

An Information Meltdown

The Media's Role in the Fukushima Disaster

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Crisis flooded Japan March 11, 2011 on the crest of a tsunami sweeping its way through any coastal civilization that sought to hold its own against the vast, volatile wave. The indifferent surge carelessly cast aside both vehicles and structures in the wake of its sheer force. Earlier that day an earthquake with a magnitude of 8.9 had rocked the same villages and cities; the eighth largest recorded in the past hundred years. Although these intertwined disasters shook the eastern hemisphere, it was the nuclear disaster in their aftermath that shook the world. The Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant, resting on the edge of the Pacific Ocean, was in a state of emergency. People worldwide held their breath as they watched the struggle against nuclear meltdown unfold across their television screens. It was on this platform of fear (man against his own creation) that the media built a story that would capture everyone's attention for years to come. But in their haste to alert the world of the impending disaster the media was careless and ill-informed. This resulted in an information meltdown of fact and fiction that has left those following the crisis misled and confused.

For over sixty years Hollywood has produced movies whose plots involved the same type of radiation as was present at Fukushima. These films are entertaining but they are also riddled with misconceptions. In the Fukushima incident news broadcasting was similarly delusional, as it overlooked the thousands of deaths from the earthquake and tsunami in order to create a sensationalized story about the Daiichi Nuclear crisis. People like Dr. Christopher Busby, a former adviser on radiation to the United Kingdom Government, were at the forefront of such stories. In an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation, Dr. Busby declared that "if this stuff [radiation] comes out then it's going to make what's happened so far, in terms of the tsunami damage, look a little bit like an entrée to the real course" (Praying For)

Busby's statement and others like it were very melodramatic and while they sent ignorant people hiding under their sheets, these statements often held very little scientific backing. In fact, eight months after the incident the chairman of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Gregory Jaczko, stated in an interview with CNSnews.com "There have been no fatalities that we're aware of that are directly related to radiation exposure." In comparison over 25,000 deaths that were documented as a result of the earthquake and tsunami (Radiation Deaths).

Many scientists are not surprised by the lack of fatalities attributed to the Fukushima plants: Dr. Jane M. Orient actually predicted it in her article "Don't Panic Over Fukushima – But Do Something" published in *The New American*, March 17, 2011 (Don't Panic). So if people of credibility like Dr. Orient anticipated that there would be no fatalities, why have these experts not been heard? The answer lies in the fear factor surrounding nuclear power and radiation. "Radiation in particular is a scary thing," said Margret Harding, a former Vice President of Engineering at GE Nuclear Energy, "we can't see it, we can't touch it, we can't look at the ground and know it's there." She also said "The first controlled nuclear plants were designed to run submarines and other military secrets; there is a web of secrecy as to what you can talk about, which adds to the mystique"(Nuclear Renaissance) In the Fukushima crisis the media played on this fear in order to fabricate a good story that would boost sales in the entertainment and media industry.

Another reason nuclear power falls victim to the media's whims is because of its relationship to nuclear weapons. Many Americans think that a nuclear power plant is just one step down from a nuclear bomb (and just as dangerous), however this is a huge misconception. A nuclear reactor can never produce an explosion of the same type as a nuclear bomb (You Can Stop). An explosion of a nuclear reactor is very different. Take what happened at Chernobyl for instance, Chernobyl was the result of intense pressure build up in the reactor core to such an extent that it could no longer be contained. This type of explosion is called a dirty bomb because it throws the radioactive materials of the reactor core into the atmosphere. The potential of this happening in the Fukushima reactors was a real concern when cooling systems lost power during the tsunami and the backup batteries were sucked dry, pressure built up quickly within the three operating reactors: I, II, and III. The other three reactors; IV, V,VI; were in the middle of scheduled maintenance when the disaster struck so their fuel rods were in spent fuel pools next to that reactors during the time (Daiichi Incident). When pressure in the three operating reactors hit a critical high the operators at the plant opened some of the pressure release valves as a last resort. The effect was a needed decrease in pressure in the reactors but also there was a release in radioactive gases. These gases included radioactive nitrogen and all of the Noble Gases. Fortunately all of these have very short half lives so they would quickly cease to be radioactive (Special Report). In order to give the gases more time to cease to be radioactive the, Japanese engineers purposefully opened the pressure valves within the reactor buildings. This resulted in the release of steam into the buildings and the intense heat broke down the water particles into oxygen and hydrogen. Unfortunately, hydrogen is explosive which is what caused the reactor buildings of Units I, II, and III to explode (Daiichi Incident).

Of course the media's coverage of these explosions included accounts of huge releases of radiation. Many sources were quick to compare the accident to the bombs dropped on Hiroshima during World War II. This along with the interchangeable use of the words "nuke" and "nuclear power plants" didn't help the panic stricken sentiment of the public towards the incident.

This increase of public fear has had a drastic impact on the nuclear power industry. Already the International Energy Agency is predicting a fifteen percent decrease in nuclear power generated by 2035 according to the 2011 draft of the *World Energy Outlook* (Energy). This document also states that the Daiichi Nuclear crisis "greatly increased the uncertainty about the future role of nuclear power in meeting the world's energy needs". Countries like Germany and Switzerland have already opted out of the industry completely and other nations are looking closely at whether the costs outweigh the benefits (Energy).

It is questions like these that have been spawned by the media's dramatic and overblown coverage. The crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant was irrefutably horrible but it played only a small part in this major disaster. News broadcasters would have been better suited covering the amazing survival stories of citizens of Japan who survived the natural disasters that caused tremendous damage in comparison. Instead they alerted the world of a crisis that was not nearly the disaster they made it in to. As a result of such sensationalism nuclear power may be crippled in the public's eye for years to come.

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