The relationship between the Japanese State and the public broadcaster NHK

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Abstract:

This paper examines the relationship between the world’s second largest public broadcaster NHK (Japanese Public Broadcasting Corporation) and the Japanese state. Through analysing the historical context of NHK’s development and contemporary operations this paper examines one of the most significant features of Public Service Broadcasting, accountability. The notion of accountability to the Japanese public is embedded and guaranteed in the Japanese Broadcasting Law, and has generally coincided with provisions for universal access. The Japanese context of accountability is then compared to the way this notion has been interpreted in the United Kingdom and Australia.

Through analysing two of the most controversial episodes of NHK’s flagship programme, NHK Special, this paper foregrounds the possible and very serious implications for the continuing independence of the Japanese public broadcaster. These episodes are: ‘The phantom ministry report: The record of Chinese forced labour’, and ‘Questioning Sexual Violence in War’. These examples demonstrate that while public service broadcasting in Japan, has been primarily based on the notion of providing universally available public access in their programmes, sometimes this conflicts with regulation and censorship issues shifting the onus of accountability from NHK to the public, to NHK to the government. This type of situation can only cause further friction between governments and the PSBs.

It is significant to recognise these challenges to the role of PSBs into the future and develop effective strategies to maintain governments at arms length in the development of programmes and their style and content.
Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to problematise the way the relationship between the Japanese State and the public broadcaster NHK has been represented in popular and academic discourse. It has been claimed that government influence on NHK operations stifles political debate concerning the public broadcaster’s role and its ability to comment meaningfully on the state of government and current affairs in Japan. Yet, in Japan formal and direct bureaucratic supervisory authority is intentionally minimal. It is, however, easy to see how such misreadings might occur mainly as a consequence of the cultural differences that exist between Western industrialised nations and Japan. For example, the seemingly rigid work practices and the rigid hierarchical structures that regulate and administer them in the interests of economic efficiency can easily be mistaken for more authoritarian attitudes if we do not understand the specific cultural values out of which they emerged. This is not to say that political interference does not occur in the operations of NHK but that we may need to apply a different set of criteria in identifying it when it does. This analysis will examine some of the criticisms and allegations concerning political interference that have been levelled against NHK both in Japan and abroad, and situate them in the historical context of the development of the Japanese media. Through examining these claims and analysing specific examples we can see how, in spite of these criticisms, the organisational structure of NHK works to enable the flow of information.

Historicising public broadcasting in Japan

One of the most direct and crucial aspects of the relationship between the state and a public broadcaster is the way in which the broadcaster is held accountable to the public through regulation by the public’s representatives. Western commentators on the Japanese media, such as Krauss and Pharr (1996), argued that the foundations of Japanese media were laid down in the pre-war environment of militarism and strict government control through censorship. Krauss and Pharr used the term “fascist” to denote the tenor and impact of this period (1996, p. 12). Pharr argued that a central issue for interpreting the pre-1945 development of Japanese media was reading the precise relationship between the state and the media from 1868 to the end of World War II (1996). Japan’s rapid industrialization and transformation from a feudal
agrarian society into a modern democracy needed a strong centralized system to administer these changes. The tensions and contradictions that the rapid introduction of modernity created are in many ways still being felt today as Japanese society switches to a digital economy. These tensions are best expressed through the concept of Nihonjinron, a genre of writing about Japan’s relations to the world and its own sense of uniqueness within that world. Befu (1997) coined the term “auto-orientalism” after Edward Said’s (1978) theory of “orientalism”, to describe a particular manifestation of this phenomenon. Auto-orientalism is a “psychologically masochistic process” that signifies the “internalisation by the orientalised people of the observation and judgement of the west toward them” (Befu, 1997, p. 15). The obligations the concept of public service imposed on the Japanese people were regarded as a reciprocal duty between the state and its citizens that was perhaps unique in the world. This sense of duty has demonstrably started to weaken in some sections of Japanese society in recent years, but remains equally as steadfast in others.

