

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### **The role of a local newspaper after disaster: an intrinsic case study of Ishinomaki, Japan**

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## The role of a local newspaper after disaster: an intrinsic case study of Ishinomaki, Japan

The city of Ishinomaki in Miyagi prefecture was devastated by the tsunami that struck Japan's North East Coast on March 11, 2011. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Ishinomaki, which included interviews with senior journalists from the city's two local newspapers, the *Ishinomaki Hibi Shimbun* and the *Ishinomaki Kahoku*, this paper presents an intrinsic case study of the role a local newspaper in Ishinomaki after the Great East Japan Disaster. The evidence reveals that in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami journalists recognised how their newspaper could serve the immediate information needs of the local community by providing essential lifeline information, describing a duty to report, despite the operational difficulties that their newspapers faced. In the longer-term recovery phase, interviewees acknowledged how their newspapers have attempted to communicate a message of hope to the city and provide an alternative perspective to the national media, which sometimes gave a false impression of the state of Ishinomaki's recovery. This paper offers some insights into journalistic role conceptions, illustrating how journalists from the two newspapers embraced the role of information-disseminator (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1991) after the disaster, and also identifies avenues for further research.

Keywords: Japan; local newspapers; journalistic roles; Great East Japan Disaster

On March 11, 2011 a 9.0 magnitude earthquake struck Japan, generating a series of tsunami waves that inundated large parts of the coastline in the north east of the country. The port city of *Ishinomaki* in *Miyagi* prefecture was one of the hardest hit areas, with more than 3,000 people killed and 22,000 displaced by the disaster (Anonymous, 2011). Damage to properties, businesses and the city's infrastructure was substantial.

While there exists a significant body of research examining the relationships between media and audiences after natural disaster (Blanchard-Boem, 1998; Perez-Lugo, 2004) and the function of local media in supporting disaster response and recovery (Kanayama, 2007; Wenger & Quarantelli, 1989), less attention has been paid to the potential role of local newspapers in aiding response and recovery after a wide-scale disaster. This article seeks to provide avenues for further research enquiry in an attempt to bridge this gap, presenting a case study of the role and function of local newspapers in Ishinomaki, Japan after the tsunami of March 2011. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Ishinomaki, the principal source of evidence examined in this case study are interviews with senior journalists from two newspapers based in Ishinomaki city, the *Ishinomaki Hibi Shimbun*, the city's community newspaper, and the *Ishinomaki Kahoku*, the area pages<sup>1</sup> that are distributed as a supplement to the regional *Kahoku Shimpō* newspaper.

To establish a conceptual framework for this case study, the article begins with a review of the literature on disaster journalism and the role of local media after disaster, paying particular attention to research on Japanese news media and journalism and recent studies on the Great East Japan Disaster. It will then

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<sup>1</sup> Available in the administrative districts of Ishinomaki city, *Higashi-Matsushima* city and *Onagawa* town.

introduce the two newspapers that provide the focus for this case study through a discussion of the characteristics of Japan's daily newspaper industry.

### **Conceptual framework: Journalism and reporting disaster**

The significant body of literature on journalism and disaster coalesces around three broad themes: disasters and their impact on news organisations and journalistic practice; the characteristics of reporting and news media coverage of disaster; and research that has explored media-audience dynamics at the different phases of disaster.

The first theme considers how disasters may disrupt newsgathering and reporting routines (See Tuchman, 1978) and the challenges that they pose for news organisations. Research has shown, for example, that disasters often necessitate the diversion of resources from 'routine stories' (Berkowitz, 1992; Olsson, 2010) and that due to inadequate disaster planning local and regional news providers may be required to adopt different procedures when covering disaster (Quarantelli, 1996; Waxman, 1973; Wenger & Quarantelli, 1989).

Considerable attention in the scholarly literature has been given to source interaction, with studies demonstrating that at the response phase of disaster journalists tend to rely on information provided by official sources (Wenger & Quarantelli, 1989, p. 22). Others highlight the tensions between journalists and emergency managers (McLean and Power, 2014), identifying how for 'reasons of post-event objectivity' news organisations are often reticent to become involved in arrangements with other agencies that support disaster mitigation and response (Wilkins, 2016, p. 222). Some have, therefore, called for greater collaboration between the media and such agencies after a disaster (Veil, 2012).

