

Five Years since the Great East Japan Earthquake What TV Programs Have Reported: Network Nightly News Shows and Documentaries

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(Summary)

Japan marked the fifth anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 2016. To examine how television reported the disaster and the aftermath for the past five years, the author analyzed disaster-related coverage in network nightly news shows and documentary programs aired by different broadcasters.

As a result of the analyses, it is confirmed that nightly network news shows heavily reported disaster-related stories in March—the anniversary month—every year, but the amount of the reporting in other months decreased year by year. This is especially notable among commercial broadcasters. No major change was observed in the topics featured in the quake/tsunami-related news (analyzed by words). On the other hand, among the news regarding nuclear disaster, stories on the accident at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant and the following radioactive contamination gradually decreased while stories related to the reopening of the nuclear facility increased. There have been less and less coverage on initial two issues in question, “energy issues” and “government policy on nuclear power generation,” since 2012.

Having already analyzed the trends of documentary programs for the first three years, the author focused on the following two years for this article. It is revealed that, compared to the first three years, broadcasters, especially commercial ones, aired much fewer programs featuring 3/11. Nevertheless, a relatively large number of programs were broadcast in every March even in the last two years. More documentaries focusing on “recovery” featured positive aspects, but those featuring “nuclear disaster” tended to portray persisting harsh conditions.

The author also conducted a case study on documentaries set mainly in Ishinomaki City and Minamisoma City. Many of the programs on Ishinomaki regarded the city as the representative of the disaster-affected areas, and they tended to follow the families of victims and include comments wishing for “recovery” and “reconstruction.” Meanwhile, many of the documentaries on Minamisoma focused on the conflict over “returning home.”

The general tendencies observed in both network news and documentaries were the substantial decrease in the amount of the disaster-related stories and the increased concentration of broadcasts in March. It will be worth studying continuously how the content will be changing after the fifth anniversary.