To read the implementation of public broadcast services following on from Pharr and Krause’s critique would be to misread the situation that applied to Japan during the period in which public broadcasting, first radio in the mid-1920s and second television in the early 1950s, commenced. It would also violate the principles of public service broadcasting that are adhered to not only by Japan’s NHK but also by Britain’s BBC networks and the Australian Broadcasting Commission. These principles will be discussed later to provide a comparison with the way NHK works to uphold the values of public service broadcasting.

As a public broadcaster NHK had its origins in the introduction of organised radio broadcasting in 1926. Radio broadcasting was initially administered by the Wireless Telegraphy Laws (1915), which were mainly concerned with spectrum allocation. Later, as a precursor to the introduction of public and commercial radio broadcasting, a special ordinance was introduced in 1922. This ordinance served a dual purpose: to regulate the airwaves, and to stimulate the implementation of broadcasting services by private enterprises. These regulations required that all radio programmes be submitted to the Minister for Communications for censorship. However, both public and commercial broadcasters were permitted to broadcast any material that had been deemed suitable for publication in the nation’s newspapers. What needs to be carefully understood is that the period in which NHK was inaugurated and PSB
broadcasting introduced was the relatively liberal Taisho democracy and these regulations were not strictly enforced.

The introduction of a nationwide broadcasting service was hastened in 1928 to provide coverage of the coronation of Emperor Hirohito. Radio programming across the three major metropolitan centres of Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya followed a similar pattern with only slight regional variations. Educational programming made up roughly 30% of all broadcasts, entertainment 30%, and information and news another 30% (NHK, 2002). News bulletins were initially provided free of charge from the major newspapers. However, not finding any economic advantage in providing this service, the newspapers withdrew it in the early 1930s. NHK was then forced to purchase news service dispatches and edit them as necessary for their own news programmes (NHK, 2002). This gave NHK greater control over the way it produced and circulated news information and made it sensible to increase the number of daily news bulletins to four.

In Sept 1931 an NHK news bulletin reported the Manchurian Incident only hours after the event occurred. While this broadcast conclusively demonstrated the power and immediacy of radio news it also as a consequence led to the radio industry being brought under stricter government control. After September 1931, the Japanese government banned the reporting of military events other than in statements issued by military authorities. The years that followed coincided with the tightening of military control over Japanese politics and ushered in a period of greater censorship and government, then military control. In 1940 broadcasting was placed under the direct control of the Prime Minister and Minister of Communications. After the outbreak of World War Two in December 1941, a Radio Wave Control Headquarters was established, which consisted of representatives from the army, navy and the information bureau. After this date radio broadcasting became little more “than an instrument for the raising of national fighting”, and, as in most countries, engaged in the war a propaganda machine (Ito, 1978, p. 15).

Television in Japan was introduced during the post-WWII occupation period under the radically different constitution of 1947. The new constitution eschewed any form of militarism, was committed to principles of freedom of speech, and adhered to the principles of freedom of the media. In attempting to explain the regulatory regime of
the pre-war Japanese media, Pharr (1996, p.11-12) theorised that the relationship between public broadcaster and the state as falling into two categories. Public broadcasters were either a “servant” of the state or its “watchdog”. In developing this metaphor, Pharr uses the term “lapdog” to describe PSBs being merely servants of the state. Morris-Suzuki (2007, p. 11) used a similar metaphor when she explored the claims that “some observers of the Japanese media” regarded NHK as being a “guard dog” that protected the interests of the political elite over those of the general public. Pharr concluded that this “dual legacy” was carried over into the allied occupation of Japan when control and censorship may have been even more tightly controlled than under the Japanese military in the years leading up to World War II. However, at the same time, according to Pharr (1996), the occupation also set the stage for the emergence of a remodelled Japanese media in 1952, when “for the first time into an environment with basic freedoms in place and no censorship laws of any kind in force” (p. 12).