Other research has sought to understand how journalists negotiate their professional role when covering distressing stories, including natural disasters, examining how reporters cope with the psychological and emotional burden of reporting from disaster situations (Himmelstein & Faithron, 2002; Richards & Rees, 2011).

The second analytical approach focuses on the characteristics of disaster news coverage. Scholars have identified recurring patterns in journalistic accounts of disaster (Cottle, 2014; Houston, Pfferbaun & Rosneholtz 2013; Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen & Cottle, 2012), noting its emphasis on their impacts on humans, the built and natural environment (Houston et al., 2013) and a failure to report on the 'whys of disaster, with their causes often overshadowed by the acute drama of the events themselves' (Ploughman, 1995, p. 319).

Analyses of international media coverage of the Great East Japan Disaster have shown how citizen or eyewitness material (Pantti, 2012) and technological practices shaped journalistic narratives to the disaster (Wang, Lee & Wang, 2012). A study comparing Japanese and international online news coverage noted that the Japanese media gave more space to the earthquake and tsunami and information about disaster relief, whereas international news focused more on the nuclear situation at Fukushima (Tkach-Kawasaki, 2012).

There is a greater body of academic work examining Japanese media coverage of the disaster. McCarthy (2014) explored how the national press assessed the government response to the disaster, identifying a tendency to support the positions that were advocated by the Japanese government. Others,

conversely, have argued that the Japanese news media became more critical of the government and its leadership after the disaster (Samuels, 2013), with national newspapers becoming increasingly independent from the government line when reporting the nuclear crisis (McNeil, 2013).

Looking beyond the initial coverage of the disaster, Takekawa (2014, p. 236) documented serialised content in local and community newspapers in *Iwate*, one of the disaster-hit prefectures, identifying how the tone of coverage reflected the role of a local newspaper in 'revitalizing destroyed communities.' Similarly, Rausch (2014, p. 256) examined the transition in the 'journalistic treatment' of the disaster in three prefectural newspapers from the *Tōhoku* region, identifying how serial columns were able to take up the concerns of disaster-affected communities about recovery and reconstruction.

A third area of research has considered the media-audience relationship, assessing media use at different phases of a disaster (Perez-Lugo, 2004). Studies have shown that in the preparedness stage (Perez-Lugo, 2004), the news media provide information that enables communities to plan and mitigate the effects of disaster (Blanchard-Boem, 1998, p. 267; Wenger & Quarantelli, 1989). In the response stage the news media are able to provide information about the disaster, its effects, and assist disaster response and relief (Miller & Goidel, 2009; Simpson & Coté, 2006;). In the longer-term recovery phase, local media, as Kanayama (2007) identified after the Great Hanshin earthquake, have an important role to play in supporting communities by enhancing social capital.

Only a handful of studies, however, have considered the perspectives provided by journalists working from or within a disaster-affected community. Usher (2009) explored how journalists from the Times-Picayune in New Orleans understood the role of a local newspaper after Hurricane Katrina, finding that when their own communities are affected by disaster journalists may depart from the traditional norms of journalism, becoming advocates for their city. Similarly, Berrington and Jemphrey (2003) found that in the aftermath of traumatic events journalists' personal involvement in stories affecting their own community influenced their practice and reporting.

The case study outlined in this article seeks to contribute to this area of scholarship by evaluating how journalists from two newspapers that circulate within a disaster-affected community in *Tōhoku* assess the role of a local newspaper and their own responsibilities as journalists after the Great East Japan Disaster.

## **Japan's regional and local newspapers**

While newspaper revenues have decreased in recent years, down by 20% since its peak in 1997, circulation figures in Japan remain high in comparison with other countries (Hayashi, 2013), with the morning edition of the *Yomuri Shimbun*, Japan's highest-selling newspaper, listing a daily circulation of just under 10 million copies (Yomuri Shimbun, 2015).

