

# Perceptions Research of PR Staff Members with Respect to Communication with the French Mass Media following the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Accident

–Interviews Conducted with AREVA, EDF, CEA, and IRSN–

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The Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Accident received prominent media coverage not only in Japan, but also in France as the world's leading nuclear power producer. What types of public relations (PR) systems did the French nuclear related organizations adopt to share information with media outlets? What kinds of attitudes did PR staff adopt when they communicated with journalists? Interviews were conducted with PR staff to perform a qualitative assessment of how French nuclear related organizations shared information with the media. With nuclear risks gaining global reach, France successfully enhanced the value of news about the nuclear accident in another country. This commentary examines this experience by focusing on the attitudes of the PR staff.

## I. Background and Purpose

### 1. French Response to the Fukushima Nuclear Accident

The accident that occurred at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant (hereinafter referred to as the “Fukushima Nuclear Accident”) led to the shutdown of all 54 reactors at Japan's nuclear power plants for the first time in the 42 years. This nationwide shutdown began when a regular inspection was conducted at Unit 3 of the Tomari Nuclear Power Station on May 5, 2012. The Fukushima Nuclear Accident also prompted Germany to phase out its use of nuclear power. In contrast, the Sarkozy administration maintained a pro-nuclear stance in France. The country's 58 nuclear reactors continued to be employed as the primary source of power even after Hollande took over the presidency.

Nuclear power accounts for over 70% of the electricity supply in France. The world's second-largest nuclear power producer after the United States, France leads the way in terms of international cooperation in the development of nuclear power technologies. Examples of

this include the introduction of the European Pressure Reactor, as well as research and development into next-generation nuclear power systems and nuclear fusion reactors. It is easy to imagine that the Fukushima Nuclear Accident received prominent media coverage in this leading nuclear nation.

## 2. Earlier Studies and Purpose of This Study

Media outlets in France obtain information mainly from the country's nuclear related organizations. However, no detailed reports have been made regarding how information is communicated within France from the nuclear related organizations to the media outlets. Furthermore, no attempts have been made so far to analyze the public relations (PR) departments of nuclear related organizations as sources of information for French media outlets.

Meanwhile, some analytical studies and research of the media coverage of the Fukushima Nuclear Accident have been reported in Japan. Examples of such studies and published research findings include a comparison of the coverage of the accident by major newspapers in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and China<sup>1)</sup>; an analysis of the editorial content of the *Asahi Shimbun* over the course of one month after the Fukushima Nuclear Accident<sup>2)</sup>; an examination of how journalism functions in Japan by focusing on televised coverage of the accident in its immediate aftermath<sup>3)</sup>; and a report on the findings of surveys conducted with people affected by the accident regarding their attitudes towards the media coverage combined with the presentation of problems observed with journalism<sup>4)</sup>. Nonetheless, none of these studies targeted the nuclear utilities that provide information to the media outlets.

Against this background, the author visited four nuclear related organizations in France in June 2012 to request interviews with their PR departments. The interviews were conducted as a part of an investigation financed by a JSPS Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research. These individual interviews were aimed at finding out how nuclear related organizations in France handled public relations when the Fukushima Nuclear Accident occurred and what kinds of attitudes the PR staff adopted when they communicated with journalists. This qualitative study is expected to identify implications and lessons for the performance of PR activities during a nuclear emergency in Japan.

The author has already interviewed some PR staff employed by nuclear utilities, with most of them working for electric power companies in Japan in 2008<sup>5)</sup>. Interviews are exploratory and problem-finding methods for revealing complexity and details. This study adopted the same method as the one used in a study conducted in 2008. In other words, informal interviews were conducted to obtain as much information from the respondents as possible without interrupting their responses from one topic to another. The interviews were also semi-structured to enable the details and order of prepared questions to be flexibly changed<sup>6)</sup>. In this manner, a certain degree of freedom was allowed to encourage open-ended responses. These interviews lasted until both sides felt that the ice had been sufficiently broken after the initial encounters.

## II. Overview of Media Outlets in France

Let us first take a brief look at the prevalence and history of French newspapers and television broadcasts. As of 2009, about 9.76 million newspapers were published every day in

France, which works out as 193 newspapers being read per 1,000 adults throughout the country. However, Japan publishes many more newspapers than France and other countries around the world, with a total of 50.04 million copies a day working out as about 460 newspapers being read per 1,000 adults. Nevertheless, newspapers remain an important source of information in France, which ranks high in terms of the number of copies published.