The kind of dichotomy that Pharr and Krauss (1996) instantiated to describe the Japanese mediascape leads to an overly simplified understanding of the operations of the Japanese media. Were we to read this interpretation as applying strictly to today’s media in Japan then we would have to infer that they are merely a product of the same kind of cultural conditioning that they argued helped shape the pre-World War II media environment and merely act as a servant to the state and the ruling LDP party. These kinds of readings have so far shaped Western understanding of the relationship between the Japanese state, the Japanese media and in particular NHK. Yet what is seen when the history of Japanese media is closely examined is a cyclical and much more complex relationship between NHK and the Japanese state that alternates periods of editorial freedom with periods of strict control. The characteristics of this period, if the notion of Nihonjinron holds any merit, are based on a combination of how Japan perceives itself to be at a particular historical moment, how the west perceives Japan to be, and how Japan perceives it appears to be to the West.

**NHK, the mass media and the resolution of controversy**

Public service broadcasting has been defined, and indeed in most western style democracies put in place as a system that operates primarily in the public interest. In this sense, ‘the public’ has been conceived, historically, as a national body of people,
only differentiated by region (Casey et al., 2002). The Broadcast Law that regulates the Japanese media required that NHK actively promote the nationwide diffusion of television and radio, while also developing new broadcasting technologies. Through state sponsorship of its technical development the expansion of Japan’s mass media paralleled the rapid economic growth, which began in the 1960s. The Japanese mass media are now among the most highly developed in the world, serving a population of 123.3 million people of more diverse and sectional interests than the above understanding of PSB allows for. To cater for this increasingly diverse population the modern Japanese media consists of a dual broadcasting system, made up of the Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK)—the public broadcaster with nationwide radio and television networks, which was reorganized in 1950 under the provisions of the Broadcasting Law as a public non-profit corporation—and numerous commercial broadcasting companies licensed on a prefectural basis. Toward the end of 1985 the government announced that it would institute a regional quota system whereby every prefecture would have four commercial stations and every major city five stations, with the exception of Tokyo, which would have six stations. Commercial broadcasting companies in Japan are also licensed under the Broadcasting Law and their licenses are renewed every three years.

More recently, new digital and satellite communications technologies have served to intensify the speed with which information circulates and the volume of its flow, problematising the nature of PSB in their wake. Within this fluid multi-media environment NHK operates three television channels (general, educational and Direct Broadcast Satellite—DBS). It also operates 3,492 general broadcasting stations, 3,416 educational stations, and 2,573 stations providing multiplex broadcasting. NHK broadcasts in 21 languages to an estimated overseas audience of between 15 and 16 million people. Given the dense population concentrations, the advanced transportation means available, and the ready access to integrated communication networks, the cultural conditions for a sophisticated and independent media market place have been fulfilled. Yet, despite its sophistication and independence from government control it is still dogged by claims of bias and political interference.

To determine why this is the case, certain provisions of the Broadcast Law and some of the specific criticisms levelled against NHK will now be examined. The Broadcast Law has its purpose in ensuring freedom of expression by guaranteeing the
impartiality, integrity, and autonomy of broadcasting. Shimizu (1993) describes the Broadcasting Law as the sole law relating to freedom of speech in post-war Japan. Except for a small government subsidy for its overseas broadcasting service, NHK’s sole source of funding is the subscriber fees collected from television viewers throughout the country. NHK research has calculated that out of 33,480,000 household subscribers, 96.8% are paying their subscription regularly. Fees are considered a public utility charge, and every household with a television set is required by the Broadcasting Law to pay them. The subscriber fee system was implemented to ensure that NHK would be able to be an impartial broadcaster free of outside interference or pressure.

NHK’s highest decision-making body is a Board of Governors, consisting of twelve members appointed by the Prime Minister with the consent of the Diet. These board members are meant to represent the viewing public. The Chairman of the Board of Governors is elected from among its members, and the President of NHK is appointed by the Board of Governors. The remaining executive structure consists of one Vice President, seven to ten Managing Directors, and not more than three Auditors. The Broadcast Law stipulates that NHK must adhere to the following clauses in its daily operations: (1) It shall not disturb the public peace or good morals and manners; (2) It shall be politically impartial; (3) It shall broadcast news without distorting the facts; (4) In the case of controversial issues, it shall represent the point of controversy from all possible angles. The same four clauses apply to commercial television companies. To ensure compliance with these clauses, NHK and the commercial stations are expected to meet the National Association of Commercial Broadcasters standards, which are reviewed every five years. NHK and NACB have jointly established the Committee for the Advancement of Broadcast Programs, as well as the Broadcast Program Centre, designed to pool cultural programmes and distribute them to commercial broadcasters.