In addition to the five<sup>2</sup> national titles, which are available across Japan, there are also regional or block newspapers, distributed in each of Japan's eight

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<sup>2</sup> The *Yomuri Shimbun*; the *Ashai Shimbun*; the *Manichi Shimbun*; the *Sankei Shimbun*; and the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (list ordered by daily circulation).

regions<sup>3</sup> (Rausch 2012, p. 17), prefectural newspapers, with a smaller prefectural circulation (Kanzaki, 2014, p. 33), and community newspapers that focus 'almost exclusively' on news and issues relevant to a particular geographic area (Takekawa, 2014, p. 222), such as a smaller city. These distinctions between the different levels of the Japanese newspaper industry are fluid. Some scholars, for example, focus more on the differences between the national dailies and prefectural newspapers (Cho, 2002). There is generally agreement, however, that newspapers at different levels complement rather than compete with each other (Cho, 2002; Yamada, 1985 and Shikata, 2013a cited in Takekawa 2014, p. 222) and it is at the local level where there is greater competition (Rausch, 2012).

The present study focuses on the Ishinomaki Kahoku, the area pages that are distributed in the Ishinomaki area<sup>4</sup> as a supplement to the Kahoku Shimpo, the regional block newspaper of Tōhoku and the Ishinomaki Hibi Shimbun (hereafter: Hibi), Ishinomaki's community newspaper.

The Kahoku Shimpo is headquartered in Sendai and has bureaus in smaller cities across the six prefectures that form Japan's Tōhoku region, including Ishinomaki, where journalists produce the Ishinomaki Kahoku, a 6-8 page supplement, providing localised news<sup>5</sup> relevant to the Ishinomaki area (Kahoku Shimpo 2013 as cited in Takekawa, 2014). At the time of the disaster the Kahoku Shimpo/Ishinomaki Kahoku had a daily circulation of approximately 47,000 in the Ishinomaki area, but now reaches fewer than 40,000 households (Foreign Press Centre Japan, 2013).

The Hibi is a daily evening newspaper that focuses on local news and issues<sup>6</sup> and is distributed in Ishinomaki and the neighbouring municipalities of Higashi-Matsushima and Onagawa. In March 2011 the newspaper had a circulation of 14,000 but by February 2015 this had fallen to fewer than 8,000 households (Personal correspondence with interviewee from the Ishinomaki Hibi Shimbun).

## Method

The research followed an intrinsic case-study approach (Stake, 1995), which is most applicable when research is undertaken because the case is unique or is of interest (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 550), with the purpose of collecting evidence to enhance our understanding of the single case.

The two newspapers, the Hibi and Ishinomaki Kahoku, serve as the objects of study, with perspectives provided by key journalists from these two newspapers acting as the main unit for analysis (Yin, 2014, p. 33). The temporal

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<sup>3</sup> *Hokkaido, Tōhoku, Kanto, Chubu, Kinki/Kansai, Chugoku, Shikoku and Kyushu*

<sup>4</sup> Available in the administrative districts of Ishinomaki city, Higashi Matsushima City and Onagawa Town.

<sup>5</sup> Examples of the type of content carried by the Ishinomaki Kahoku include: serialised columns and stories, information about local health services, photo features, advice columns, such as expert advice on legal matters, school sports reports, and ship to shore reports from Ishinomaki's fishing fleet.

<sup>6</sup> The Hibi's coverage is almost exclusively local in its orientation, for example reporting on local and school sports, events and festivals, producing serialised content, including a long-running series of people's reflections on the 3/11 disaster, and comment and opinion on issues affecting the Ishinomaki area.

parameters for the case were to examine the role of a local newspaper at both the response and in the longer-term recovery phase of the disaster, running up until March 11, 2016, the fifth anniversary of the Great East Japan Disaster.

The presentation of the case study and analysis that follows is based on two sources of evidence, interviews conducted in February 2015 with senior journalists from the two newspapers, recruited by the researcher, and a broad document search, which included a selection of content published by both newspapers. These were supplemented by observations recorded by the researcher when conducting fieldwork in Tōhoku and Ishinomaki.

The interviews followed Yin's (2014) guidelines for case study interviews, focusing on an in-depth interview with a senior journalist from the Hibi and Ishinomaki Kahoku. Both of whom had and continue to have responsibilities for coordinating coverage and managing reporters.

