**Journalists and Citizens ask the Asahi newspaper to retract its retraction of a major scoop surrounding leaked government reports on the real situation inside the crippled Fukushima nuclear facility during the 3/11 crisis**

On May 20, 2014, the Asahi newspaper published a scoop based on the leaked testimony of Masao Yoshida, the former manager of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant at the time of the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami that caused the meltdowns of 3 reactors of the nuclear power plant.

Yoshida, who died of cancer last year, was seen as a national hero for his decisive action despite the clear lack of personal safety after a magnitude 9.0 earthquake followed by an unprecedented tsunami destroyed the Fukushima nuclear power station on March 11, 2011.

The report conducted by a government investigation about the way the disaster was handled at the time, contained hundreds of pages, mostly transcripts of interviews, including with then-Prime Minister Naoto Kan.

The Abe government released the entire transcripts after the Asahi newspaper published a series of stories based on a leaked copy of Yoshida's testimony, in May. The testimony had been designated as “confidential” by the government investigation committee, which interviewed Yoshida.

However, on September 11, 2014, the Asahi Shinbun retracted their major "scoop" article based on Yoshida’s testimony, which reported that workers at Fukushima Daiichi had escaped to the Daini nuclear power plant, about 11 km away. Not only the article was retracted, but the two reporters who wrote the article were disciplined on November 28th after the Asahi newspaper company’s Press and Human Rights Committee (PHRC) decided it was the best way to deal with the overwhelming criticism made by other newspaper companies against Asahi. In his testimony, Yoshida said that despite his order to remain on site had not been followed, he was happy that the workers evacuated to the Daini buildings.

Today, a citizens’ group, composed of lawyers, journalists, academics, and writers, is calling for a retraction of the retraction of the Asahi newspaper article.

According to them, a major newspaper publisher retracting an article not because of factual errors but because the government and some right-wing media did not like it, is a clear and serious threat against freedom of the press and thus cannot be tolerated.

The Special Secrecy Law has just come into force in Japan on December 10th, but the article in concern came out few months before the law was enforced. “If the article had come out after the Secrecy Law went into effect, the truth would never have come out,” journalist Satoshi Kamata said yesterday at a press conference. The article was written at a time when the government had not made public any of the investigation documents. “The Asahi journalists reported the facts from the testimony and documents by their own means. They made important information public through their article. The fact that this piece of valuable information made public by those journalists is now entirely retracted is a way to push them down and oppress them and therefore is a great concern for Japanese journalism,” he concluded.

Due to the fact that nuclear power has, for many years, been put forward as a state policy together with corporations, and that the prime minister said the situation was “under control,” reporting information about the situation in the nuclear plant during the middle of the crisis is actually revealing a state secret.

This situation highlights the way freedom of the press should be in relation to the state power and authority. “When the state policy in place promotes nuclear power, and when these kind of forces are at play to pressurize a newspaper to give in, [this] is something that is very concerning,” said Tasturo Hanada, a Media and Journalism Professor at Waseda Ueniversity.

**What was the problem?**

The criticism on the article was made against its headline: “Going against the orders of evacuation.” Critics said that the expression used was not accurate.

Attorney at law Yuichi Kaido, who specializes in geographic locations of nuclear facilities in Japan, believes the wording of the headline used by the Asahi newspaper and the content of the article was correct. One point that could have been misleading, however, was whether the “order” did in fact reach all the workers on site. “The way the article was written could imply that all the workers were aware of the fact that the order was given,” he explained. Of the 650 people who evacuated, we do not know who was aware of the situation and who heard orders directly from Mr. Yoshida, and moved away despite of that, Kaido said. “We do not know the specific names of those who moved out.”

The speakers reminded the audience that investigative journalism is about looking into and monitoring the social and political moves of authority, and, based on evidence, bring facts to light, build a story, and present it in an appealing way to readers as a piece of news. “Journalists consider *what* is the story that should be told, and *how* should they present it, based on a facts. Journalism should not just be about reporting the naked facts. Facts become facts only when they are told. The way a story is told is what brings us closer to the truth.”

The words “order” and “withdraw” were part of this story. If the article said “instruction,” instead of “order,” would that have been correct, the 3 speakers questioned. And if the word “standby” was used instead of “withdraw,” would that have been correct? And if the words used by Yoshida himself in his testimony were reported exactly in the way that he told them, does that mean that the reporting would have been false?

If that is the case, the testimony should have been printed out word for word in the newspaper, but nobody would call that journalism. It would lack the story put in there by the reporters. “I am very surprised that such basic and clear facts are not being understood within journalism in Japan,” Professor Hanada said. “If there is criticism against or a different usage of the source presented in the Asahi article, the other media should also use their facts and sources to write a different story with a different view. And this should be a competition within the readers’ market. The readers themselves should judge which story is closer to the truth.” In this incident, former president Kimura passed over the judgment to the PHRC, a third-party organ of The Asahi Shinbun, and came up with the decision that the retraction of the article was the best thing to do. As a result, the reporters and those involved were disciplined. The PHRC has originally been set up to deal with complaints from readers in regard to articles which might be violating human rights or which might have issues of dishonoring people.

“Evaluations of the work of journalists should be done by peer bodies, which are in place for this purpose. However in Japan, such bodies which fulfill that kind of function do not exist, and corporate involvement within the media is so strong that these kind of situations are solved within the involved company rather than within a broader peer body.” Although the PHRC performed as a third party organ, the decision of retraction was completely taken within the company itself,” the speakers explained.

“In Japan, there is no such press council or professional organization in place to support journalists such as there would be in the US, for example,” journalist Satoshi Kamata said. “The press club system in place in Japan is completely obstructing the development of professionalism within Japanese journalism.”

**Japanese journalism’s trauma and failure to report a nuclear disaster**

There are various explanations and interpretations regarding retraction of the article. Satoshi Kamata believes it is related to the failure of Japanese journalists to cover the 3/11 disaster.

Again, he reminded that the pressure against Asahi was made because of its headline. It had a very strong impact and did lead to strong criticism from many other newspapers or weekly magazines. “The criticism was overwhelming,” Kamata said. “We do not know whether there was direct pressure from the government, but what we know is that after the Asahi journalists wrote the scoop bringing up the Yoshida Testimony to light first, the government decided to make the documents public and encourage other media to also write reports about it in a way that would criticize the original Asahi article.

During the nuclear crisis, company orders were given for mass media in the 30km area around the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant to evacuate and withdraw. “The two words we see reoccurring here are ‘order’ and ‘evacuation,’” he pointed out. The great criticism made upon the Japanese media at the time of the Fukushima disaster was their absence on the field. There was no Japanese mass media within the 30 km area. Mr. Katsunobu Sakurai, the mayor of Minamisoma city in Fukushima prefecture said in his testimony that the media “run away.”

“As the Asahi newspaper used those same words, I believe in some way it is a psychological denial by the press club journalists and corporate media, that reminds them of the criticism that was made at the time of the 3/11 disaster in regards to their company orders about withdrawing as well. In other words, the mass media wanted this to be an ‘instruction,’ not an ‘order,’ and a ‘standby’ rather than an ‘evacuation.’”

The speakers believe this article destroyed two of the major mistakes surrounding the nuclear disaster. Firstly, the article pulled down the fact that a situation can be “under control” inside a nuclear power facility in the case of a disaster. Secondly, it cleared the myth of the situation being under control as long as the workers are on site and doing their best.