When their licenses are granted or renewed every three years Japanese broadcasting companies are required to abide by the following conditions with regard to their programming: (1) All commercial television companies except TV Asahi and TV Tokyo must maintain a ratio of 20% or more cultural programming and 10% or more educational programming; (2) NHK’s educational channel must maintain a ratio of 75% or more educational programming and 15% or more cultural programming; (3)
TV Asahi and TV Tokyo must each maintain a ratio of 30% or more educational programming to reflect their origins as educational television providers. Although such administrative guidance borders on regulation of programming type and quality, and may be of questionable desirability in terms of freedom of expression, it was instituted to curb the trend to compete for audience ratings with flashy and vulgar programming.

These regulatory mechanisms, put in place to guarantee freedom of the media, have according to various criticisms on occasion either broken down or been completely by-passed. So, in some regards, this power structure rather than representing independence from government control has instead been interpreted as demonstrating the public broadcaster’s reliance on government in its decision-making processes. However, two examples will demonstrate that this situation is not as straightforward as this summation contends. On August 1, 1993 in what has been described as NHK’s “finest hour” (Underwood, 2006, p. 1) the public broadcaster aired a one-hour long documentary on the topic of forced labour during World War Two, called “The phantom ministry report: The record of Chinese forced labour.” This documentary went on to win the highest prize at the 1993 Asia TV Broadcasting Festival. Not only did the documentary raise the formally taboo subject of Japanese atrocities during the war, it also examined the issue of Korean “comfort women,” and most remarkably called for compensation to be given to the surviving victims. Underwood (2006) remarked that: “In a manner scarcely imaginable today, NHK unflinchingly educated the Japanese public about a major, nearly forgotten war crime” (p. 4). NHK followed the documentary with a book that included a chapter with the openly critical title *Ongoing Evasion of Responsibility by the Government and Corporations*, and in this way also apportioned blame to the major Japanese corporations that had profited from the war and later from the reconstruction during the occupation years.

The fact that the previous Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi publicly expressed “deep regret” over the events when the story first surfaced, and the newly elected Prime Minister Hosokawa’s (the first non-LDP Party Prime minister in 38 years) assertion at a press conference that Japan had acted as an aggressor during the War and was wrong in starting it, should not be take as a sign that it was now not only permissible but also desirable to openly discuss these events. Both comments were at the time roundly criticised by the major political parties and the press. In the intervening years
this criticism has only grown more strident. For example, an editorial appearing in the 6 February 2005 edition of the Daily Yomiuri carried the title “Asian Women’s Fund Based on Distortions”. The editorial then criticised the comments made a decade earlier by the former Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei, called them “patently false” and blamed them for instilling “the mistaken perception both at home and abroad the women who worked at brothels had been forced to do so by the Imperial Army after being forcibly transported to such facilities for sexual servitude” (Underwood, 2006, p. 4). This example demonstrates how NHK could go against the prevailing political orthodoxy and ignore criticism of its actions to fulfil the role of ‘watchdog’ over the public’s right to know about a politically sensitive and controversial issue.