Interviews were semi-structured to allow interviewees to reflect on the role of a local newspaper, their own practice and responsibilities to a disaster-affected community, drawing on the methodological approaches developed by Usher (2009) and Himmelstein & Faithorn (2001) to examine how journalists understand the role of a local newspaper and negotiate their own professional responsibilities in the aftermath of disaster. Interview questions were open ended but organised around three broad themes that sought to address the central research proposition: the impact of the disaster on the newspaper and journalistic routines; journalists' perceptions of the role of a local newspaper and their own as journalists at the response and in the longer-term recovery phases of the disaster; and recovery needs and reconstruction in the Ishinomaki area.

Each interview lasted between one and one-half hours and were conducted in Japanese, with the aid of an interpreter, audio-recorded, with the consent of participants, then translated and transcribed. A thematic analysis was then conducted to identify key themes emerging from the data. Due to participant confidentiality, the quotes presented below to illustrate evidence are not personally attributed to individuals.

A broad document search was also conducted to obtain additional evidence pertaining to the effects of the tsunami on the Ishinomaki area and local media in the city. Relevant sources were identified from internet searches using the following search terms, *Ishinomaki* (石巻); *Ishinomaki Hibi Shimbun* (石巻毎日新聞); *Ishinomaki Kahoku* (石巻かほく) and by using the Factiva newspaper database to retrieve relevant articles published in US, UK and Japanese newspapers. A selection of articles published by both newspapers in the five years since the disaster were also sourced by the researcher. Further documents were obtained when conducting fieldwork in Japan, including access to copies of the poster newspapers produced by the Hibi in the days after the disaster.

The purpose of the document review was to seek further corroborating evidence concerning the effect of the disaster on the two newspapers that comprise the current case study (Yin, 2014, p. 107) and to contextualise the interview data. Relevant documents and news articles are identified, therefore, as secondary data in the case study.

The evidence that follows is presented in chronological order, beginning by examining the impact of the disaster on the two newspapers and their operations, before turning to the perspectives provided by the key interviewees.

To address the research proposition the central themes identified from the evidence in this intrinsic case were then analysed in the context of existing literature on journalism practice in disaster situations and journalistic role conceptions.

### **The impact of the disaster on the two newspapers**

The branch office of the Ishinomaki Kahoku is accommodated within the corporate building of the *Sanriku Publishing Company* in Ishinomaki, which was flooded by the tsunami. As a consequence, the editorial and production systems used to produce the newspaper failed (Anonymous, 2011) and the Ishinomaki Kahoku was not published for three days after the tsunami.

It was not until March 14 when journalists were able to transport articles on a USB stick by car to the city of Sendai, where the paper could be printed alongside the Kahoku Shimpo, that a two-page version of the paper was produced and brought back to be distributed in the Ishinomaki area.

When the tsunami struck, there were 10 journalists employed by the Ishinomaki Kahoku. All survived but were still victims of the disaster, with some having lost loved ones or their homes (Anonymous, 2011).

The offices of the Hibi, which are located in the central area of Ishinomaki were also flooded and damaged by the disaster. Without power to its own rolling presses, the Hibi was not published again until March 18. In the intervening period the Hibi's seven journalists, along with its proprietor, decided that to get information out to their readers they would write the newspaper out by hand on rolls of paper, with journalists writing out six newspapers each day from March 12 until March 17. The poster-newspapers were then taken and put up at evacuation centres and a park, *Hiyori-yama kōen*, on higher ground in the centre of Ishinomaki that served as a refuge point after the disaster.

Hibi: "We had to think of ways to get information out to people because we couldn't use the regular route.... So we thought of maybe writing stuff out by hand on paper."

The handwritten newspapers subsequently received international media attention and acclaim<sup>7</sup> for the way the Hibi was able to continue to provide vital information to the local community, despite the extensive damage to the newspaper's offices (See Glionna, 2011; Higgins, 2011).

On the March 18, as power started to be restored around the city, journalists were able to print an A4 version of the newspaper, with a limited circulation. When the power was reinstated to the Hibi's offices the following day, March 19, it was found that, despite suffering water damage, one of their rolling presses was still in working order, enabling a single-sheet version of the newspaper to be produced.