Initially, radio and television broadcasts used to be managed centrally by the Office of French Radio and Television (ORTF), which was later split up into seven independent broadcasters in 1974. Compared to Germany and the United Kingdom, however, radio and television broadcasts in France can hardly be described as truly independent following more than half a century of national monopoly<sup>7)</sup>.

French journalists approach their sources of information individually. Compared with other citizens, they have special rights stipulated under the law and other regulations. Unlike their Japanese peers, who enjoy no special protections concerning their rights, French journalists have their “spiritual freedom” (autonomy) protected by a labor code. In other words, French journalists have a legally protected status.

### III. Overview of Interviews with PR Staff

#### 1. Targets

In June 2012, the author requested individual interviews with major nuclear related organizations in France, as summarized in **Table 1**. Seven individuals from the PR departments at four organizations (AREVA, EDF, CEA, and IRSN) were interviewed. They included three managers. Each person was interviewed for at least one hour at their headquarters in Paris or in the suburbs of Paris.

#### 2. Question Design

The questions asked in the interviews are presented in **Table 2**. First, the interviewees were asked what kind of system the PR staff adopted at their nuclear related organizations to communicate with journalists and what kind of organizational structure they adopted to handle public relations (Category 1). Next, they were asked how they communicate with journalists and what kind of relationships they have with them (Category 2). Later, they were asked whether the characteristics of the media coverage of the Fukushima Nuclear Accident had

**Table 1** Respondents to interviews conducted in 2012

Target organization	Respondent	Month/Day (Hours)	Venue
AREVA	1) PR and press officer	6/19 (1.5)	HQ (Paris)
EDF	1) PR and press section chief 2) Press officer	6/21 (1.5)	HQ (Paris)
CEA	1) Press manager 2) Assistant press manager	6/21 (2)	Centre de Saclay (France)
IRSN	1) Press manager 2) Information and media officer	6/22 (1)	Fontenay-aux-Rose (France)

**Table 2** Interview questions

Category	Question
Category 1: Method of sharing information with media outlets	→ What kind of PR system was adopted at your organization and were you able to swiftly communicate with journalists in the event of an emergency?
Category 2: Method of sharing information regarding the Fukushima nuclear accident with media outlets	→ Do you think that information regarding the Fukushima nuclear accident was shared with journalists based on mutual trust? → Do you think that journalists were satisfied with the information shared by nuclear related organizations regarding the Fukushima nuclear accident?
Category 3: Characteristics of media coverage of the Fukushima nuclear accident	→ Do you think that media coverage of the Fukushima nuclear accident was exaggerated, negative, or sensationalized?
Category 4: Nuclear phase-outs in neighboring countries	→ Do you think that the nuclear phase-outs in neighboring Germany and Switzerland have influenced your organization's PR engagements with media outlets?

**Table 3** Summary of interview responses

Question	AREVA	EDF	CEA	IRSN
System adopted by the organization to facilitate information sharing	Emails were sent out simultaneously to about 4,000 registered journalists. The journalists' questions were responded to around the clock. An emergency procedure was implemented to collect information.	A contractor sent information to all of the journalists in one go. The journalists' questions were responded to around the clock. A crisis room was established.	Information was shared with AFP as necessary. The journalists' questions were responded to around the clock. A crisis team was established.	Information was shared with AFP as necessary. The journalists' questions were responded to around the clock. An emergency procedure was implemented to collect information.
Mutual trust with journalists	Transparency was emphasized in responses to journalists, which probably allowed us to gain their trust.	EDF tried to enhance the transparency and reliability of its information, which probably encouraged the journalists to trust it.	As a national research institute, CEA was probably trusted by journalists.	As a national nuclear watchdog, IRSN was probably trusted by journalists.
Satisfaction among journalists	There was too much information. Journalists may have felt that it was heavily loaded with jargon.	A lot of jargon was explained using simpler words. This most likely satisfied the journalists.	Very little organized information seems to have been made available.	We believe that journalists were supplied with enough information for them to be able to write their news articles.
Characteristics of media coverage of the nuclear accident	We don't think that the media coverage was exaggerated.	We don't think that the media coverage was exaggerated.	We don't think that the media coverage was exaggerated.	We don't think that the media coverage was exaggerated.
Phase-outs in neighboring countries	France would suffer a considerable loss from a nuclear phase-out. The policies of neighboring countries won't affect our PR activities.	The nuclear policies of neighboring countries won't influence our PR activities as long as people understand how a phase-out would impact their electricity bills and the global climate.	The decisions made by neighboring countries won't impact our PR activities.	This is just a political decision made by Germany. It won't influence our PR activities in France.