The second example concerns the resurfacing of this issue when the Women’s War Crimes Tribunal was convened in December 2000. While the Tribunal was covered in detail by the international media it was largely ignored by the Japanese newspapers and television stations. Only one national newspaper, Asahi, covered the tribunal, and only one television station, NHK, explored the issue with the documentary “Questioning Sexual Violence in War” broadcast 30 January 2001 on its educational channel. According to Morris-Suzuki (2007, p.4) in the days leading up to the broadcast there was considerable tension amongst the management of NHK’s educational section. Three days before the documentary was scheduled to be broadcast NHK was threatened by a group of extreme right wing activists demanding the programme be scrapped. However, what is more significant and perhaps more sinister was a meeting the day before the documentary was due to be broadcast between NHK’s Executive Director-General of Broadcasting Takeshi Matsuo and the deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary of the governing LDP Shinzo Abe (Morris-Suzuki, 2007). In the last hours before the documentary went to air crucial changes to its content were made and the running length was reduced from 44 to 40 minutes. The changes to the tone of the documentary were such that members of the Violence against Women in War—Network Japan protested: “that NHK had violated the terms under which they had agreed to cooperate with the making of the programme and sued the broadcaster and two production companies involved in making the documentary for damages” (Morris-Suzuki, 2007, p. 5).
“The issue at stake,” according to Morris-Suzuki (2007, p.6), “is whether these changes were an independent editorial decision, or whether they were a result of political intervention in the editorial process of NHK” (p. 6). In January 2005 the controversy came under wider public scrutiny when the documentary’s Chief Producer Satoru Nagai stated anonymously in an Asahi newspaper report (Honda & Makato, 12 January 2005) that alterations had indeed been made to the programme under political pressure from Abe and the Economics and Industry Minister Shoichi Nakagawa. Asahi reported that a senior NHK executive who ordered the alterations stated specifically that the parliament would shortly debate NHK’s budget. The Executive Director-General of Broadcasting Takeshi Matsuo, also speaking anonymously, confirmed to Asahi that he had felt under political pressure by the politicians to make revisions to the documentary. Both senior NHK executives and the politicians at the meeting, while agreeing that the programme’s content had been discussed, continued to deny that any pressure had been placed on the documentary’s production team to make changes (Morris-Suzuki, 2007). However, in a press conference that was meant to diffuse any criticisms regarding editorial or political interference the Director-General of Broadcasting made the curious statement, which was reported in Asahi, that it was “normal practice” for NHK to “explain” its programming schedules and discuss programme content with senior politicians before they were broadcast (20 January 2005). Morris-Suzuki (2007) argued that by making such an “overt statement” concerning the “normal practice” of discussing the content of potentially controversial material before its broadcast with “selected politicians” clearly placed any notion of NHK’s “independence in doubt” (p. 11). However, this incident and the truth of the allegations behind it have yet to be resolved because of the constant denials of the principle figures involved. The controversy could therefore be explained in a number of ways, either as an example of corruption through use of undue political influence to interfere with editorial independence, or as a very selective interpretation of the clauses stipulated in the Broadcast Law regarding programme quality, accuracy and impartiality. Whichever way you choose to interpret these events, they still provide an example of the cyclical nature of the attitudes of the Japanese media and Japanese society.
NHK and the maintenance of public service broadcasting values

To determine whether in the main NHK’s performance has adhered to the values of PSB we can compare it with the way those values have been interpreted and implemented in other major PSBs around the world. Brants and Siune (1992, p.31-32) listed the most significant features of public broadcasting television to be:

- Accountability
- Public financing
- Content regulation
- Universal service
- Protection from competition

In a similar vein, Kellner (1990) stated that these elements of the public service model occasion structural and institutional arrangements that are intended to ensure access, accountability and the quality of programming. These characteristics are all codified and guaranteed in the Japanese Broadcasting Law.

Scannell (2000, p.47) provided one of the most lucid accounts of PSBs through his analysis of the formation of the BBC and the conflicting very liberal and very conservative attitudes that were structured into its early operations by its first Director-General, John Reith. Scannell (2000) explained that public service broadcasting was firstly a public utility operating as a “national service in the public interest” (p. 47). As well as maintaining the “highest standards in information, culture and knowledge”, public service broadcasting also had a responsibility to reach the maximum available national audience (Strinati, 2000, p. 157). It must perform as a “cultural, moral, and educative force for the improvement of knowledge, taste and manners” (Scannell, 2000, p. 47). Reith’s idea of culture was defined very much in upper-class terms and “his enthusiasm for the educational function” of broadcasting was “matched by his distaste for popular mass entertainment” (Casey et al., 2002, p. 186). Since its prime function, according to Reith, was to educate public broadcasting must lead “public taste rather than pander to it” (Casey et al., 2002, p. 185).

Therefore, according to Scannell (2000):

the concept of public service in Reith’s mind, had, as a core element, an ideal of broadcasting’s role in the formation of an
informed and reasoned public opinion as an essential part of the political process in a mass democratic society. (p. 48)

This democratic society was to be built on the cornerstones of universal availability and diversity of programming.