In the initial period after the tsunami it is important to note that for both newspapers fewer journalists were able to work. Many were directly affected by the disaster and of course first needed to take time to check on the safety of

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<sup>7</sup> The Ishinomaki Hibi was awarded a Special Citation by The International Press Institute at its 2011 Annual Conference 'for its heroic publishing efforts in the wake of the tsunami that struck Japan' (IPI, 2011).

family members and their own homes, before being able to return to work. As the interviewee from the Ishinomaki Kahoku explained:

(Kahoku) 'There were 10 reporters, who were also victims of the disaster...some with their houses washed away, some losing family members and so on.... Afterwards, it was the reporters that were able to ascertain the safety of their families that went out to report on their surroundings.'

### **The response phase: A sense of mission**

Comments from both interviewees indicate that there was a strong professional imperative to attempt to report on the situation in Ishinomaki and provide information that would enable people living through the disaster to cope in its immediate aftermath. This commitment was reflected in the conversations at the Hibi that preceded the decision to handwrite newspapers, with the interviewee recounting how colleagues, along with the newspaper's proprietor, met on March 12, the day after the tsunami, to discuss how they could disseminate information to the community.

Hibi: 'He gave a pep talk to everyone and so we had to think of ways to get information out to people... So we thought of maybe handwriting stuff on paper. The other idea we had was for reporters to go to evacuation centres and read out information to the people that were gathered there.'

The interviewee stressed that there was not consensus amongst colleagues that posters were an appropriate solution, explaining how some at the newspaper were not supportive of the decision:

Hibi: 'We were aware that it was not the ideal situation but we had to make the best of a bad job. It was all we could do. That was why we came up with the idea. We didn't think that it was the perfect way to do things.'

Having to write out a poster newspaper by hand each day, for others, underlined the inadequate disaster planning at the Hibi:

Hibi: 'The fact that we had to do this is testament to the fact that we weren't prepared for disasters when we should have been.... It is a slap on the wrist for us and for not being able to do better. We don't feel particularly proud about having to come up with this, despite the fact that it got a lot of coverage.... It is just what we were forced to do.'

Both interviewees acknowledged a sense of responsibility as a local newspaper, and they as local journalists, to their readers and the community:

Kahoku: 'It is what we were there to do, as a newspaper, as reporters. That feeling was strong.....A sense of mission. Because this is the most widely distributed newspaper. We felt it was our duty to get information out there as professional reporters.'

Kahoku: 'As for the Ishinomaki Kahoku, our job was actually for the local people and we kept on doing that.'

The interviewee from the Hibi explained that in part this responsibility was premised on a professional commitment to attempt to record and provide

information, despite the situation in Ishinomaki and the difficulties that they faced:

Hibi: 'It was the feeling again of the duty to get something out as a professional involved in newspapers.'

Another theme that emerged from the interviews is how after the tsunami journalists thought differently about how they viewed information, recognising that the type of information that they could provide would help people to cope after the tsunami:

Hibi: 'If you are not giving the readers the information they need or want it is not worth anything as information itself. So after the disaster we were really made aware of the importance of answering the needs of readers; where they are doing a cookout for food, where you can get hot food, where you can get pure water etc. This is the actual information that people wanted and what we had to provide. So we were more aware of the importance of providing information that the readers required.'

Kahoku: 'At the beginning it was just information about the damage, the extent of the damage, the whereabouts of people... As time passed we moved to provide information about the evacuation shelters and what was going on there. After this is would have been lifeline information, electricity, water, the state of the roads, when they are going to be repaired, when they are going to be coming back online.'

The poster newspapers produced by the Hibi are illustrative of how reporting focused on describing the damage to Ishinomaki, for example listing the extent of the damage in different areas of the city (*Ishinomaki Hibi*, March 13, 2011) and the structures and buildings destroyed by the tsunami (*Ishinomaki Hibi*, March 12, 2011). Similarly, the two-page version of the Ishinomaki Kahoku produced on March 14 attempted to communicate the scale and impact of the disaster on people and property. Its reports also, however, drew on the experiences of local people as they recounted the devastation wrought by the tsunami on their hometown (*Ishinomaki Kahoku*, March 14, 2011).