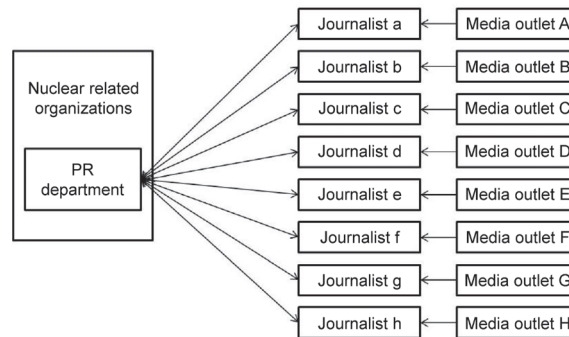
been excessive (Category 3). Lastly, they were asked how they perceived the nuclear phase-outs in neighboring Germany and Switzerland (Category 4).

## IV. Interview Results

The responses from the four organizations were compiled by identifying some common elements. **Table 3** summarizes each organization's responses in four question categories.

### 1. System for Sharing Information with Journalists

The four organizations have all adopted systems that allow their PR staff to share information with journalists directly. This strikes a contrast with the Japanese practice of indirect contact with journalists through press clubs.



**Figure 1** Transmission of information from nuclear related organizations to media outlets in France

**Figure 1** shows the typical transmission of information to media outlets in France. AREVA has registered some 4,000 journalists, all of whom can be contacted simultaneously through the sending of mass emails and the like. EDF outsources key communication with journalists to contractors. Both AREVA and EDF have assigned about 10 personnel to deal with journalists. As a research institute, CEA has established a PR system for sharing information with individual journalists only as necessary. Press releases issued by CEA mobilize the network of AFP, a news agency that is one of the leading media organizations in France. IRSN adopts a similar system to that of CEA. Instead of voluntarily sharing information with specific journalists, they have a policy that involves responding to questions from journalists.

Three of the four organizations have employed former journalists as PR staff. All of the four organizations are headquartered in Paris or the suburbs of Paris, and the PR staff working there work together with branch sites located at nuclear facilities and the like. The branch site personnel do not make independent judgements if an accident or other problem occurs on site. They always contact their headquarters first to establish a policy for handling the requisite public relations.

## 2. Communication with Media Outlets

The responses made by these four organizations varied very little and exhibited certain tendencies. It was noticeable that the PR staff often made statements such as the following: “Even a severe nuclear accident won’t lead the public to believe that France doesn’t need nuclear energy” and “Journalists won’t cast away their perceived need for nuclear energy.” The four respondents all explained that, after the Fukushima Nuclear Accident, they communicated with journalists while keeping in mind the three key points of transparency, credibility, and pedagogy.

They all placed an emphasis on transparency as they contacted journalists regarding the Fukushima Nuclear Accident. They also mentioned that they saw no reason to arouse distrust among journalists. Their responses could also be distilled to arrive at the conclusion that “the media coverage of the Fukushima Nuclear Accident did influence public opinion.” All of the respondents commented that the information shared from Japan in the wake of the Fukushima Nuclear Accident was “sufficient in amount, but sometimes difficult to understand.” They also pointed out that the PR staff could explain how the emergency unfolded once the information from Japan had been processed and sorted out in a clear manner. For this reason, the six respondents shared the view that “Journalists were generally satisfied with the information that they obtained.”

### 3. Characteristics of Media Coverage of the Nuclear Accident

The PR staff from AREVA, EDF, and CEA all responded by stating that the media coverage of the Fukushima nuclear accident was “not exaggerated” and “had not been sensationalized.” Meanwhile, some responded by saying that “Exaggeration in media coverage is generally inevitable” and “Journalists probably also think that sensationalism is an unavoidable part of media coverage.”

### 4. Nuclear Power Phase-Outs in Neighboring Countries

The responses were aggregated to form the view that “communication with French media outlets won’t be influenced” by nuclear power phase-outs in Germany and Switzerland. Similarly, the responses were almost identical in expressing the belief that “policies in neighboring countries will not change the perceptions of French journalists on nuclear energy.”