In this way, PSB acted to promote social cohesion, particularly through promoting national and social unity through “the live relay of those national ceremonies and functions,” for example “a royal wedding”, or televising major sporting events that worked to bind “people together in the shared idioms of a public, corporate, national life” (Scannell, 2000, p. 48). All of these kinds of events have provided salient moments in the formation of public broadcast media in Japan. The national radio network was rushed to completion for the 1928 ascension of Emperor Hirihiito to the throne, while colour television was implemented to coincide with the 1960 Tokyo Olympic Games. These elements became central to the relationship between public broadcasting and the rights of citizenship that aided in constituting an “informed and enlightened democracy” (Scannell, 2000, p. 48).

In its particular Englishness based on an upper-class notion of culture, the early BBC style of broadcasting came to alienate post-war audiences, in particular those from a working-class background (Casey et al., 2002). The Japanese developed a unique solution to this kind of problem. From its beginnings in 1953 television was always concerned with entertainment, and included sports, drama and quiz shows (Kato, 1998, p.175). From it inception, the Sunday singing contest broadcast by NHK provides an example of the psychological proximity of television (Kato, 1998, p.175) in overcoming the kinds of cultural distance that Reith’s philosophy of public broadcasting maintained. The programmes relied heavily on audience participation, and their planning and production were fundamentally amateurish, and this remains a characteristic of some forms of public television in Japan today (Kato, 1998, p.175). Kato (1998, p.175) also argued that these kinds of shows were used as informal auditions for jobs within the television industry, which also had the effect of drawing television and audience psychologically closer.

However, these themes of monopoly control and universal access, as Strinati (2000) demonstrated, could also perform another function that had little to do with independence of expression. Between 1926 and 1955, first radio and then television
broadcasting in the United Kingdom were provided solely by the BBC operating as a public service monopoly that avoided both commercialism and state control. It was largely to counter the kinds of frivolities that Kato describes in the Japanese context that Reith was in favour of maintaining monopoly control and therefore a particular mode of expression (Casey et al., 2002). Although, Strinati adds, that this also needed to be qualified in relation to the war years when the BBC was strictly censored, closely monitored, used as a propaganda instrument, and came under the regulations of the Official Secrets Act and the Defence Note system. So Japan was not the only country where the independence of public broadcasting has been called into questions. The controversy regarding NHK and the issue of editorial independence brought into focus by the documentary on “Comfort Women” recalls scandals and events that have rocked PSBs such as the BBC and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, for example, the 2004 Hutton Inquiry into the BBC’s reporting of the way the British government responded to the question of Iraq’s “weapons of mass destruction,” and the death of weapons inspector Dr David Kelly. Similarly criticisms regarding editorial independence were extended to the ABC when its Managing Director, Jonathon Shier, resigned in the face of allegations that he was being overly influenced by his close friend Prime Minister John Howard.

**Conclusion**

What these examples demonstrate is that while these PSBs (along with NHK) were primarily based on the notion of providing a universally available service to which the public were to have access and which covered the whole spectrum of public life through the range of programming, at certain historical moments they were subject to the same kind of cultural conditioning through strict regulation and censorship as that of which NHK as been accused. Scannell (2000, p.50), however, argued that the structural arrangements, many of which are shared between the BBC, ABC and NHK, are in the long term far more important to the development of public broadcasting than the style or content of programmes and the subsequent issue of censorship. While a commentator like Pharr, for example, does not explicate her commentary along these lines we can infer that she expects the reader to understand the Japanese media as if they were still as strictly regulated and used for propaganda purposes as they were during that earlier period. However, the themes and philosophies to which the values of PSB adhere militate against the notion of strict censorship and militarism.
as being the foundation of Japan’s mediascape that is promoted in Krauss and Pharr’s account. This paper has demonstrated that Pharr’s comments overstate the situation and this has resulted in an exaggerated but simplified understanding on the part of the reader as to the way the Japanese media operates and how they are regulated. To explain the anomalies within the system we must look to other explanations such as the many cultural differences between Japan and the West and the way these have been represented.

References


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