedness.

Teachers of New York City’s public elementary school came to know “HOW TO CRAFT SAFETY” when they were working with Mr. Nagata as part of Japan Foundation’s project. The school conducted drills but they had been focusing on fires and crimes, not natural disasters. But actually the region is prone to floods caused by hurricanes. After Mr. Nagata’s workshop for children, teachers at the school began to learn the method of disaster preparedness education. The principal told NHK WORLD-JAPAN in an interview that the idea of using everyday materials for different purposes in emergencies is innovative and that she had realized the potential of disaster preparedness for education (NHK WORLD-JAPAN 2018a, b).

Also in New York, Parsons School of Design, a world’s leading design college, held an intensive seminar featuring “design for disaster risk reduction” for the first time in 2017 after being inspired by “HOW TO CRAFT SAFETY.” One of the seminar’s organizers said in an interview by NHK WORLD-JAPAN that the videos are packed with elements important for future designers. He added that design should respond to the disaster simply and eloquently in ways that are effective, not getting carried away with fanciness, expense, or branding identity. The students came up with many ideas of designs which could be useful in emergencies, such as transforming a shirt and a plastic bag into a container for carrying water, turning lifejackets that
refugees used to cross the sea into backpacks, walls which move to block floodwater (NHK WORLD-JAPAN 2018e).

Throughout all the production process of programs, web content, and events, the BOSAI team was conscious about its goal, involving global audience in real activities for disaster preparedness. This chapter calls the team’s approach “participatory coverage,” to indicate various media activities which commit to the real society through content, as well as, production process. “Participatory coverage” involves people of different sectors and its communication is multilateral. For example, online content such as quizzes and “HOW TO CRAFT SAFETY” are made through collaboration of experts and citizens. The production team also gets feedback to improve the contents, when they are used at local communities and schools. Here, media is participating in real social activities rather than simply providing information.

15.5 Change of Needs and Audience

This part will discuss the history of NHK WORLD-JAPAN focusing on its audience and past coverage of the disasters. It is important for media to recognize the needs of the target audience. However, the audience changes over time, which has had an impact on the BOSAI team’s production policy.

Since NHK started international broadcasting in 1935, its communication style was basically from radio station to people overseas. For the audience, the radio service was one of few means to gain information about Japan. However, the media environment has drastically changed and people have access to more information sources. Because international TV broadcasting had become more common in the world and internet service was spreading widely, NHK launched a 24-h all-English TV channel in 2008. As for multilingual radio services, it began providing online news both live and on-demand in the year 2000. Depending on target areas, radio services use a variety of means including Medium Wave, FM, satellite radio, the internet, and smartphone apps. Simultaneously, various media increased the volume of information about Japan in multiple languages. NHK WORLD-JAPAN is now one of many options for people in need of information on Japan.

How did this change affect disaster coverage? When the Magnitude 7.3 earthquake hit the city of Kobe and its surrounding area in January 1995, NHK WORLD-JAPAN had nothing other than shortwave radio service. It intensively covered the disaster, but the target was the listeners overseas, not the people in the quake-hit areas. The situation had already changed when the devastating earthquake and tsunami attacked northwestern Japan in March 2011. NHK WORLD-JAPAN had already launched a live online streaming for both radio and TV. But these services were still new at the time and they were not widely known. It took several more years until NHK WORLD-JAPAN broadcast multi-language disaster information targeting domestic audience of the disaster-hit areas. In October 2019, strong typhoon hit Japan, and NHK’s domestic news programs were showing website information of NHK WORLD-JAPAN on the screen and announcers asked viewers to tell foreigners around them about the website.
This new audience was a secondary target for NHK WORLD-JAPAN, but they have become increasingly important. Change in Japan’s society has also accelerated the trend. The number of foreign tourists coming to Japan surpassed 30 million a year in 2018. Number of foreign residents has also increased, mainly due to Japan’s need to deal with the shortfall of workforce. These people are vulnerable when a disaster hits Japan mainly due to language barrier and lack of knowledge about disaster management system in Japan. In addition, Japan has seen extreme weather conditions which have caused floods, landslides, and heat strokes in late 2010s. Experts say this trend is expected to continue or worsen due to global climate change.

