

# News coverage of Fukushima disaster found few reports identified health risks to public

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Five years after the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in Japan, the disaster no longer dominates U.S. news headlines, although experts say it is a continuing disaster with broad implications. A new analysis by American University sociology professor Celine-Marie Pascale finds that U.S. news media coverage following the disaster minimized health risks to the general population.

Pascale analyzed more than 2,000 news articles from four major U.S. outlets following the disaster's occurrence from March 11, 2011 through March 11, 2013. Only 6 percent of the coverage—129 articles—focused on [health risks](#) to the public in Japan or elsewhere. Human risks were framed, instead, in terms of workers in the disabled nuclear plant. Pascale's research has published in the flagship journal for the International Sociology Association, [Current Sociology](#).

## Disproportionate access

"It's shocking to see how few articles discussed risk to the general population, and when they did, they typically characterized risk as low," said Pascale, who studies the social construction of risk and meanings of risk in the 21st century. "We see articles in prestigious news outlets claiming that radioactivity from cosmic rays and rocks is more dangerous than the radiation emanating from the collapsing Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant."

Pascale studied news articles, editorials, and letters to the editor from two newspapers, The Washington Post and The New York Times, and two nationally prominent online news sites, Politico and The Huffington Post. These four media outlets are among the most prominent in the United States. They also are among the most cited by television news, talk shows, other newspapers, social media and blogs Pascale said.

Nuclear disasters have potentially large-scale and long-term consequences for people, environments, and economies around the globe. Given limited public knowledge about the details of nuclear energy and encumbered access to disaster sites, the media have disproportionate power around the globe to shape public knowledge, perception, and reaction to nuclear crises, Pascale said. Pascale's article illustrates how systematic media practices minimized the presence of health risks, contributed to misinformation, and exacerbated uncertainties.

Pascale's analysis initially characterized the risk to the general population in one of three ways: low, uncertain, or high. However, when examining the bases on which these characterizations were made, it was clear that all media characterizations of uncertain risk were subsequently interpreted as evidence of low risk. In two years of reporting, across all four media outlets, there were only a combined total of 17 articles reporting any noteworthy risk from the largest nuclear disaster in history.

Corporations and government agencies had disproportionate access to framing the event in the media, Pascale says. Even years after the disaster, government and corporate spokespersons constituted the majority of voices published. News accounts about local impact—for example, parents organizing to protect their children from radiation in school lunches—were also scarce.

## **Globalization of risk**

Pascale says her findings show the need for the public to be critical consumers of [news](#); expert knowledge can be used to create misinformation and uncertainty—especially in the information vacuums that arise during disasters.

"The mainstream media—in print and online—did little to report on health risks to the [general population](#) or to challenge the narratives of public officials and their experts," Pascale said. "Discourses of the risks surrounding disasters are political struggles to control the presence and meaning of events and their consequences. How knowledge about disasters is reported can have more to do with relations of power than it does with the material consequences to people's lives."

While it is clear that the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear meltdown was a consequence of an earthquake and tsunami, like all disasters, it was also the result of political, economic and social choices that created or exacerbated broad-scale risks. In the 21st century, there's an increasing "globalization of risk," Pascale argues.

"People's understanding of disasters will continue to be constructed primarily by media. How [media](#) members frame the presence of [risk](#) and the nature of disaster has enormous consequence for our well-being," she said.

Provided by American University

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