## V. Analysis of Responses

In Japan, nuclear utilities have been expanding and strengthening their PR units based on their earlier experiences of conducting PR activities in response to emergencies. In France, however, the PR departments responsible for dealing with media outlets are not as large as their Japanese counterparts are. Furthermore, with the media not having to rely on press clubs in France, the PR staff there evidently and consciously shared information with individual journalists as professionals.

Regardless of any differences in the approaches taken compared to Japan, the PR departments of French nuclear related organizations placed great importance on communicating with media outlets following the Fukushima Nuclear Accident. For this reason, they have established crisis rooms and implemented other robust measures in anticipation of inquiries from citizens and media outlets. These departments anticipated the prominent media coverage of the Fukushima Nuclear Accident.

The interviews also revealed evidence that communication between the PR staff and journalists there was continued with little friction. The staff maintained a good rapport with the media outlets and gauged that the journalists were aware of the need for nuclear energy. In this manner, the interviews demonstrated that French nuclear related organizations tried their best to share information with the country’s media outlets by collecting information regarding the nuclear accident that took place overseas in Japan.

Nonetheless, the PR staff stressed that they sometimes found it difficult to provide adequate explanations to the French media outlets if they did not receive clear information from Japan. In fact, a huge amount of information released by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) reached France, but the quality proved problematic for the PR staff. Any complicated and highly technical information from Japan had to be digested by them to produce clearer explanations.

Descriptions of the PR systems and risk communication employed during emergencies are provided in reports that were submitted in Japan in July 2012 by both the National Diet of Japan Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission (NAIIC) and the Government’s Investigation Committee on the Accident at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Stations of Tokyo Electric Power Company. Detailed accounts of the PR system employed by TEPCO and their press releases are also found in these reports. Unfortunately, the reports did

not mention the importance of delivering relevant information to other countries and communicating with foreign organizations. As far as the findings from this study are concerned, the relevant organizations in countries other than Japan are also compelled to collect information on nuclear accidents. Moreover, attention must be paid to both the amount and quality of the information shared with other countries. Today, nuclear utilities are expected to engage in nuclear public relations to share clear information with foreign nuclear related organizations quickly.

Viewed from the opposite perspective, nuclear utilities must be prepared for the possibility that the impact of a nuclear accident or problem in another country may affect the nuclear policy of their own country. Nuclear utilities are expected to establish PR systems that allow them to provide expert insights in a clear manner to media outlets while earnestly collecting information on nuclear accidents and other relevant events in other countries. Advancements in information technologies are expanding the global reach of the media. With this in mind, nuclear utilities should consciously pursue clear and swift communication with other countries.

## VI. Conclusions

The Fukushima Nuclear Accident that occurred in Japan received prominent media coverage in France. Day and night, the PR staff in France skillfully continued to communicate with journalists. This is probably because of the extensive interest that French media outlets have in relation to the use of nuclear energy both in and outside their country, which promotes nuclear power development. Even if a nuclear accident takes place in another country, the value of news can be enhanced by media outlets that operate in countries that use nuclear power. The Fukushima Nuclear Accident showcased this point.

Beck<sup>8)</sup> proposed the idea of a global risk society as risks began to cross borders around the world. As the society faces global risks of a universal nature, information concerning an emergency in one country should be shared swiftly and clearly not only within that country but also with other countries. Nuclear utilities are also expected by nuclear related organizations in other countries to provide information. Whether they are living up to this task has come under international scrutiny.

In particular, proactive information sharing could make a policy contribution to Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS), all of which are pursuing nuclear power development, as well as Poland, Romania, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, and other countries that have committed to building nuclear power plants. Going forward, information sharing with other countries should be included in PR activities. Conversely, if a nuclear facility or the like is affected by an accident or problem in another country, Japanese nuclear utilities should try to swiftly provide relevant information to domestic media outlets.

As Combs and Slovic<sup>9)</sup> have pointed out, people gain a recognition of the risks involved through frequent media coverage. Fukuda<sup>10)</sup> upheld the belief that the variables of media coverage cannot be overlooked in discussions of risk communication. Today, information is transmitted across borders in real time. Once nuclear related organizations become capable of swiftly sharing clear information with domestic and foreign media outlets, they will surely advance a step further toward more effective risk communication.

I hope that the findings from this study conducted with PR staff based in France can be complemented by further studies to examine the relationships between nuclear related

organizations and media outlets in Asian countries that pursue nuclear power development.

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