All these changes made the BOSAI team to think about targeting foreigners in Japan. It was not an easy decision, because foreigners in Japan have different needs for disaster preparedness information than those overseas. But after long discussion, the team decided to include them for several reasons. One is because of necessity. The team believes it is the role of public media to provide necessary information to people in need. Another factor was globalization. More and more people move across borders these days compared to the time when Radio Japan started its service. Listeners in their home countries are more likely to come to Japan and vice versa. Also, the media situation is more complex than in the past. Foreign people share the information in and out of Japan, and the virtual communication space has no border. For international media like NHK WORLD-JAPAN, it has become unrealistic to divide audience depending on their physical location.

In this regard, the BOSAI team started a new TV program series in 2020, focusing on basic knowledge necessary for foreigners who are living in Japan. The team is also planning to add new materials on the BOSAI portal website in “simple Japanese” using easy vocabulary and grammatical structures. Experts, governments, and citizens’ groups are promoting this “simple Japanese” to encourage communications between Japanese and foreigners. The BOSAI team is hoping that contents in “simple Japanese” would be used by foreign people and Japanese to learn about BOSAI together.

15.6 Raising Awareness Through the Production Process

The next focus is a TV program, which the BOSAI team produced in 2019. The team found its production process to be a good example of “participatory coverage,” an approach of contents making in which the media and citizens work together to improve society.

A ten minute program titled “Disaster Preparedness, the First Steps” was broadcast as one of the episodes of TV series “WHAT’S YOUR CONNECTION?” (NHK WORLD-JAPAN 2019) It was aired in the Myanmar language with English subtitles. Currently on the internet, three other versions of Indonesian, Thai, and Vietnamese subtitles are available.

This program answered a question from a Myanmar listener living in Japan, who asked “How can I learn about disaster preparedness in Japan?” The questioner was
a member of a community led by a Myanmar Buddhist monastery in Tokyo. She and the chief priest of the monastery appeared in the program to learn about disaster preparedness with other members of the monastery.

In producing this program, the BOSAI team was hoping that these Myanmar people would learn about disaster preparedness by using available resources from their local society, instead of a privilege provided by media people. The team also expected that the viewers, including other language communities who could have similar problems in Japan, could learn how to educate themselves by watching this program.

One of the local resources that the program used was the disaster preparedness center in Tokyo where people can actually experience simulated disasters under the guidance of an instructor. It is run by Tokyo Fire Department and open to citizens including foreign tourists and residents. Myanmar people visited the facility and experienced an earthquake simulation, evacuation under artificial smoke, and how to use a fire extinguisher.

Next, the BOSAI team chose an advisor for the Myanmar community. The team had a human network of experts and some of them were frequently seen in the media. But the team didn’t choose a famous personality, because it’s not the best solution for ordinary people to follow. Instead, the team used a system already available in Itabashi ward, where the monastery is located. The team applied to the ward for an expert to come to teach interested citizens about disaster preparedness for free. On the day of the shooting, an experienced former official of the Tokyo Fire Department visited the monastery. She checked the whole building, pointed out risky places, and taught how to minimize them. Then she worked with the Myanmar people, for example, fixing furniture, putting film on grass shelves, putting fluorescent stickers on stairs, etc. The chief priest said about his first experience of learning BOSAI, “We haven’t seriously thought about disasters until now. I thought today that I should definitely do something about them.”

This program proved to be a successful example of “participatory coverage” because it brought a significant change to the Myanmar people even after finishing the program shooting. People at the monastery continue learning BOSAI by themselves, by holding study meetings and town walking for disaster preparedness. In October 2019, typhoon Hagibis, an extremely violent storm tore through Japan leaving widespread damage. Before and during the typhoon, the Myanmar people were supporting one another in how to prepare for the arrival of the typhoon. They shared ideas on SNS, including how to cover windows with storm shutters and how to prevent windows from breaking. They also encouraged each other to store water. It was impressive that the Myanmar people have not only raised their awareness but also spread their knowledge to their community.

The program also served to connect Japanese society with the Myanmar community. The Itabashi ward officials who helped dispatch the instructor said that they were happy to find a foreign community interested to learn about disaster preparedness, because they were always struggling to reach such communities. Also, the instructor
showed her willingness to continue to be involved in the Myanmar people’s activities. She voluntarily visited the monastery several times even after the program was over. She said that she admired their enthusiasm.