The interviewee from the Hibi explained that the disaster-related information their newspaper provided served to underline its primary function as a disseminator of locally-relevant information. To illustrate this point they drew parallels between a local or community newspaper and a *kairanban*, a neighbourhood circular, a common feature of community life in Japan, containing local news and information that is passed from one house to the next.

Hibi: 'When it comes down to it, just after the disaster, with the information we provided about where you could get food and where you could get water, we had basically returned to the *kairanban* aspect.'

The provision of such information was visible in the poster newspapers produced by the Hibi, with reports informing readers of the distribution of food at the town hall (*Ishinomaki Hibi*, March 12, 2011) and the city sports' park (*Ishinomaki Hibi*, March 14, 2011), which became a place of refuge for residents after the disaster. There was also news of the arrival of search and rescue teams (*Ishinomaki Hibi*, March 13, 2011) and details of specific requests for support that had been lodged by Ishinomaki City (*Ishinomaki Hibi*, March 14, 2011).

A further theme that arose from the interviews was the extent to which journalists in the days after the disaster were aware that the international media spotlight was on Ishinomaki. The interviewee from the Hibi, for example, suggested how at one point during the week after March 11 up to 1,000 people from the Japanese and international media were in the city. Both interviewees, however, felt that this had very little bearing on their own and colleagues' practice:

Hibi: 'We didn't have the capacity to deal with it. We were busy with our own stuff. We were just completely wrapped up in producing this poster newspaper.'

Kahoku: 'There were huge numbers of the media around. It didn't really affect what we did or how we acted. We just continued as we would have done anyway.'

Hibi: 'I feel there was a difference in focus between the two in the sense that the larger papers from outside, in their coverage, tended to concentrate on the more sensational aspect of the whole disaster.... As a local newspaper of course we were more concerned about just being able to survive and the day-to-day and the slightly more mundane aspects.'

The interviewees' reflections demonstrate an awareness of the value of information that their newspapers could provide to enable people in Ishinomaki to access services and support after the tsunami. Journalists stop short of suggesting that during the response phase their newspapers were able to meet a broader social responsibility to the public (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004). Instead the provision of lifeline information, hints at an additional dimension to notions of journalistic duty, with the interviewees describing an obligation beyond their readership to meet the immediate information-needs of a disaster-affected community.

Local newspapers and their journalists are part of their community (Hatcher & Reader, 2012), and the evidence here implies that these connections may become stronger following a wide scale disaster. The considerable efforts of journalists at the Hibi and the Ishinomaki Kahoku to continue to report in the days after the disaster and the emphasis placed on providing lifeline information people needed to survive and cope demonstrate how they and their newspapers attempted to meet the needs of their community during this critical period. Both interviewees suggested that the disaster brought into clearer focus the value of a local newspaper.

A further theme evident from the interviews was how professional accountability, the desire to follow and uphold journalistic principles (McQuail, 2003, p. 223), guided journalists' practice during the response phase of the disaster. Most significant was the disseminator role (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996), with the evidence presented here underlining the importance to journalists of being able to provide information that people living in the Ishinomaki area needed after the tsunami. An alternative explanation may lie in the extraordinary conditions in which journalists from the two newspapers were working in after the tsunami and as the city was without power and communication they were restricted to just reporting what they could see and hear. It could, therefore, be argued that the disseminator role was the only role that journalists were able to fulfil after the tsunami, one that was a product of the post-disaster conditions in Ishinomaki.

## The recovery phase: Balancing hope and loss

Beyond the response phase of the disaster, the evidence that is presented here indicates an awareness amongst journalists that their newspapers have a broader responsibility to the local community, with interviewees discussing how their newspapers have sought to communicate a message of hope and expressing a commitment to reporting that reflected the realities of post-disaster recovery in Ishinomaki.

