

Broadcasting Research for the New Age

Technology is the enabler, but the sustaining core of broadcasting is a culture all its own, built up through imagination and intellect over nearly a century. The rich world of broadcasting we enjoy today has come about only through hard efforts, decade by decade, to make it a permanent and necessary part of society. Not for the first time, it faces new challenges now, but this time from the new broadband technology and the convergence of broadcasting and communications. Now, as the century is just beginning and these important issues demand attention, is a good time to take a fresh look at the roles broadcasting has played in society and to think about their evolution in the future.

The NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute has the longest history of any research institute affiliated with a broadcasting concern in the world. In 1946, only a year after the end of World War II, the Institute was founded to explore ways that broadcasting, then a media of rare value, could encourage democracy to take root in Japan. Its purpose, as stipulated in Japan's Broadcasting Law, was to conduct surveys and research that would contribute to the advancement of broadcasting and provide information on public needs. For fifty-five years, the Institute has pursued its mission in public service and culture through research and publication, as well as through training and nurturing of talented people in the field.

The environment of broadcasting and of broadcasting media research has been changing dramatically. When broadcasting took off as a creation of early twentieth-century society, it carried on the accumulated legacy of older media, absorbing the journalistic approaches and entertainment techniques developed in the newspaper and film industries. But the new medium (radio at first) soon learned to exploit its advantages and develop features of its own—to use familiar forms of speech and prompt reporting, for example—and was able to expand as a genre, acquiring in the process considerable influence in society.

Broadcasting today has tremendous diversity and reach. Regularly accessible to almost 100 percent of the world's people, it offers wide variety in programming, from news reports to entertainment, differing from place to place. Increasingly it is being put to use to inform the public of important news, events, calamities and natural disasters; to maintain peace and order; and to protect lives. Forming the central channels of information, it has become a necessary lifeline for people and communities everywhere.

Broadcasting's first century was not always smooth. It was a history of changing goals and purposes and experimentation with uses of its powerful voice. There have been dark times in certain places when broadcasting was exploited by governments as an instrument of political control and oppression. Moving beyond such difficult eras, people have been able to turn radio and television into sources of information and pleasure and have made them into a free and open venue for creative expression and public debate backed by sound journalism. Capitalizing on the distinctive characteristics of broadcasting, people have gradually built custom-made roles for it and created the large and critically important niche it occupies today.

As the genre has expanded and its presence has grown, however, its role and mission in society have become blurred. It is more difficult now to define it and give a clear answer to the question, "What is broadcasting?" One reason, of course, is the emergence of the new technologies that allow increasingly faster and more abundant information and ever-developing information systems. While creating new possibilities, they are affecting the ways and purposes for which broadcasting is being used.

All the advanced nations have cast their lot for competition and the market-based economy. As companies and industries restructure in order to seize information-age opportunities, they are driven by a corporate logic that pushes them to adopt new technology to expand business, and the drive to expand gives an increasingly prominent role to information. What seems to have been forgotten is that the advanced information society, by definition, is set up to squarely confront the issues of the civil society: the right to know, freedom of expression, and democratic rules.

How the advanced information society will take shape is not clear. The spread of media use and distribution of massive volumes of information will not necessarily make society richer, materially or culturally. Certain harmful effects of increased use of multimedia and the Internet have given cause for great concern in recent years. There are some serious problems arising from unsuitable or poor distribution of information, one-sided information, loss of journalistic integrity, a growing tendency toward commercialism, and cheap, vulgar content. Unmistakable evidence indicates the great difficulties of dealing with the information revolution and managing it to constructive advantage. The changes are happening so rapidly that we must be cautious, lest the culture of broadcasting and the quality that has been built up over nearly a century is needlessly swept away in the onrush of the information revolution.

Consider how broadcasting and communications, propelled by new technology, are already combining and merging in some areas. Each comes with its own characteristics and specific roles developed around them. Each brings

its own history and culture. One of the features of broadcasting is the capacity to deliver information at low cost to many people, quickly and equally. The Internet, on the other hand, lets a person transmit or receive information at his or her own discretion via e-mail or by accessing and interacting with websites. But now broadcasting is being called upon to change from media that generate information one-way into a multi-function interactive public apparatus that utilizes the technologies and diversity of the Internet to link citizens and society.

Given the flood of information provided via the Internet and the new media technologies, how will people select and organize information, and how will they choose to pass it along? How will public opinion and culture be shaped from now on? All the signs point to a steady convergence of broadcasting, communications, and broadband technology.

Anticipating that development, the ongoing changes indicate that broadcasting, which has long supported “theater in the home” through radio and television, is well on its way to incorporating computer functions. In time it will function as the information base of a massive network linking individual lives to each other and to society. It will, in short, become even more important to society than it is now.

We believe that the more information technology advances, the more important broadcasting’s role will be as the provider of “public information space” where people share concerns, debate issues, and form consensus. The philosophical basis of the information society will remain freedom of speech and the right to know for citizens, and the editorial prerogative and freedom of news gathering that the broadcasting industry has built up and defended.

At the same time we believe that the mission of everyone involved in broadcasting research is to create a new role for broadcasters as the “nerve centers of the information society.” That role will be to give people faster, more equal, and more diverse access to the widening explosion of information; to ensure accuracy and truthfulness; and to provide support in the evaluation of quality. As broadcasting and communications converge, we rely on broadcasting’s most valuable asset—the trust that its media have earned over the years.

Broadcasters have gained the right to use their media in ways that contribute to the public welfare and the advancement of culture. Yet as broadcasting becomes an ever-larger presence in our lives, too many in the enterprise seem to be shedding their sense of social responsibility. This is an unfortunate trend, and it is receiving way too little attention. On the one hand, we are seeing an unprecedented expansion of broadcasting services and diversification of software options, and on the other, growing commercialism, bad taste, and vulgarity in content. Uncertain or declining standards are bound to

have a critical impact on society, but they are being virtually ignored. Now more than ever broadcasting needs to reassert its guiding principles: the public good, advancement of culture, and honoring the trust it has cultivated over the years. In other words, much more study is needed of the concepts and principles relating to the social role of broadcasters and confirming the philosophical underpinnings of that role.

People involved with the media today and their breathless pace of transformation need to cultivate an ability to discern what should change and what should be held steady. There is an urgent need for original and innovative research that takes into account the significance of broadcasting over the past century while tackling the new issues created by the merging of broadcasting and communications. The challenge for researchers is to gather knowledge, experience, and data in order to learn how to take advantage of network broadcasting and determine its place as a public institution in the advanced information society.

The history of broadcasting in Japan contains some remarkable achievements, but one of the finest is certainly the establishment of this Institute, fifty-five years ago. We can only admire the foresight of its founders, who argued the need for a research institution devoted to study of the broadcasting media and their relation to culture and the public good. Now, looking ahead, we are beginning the century with a great many broadcasting-related questions unresolved or unchallenged. For example, we have hardly made a dent in exploring such issues as the impact on individuals and society of the information and experience provided by the broadcasting media in the areas of medicine and psychology.

On another level, despite the widening global exchange of information in other realms, surprisingly little research is being exchanged on the subject of broadcasting as a public asset of the information society. We believe that exchange of research and sharing accumulated knowledge across national borders are necessary if we are to reach an understanding of the mission of broadcasting for the new century.

Those goals are central to *NHK Broadcasting Studies*. While introducing aspects of the research undertaken at the NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute, its mission today is to encourage and stimulate the exchange of ideas and original work internationally in the area of broadcasting media research for the new age.

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