Time has passed since the program was aired, and the Myanmar people’s activity continues to develop. They started a bilingual emergency management class for children. Educating children make it possible to educate their families too, because many Myanmar children were born in Japan and speak better Japanese than elder members of their family. The people at the monastery are also planning to launch a website to share disaster management information in both languages for people living around the world.

15.7 “Participatory Coverage” and Challenges of BOSAI

Until now, this chapter has described the process of NHK WORLD-JAPAN’s “participatory coverage,” an effort to encourage people to take actual actions for BOSAI, or disaster preparedness. For that purpose, the team expanded their contents from programs to online contents and events. The team also tried to help people to engage in disaster preparedness activities through the program making process.

The concept of “participatory coverage” was inspired by “action research.” “Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice” is a widely known expression by Kurt Lewin, who coined the term “action research” (Lewin 1948). In the context of the media world, this could indicate that “Media activities that produces nothing but programs will not suffice.” Programs are not goals but a means. However, media people’s interventions can affect collaborators in both positive and negative ways. Sometimes collaborators become empowered. Sometimes trouble ensues. Sometimes collaborators work hard while being covered, but get tired afterwards. To avoid negative results, media people must ask themselves “Is the goal making attractive programs or improving society through the programs?” Actually, both are important. In fact, the two goals can be compatible. The program that changes the community is a good program. Just same as Lewin’s expression “Nothing is so practical as a good theory” (Lewin1951).

The BOSAI team uses specifically three methods for “participatory coverage”: “collaboration,” “utilizing local resources,” and “getting feedback.” The first method, “collaboration” is necessary to assess the needs of real society and make effective commitments. In making programs and other contents, the BOSAI team involves experts and potential target people including international colleagues. The second method “utilizing local resources” is important to empower local people including collaborators and the audience of programs. As described earlier, the team chose to use local systems in the program to learn disaster preparedness for the Myanmar community in Japan. This enabled Myanmar people to learn through their own initiative. In addition, the program viewers could learn about accessible resources. The third method, “getting feedback,” is a condition for successful future “participatory
coverage.” The team visited and facilitated events where the BOSAI contents were used. These experiences are helpful to develop and improve content.

On the other hand, there is an important point that media people must be careful about when practicing “participatory coverage.” They need to keep proper distance between themselves and collaborators. In many cases, especially in the field of disaster preparedness, production teams and collaborators share the same initial goals, but the viewers might not. In order to make persuasive content for diverse people, media people must keep a birds-eye perspective and be critical at all times. This is crucial to maintain a healthy relationship based on trust with the audience. Needless to say, the point of view of the collaborators shouldn’t be prioritized in some cases, especially when covering controversial issues or checking antisocial activities.

Now, this chapter closes with two challenges that the BOSAI team is facing: “Grasping a precise image of audience” and “pursuing universal values.”

First, grasping a precise image of the audience is necessary in this rapidly changing society in order to set flexible, yet focused strategies. NHK WORLD-JAPAN initially targeted radio listeners outside of Japan, but currently it includes foreign travelers and residents in Japan. The BOSAI team is constantly reviewing the needs of the audience and expanding its service. Currently, the whole world is facing a new challenge under COVID-19 pandemic. It is obvious that the audiences of NHK WORLD-JAPAN are drastically affected and this will change their values and lifestyles. So it is the responsibility of the BOSAI team as well as the media in general to adjust the strategies in order to efficiently contribute to society in the current crisis.

Second, in spite of the fact that the audience is continuously changing, the programs and the contents should pursue universal values. The values here are human rights, international cooperation, respect for diversity, etc. In the 2020s, it is unavoidable for the world to see surprising changes in all fields, including public health, economics, politics, education, climate, etc. In this complex time, priority of values can be confused. Especially in such a situation, it is important that the BOSAI team adhere to universal values, while disseminating practical and useful know-how.

In this regard, “participatory coverage” is expected to become more and more important for the BOSAI team. The team’s goal is creating a resilient world by providing opportunities for all people to learn about disaster preparedness and encouraging them to take actual actions. In order to achieve it, it is indispensable to discuss and collaborate with various people such as local citizens, educators, and experts. Through this process, the BOSAI team is hoping, it can find out a new strategy to contribute to the changing world and fulfill its role as a public media.
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