The interviewee from the Ishinomaki Kahoku explained that one of the reasons they refreshed their online news site in March 2013, two years after the disaster, was to enable people living outside of Tōhoku, and would therefore be unable to subscribe to a print version of the newspaper, access to information about Ishinomaki. Since the tsunami, the Hibi's online news site, which publishes a selection of articles carried in the daily newspaper, has seen an increase in traffic that the interviewee attributed to people from outside the area looking for news about Ishinomaki. This was qualified, however, by acknowledging the Hibi's circulation has fallen from 14,000 in early 2011 to 7,500 in February 2015, with some readers having lost their lives in the disaster and others moving away from the area or now no longer able to afford a subscription.

Hibi: 'There are lots of people who don't really know what the future has in store for them yet, so they don't have the financial leeway to want to commit money to getting a newspaper. That is one of the reasons why there aren't so many readers.'

With post-disaster planning (*Minami hama kinen kōen kadowaki shō to no renzoku sei shōten*, *Ishinomaki Hibi*, September 9, 2016) and redevelopment (*Tsunami saigai hen matomaru*, *Ishinomaki Hibi*, May 11, 2013), unsurprisingly, foremost in both newspapers' coverage as the disaster areas have moved toward recovery, the two interviewees also suggested that their newspapers, through the articles that they choose to publish online, have attempted to get information about Ishinomaki out to audiences outside of Tōhoku.

Kahoku: 'Things have got back to basically how they were before the disaster, in terms of media awareness of Ishinomaki. Information about the state of Ishinomaki, with four years having now passed since the disaster, is not really getting out.'

Kahoku: 'In terms of content, at the same time of course providing information for local residents we were also more aware of trying to furnish information that would be more useful for people outside the area as well.'

It is also significant that the Hibi's freely accessible online news site (Hibi-net) includes separate sections for the three municipal areas of Ishinomaki, Higashi Matsushima and Onagawa to direct readers toward localised news content.

Ishinomaki featured prominently in both the Japanese and international media (See Goldenberg, 2011; Higgins, 2011; Watts, 2011) coverage of the tsunami and its aftermath. Interviewees explained how they felt more recent reporting on the city's recovery in the national media did not always reflect the current situation in Ishinomaki, for example often failing to highlight the complexities of post-disaster recovery. The interviewee from the Ishinomaki Kahoku explained how the news media in Japan tended to emphasise the

physical reconstruction of the city, which marginalised other recovery issues and needs that are important to people living in Ishinomaki.

Kahoku: 'Of course, different media organisations have their own agenda when they want to cover Ishinomaki but coverage can produce an image that the whole city is okay; everything had been reconstructed and it is all finished. When in reality that is not the case.'

To illustrate this, the interviewee continued by discussing how a great deal of attention has been paid in the national media to the reopening of the two train lines running to and from the city (See Anonymous, 2015; Motegi, 2015), which may give a false impression of the pace of reconstruction in Ishinomaki:

Kahoku: 'Things that get covered more in the news now, the reopening of a train line here. Something like that gives everyone the impression that everything is going well in Ishinomaki, whereas there are still many open spaces, where everything has been swept away and hasn't been rebuilt yet, which of course people in Tokyo and Osaka may not be so aware of. They just hear the good news about trains starting up again.'

In response to this, both interviewees acknowledged how their newspapers have tried to shed light on other aspects of recovery, in particular the social and emotional needs of those affected by the disaster (*Fuan ya yoku utsu de menekiryoku teika, Ishinomaki Hibi*, June 28, 2013; *Kokoro no sapōto jigyō jisshi, Ishinomaki Hibi*, December 12, 2013). The interviewees also stressed how their newspapers have attempted to show how post-disaster conditions persist for many people, for example, by pointing out the frustrations felt by people that are still waiting to relocate from prefabricated, temporary housing into new public housing and how their newspapers have sought to highlight this issue (*Furusato saisei sara ni mae-e, Ishinomaki Kahoku*, March 11, 2016).<sup>8</sup>

The interviewee from the Hibi drew comparisons between their own, as local media from within the Tōhoku region, and the national media in Japan's coverage of disaster recovery, suggesting that one reason that journalists from outside the area may pay more attention to redevelopment is because other post-disaster issues, for example the effect of the disaster on mental health, are more difficult to report.

A common theme to both interviews was an acknowledgement that their newspapers had sought to communicate 'a message of hope' to readers, as described by one interviewee, which was reflected in some of the stories that they have published and their approach to coverage of particular events since the tsunami:

Hibi: 'In the publishing world there is this saying...good language is vitamin for the heart. So I think that the issue is how we delivery those good words for people so it can become vitamins for their hearts.'

Hibi: 'We did make a conscious attempt to try and put more weight on optimistic information that had feelings of hope.'

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<sup>8</sup> In September 2013 15,000 people in Ishinomaki were still living in temporary accommodation (Anonymous, 2013).

This tone is evident in the two newspapers' reporting on commemorative events marking the anniversary of the disaster (*Maemuki ni ikiru, Ishinomaki Hibi*, March 12, 2014).

The interviewee from the Kahoku stressed that while they have attempted to present stories that would provide hope and optimism, their newspaper avoided the *Ganbaro Nippon* (don't give up or do your best Japan) narrative that became a feature of media and public discourse in Japan after the disaster (See Samuels, 2013):

Kahoku: 'We tried to avoid active encouragement, do your best...this kind of thing. We tried to avoid that but we did also try to include things that might give people hope and optimism....We did intentionally include that type of material.'

At the same time they explained how they have tried to strike a balance between more positive stories, remembering those that had lost their lives in the tsunami and also recognising how many of their readers were still dealing with grief and loss. The challenge in negotiating these complexities is illustrated by the comment below when reflecting on their newspaper's coverage of traditional cultural practices, such as annual school graduation and entrance ceremonies:

Kahoku: 'The April after the tsunami there was an entering school ceremony and we included a photo of the children attending the ceremony. Later we received a complaint from someone who had lost their child and didn't want to see these photos....So we have had to tread a line between hope, the more cheerful type of article, and also those would be more comforting for people still trying to deal with their loss.'

On the anniversaries of the disaster, both interviewees explained how their newspapers would follow cultural tradition and established patterns of reporting in Japan, producing articles and serialised content commemorating the tsunami, for instance marking 1000 days since the disaster (*Wasurete wa ikenai kansha-no kokoro, Ishinomaki Hibi*, December 4, 2013) and including a recurring feature on local people's accounts of the disaster (3.11: *Higashi nihon daishinsai: Sono toki dō kōdō shitaka? Ishinomaki Hibi*, July 6, 2013; August 10, 2013). They described how at such times they will present stories showing how Ishinomaki is recovering from the disaster, for example including a story about how families have moved from temporary accommodation to a more permanent home (*Furusato saisei sara ni ma-e, Ishinomaki Kahoku*, March 11, 2016), but would also include content remembering those that had not survived the disaster (*Aitō ni tutumareru Ishinomaki chihō, Ishinomaki Hibi*, March 11, 2014):

Kahoku: We have quite a lot of rituals to commemorate people that have died, the eleventh of the month, also the first, second year since they passed away. So we are aware of the cultural aspect....and will furnish articles in connection with that at those times...There are community projects where people are moving from one area that was inundated by the tsunami to a more safe area. This kind of information is obviously being reported but at the same time, at this time of year, we also think it is important to ensure that we have not forgotten the people that have lost their lives.

The evidence presented here suggests that in the longer-term recovery phase journalists maintained a commitment to the function of newspapers as disseminators of information but this role that was enacted by attempting to educate and inform audiences outside of Tōhoku about the realities of disaster

recovery and reconstruction in Ishinomaki. Alternatively, there is also some evidence to indicate that the two newspapers have orientated themselves toward a more interventionist position during the recovery phase (Hanitzsch, 2011), with journalists negotiating a role between passive disseminator and a more active participant (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1991). This is illustrated in the way they have attempted to maintain the Japanese public's awareness of the recovery needs of Ishinomaki.

A recurring theme that emerged from the interviews was an acknowledgement that their newspapers, through their reporting, have attempted to provide people with hope and optimism as Ishinomaki continues to recover from the disaster. This suggests an awareness of the contribution that local newspapers, and they as journalists, are able to make to the emotional recovery of Ishinomaki. While studies of journalists' experiences of reporting on traumatic events have shown that often only limited attention is paid to the effect of their reporting on news audiences (Richards & Rees, 2011), the evidence presented from this case study shows how journalists working within a disaster-affected community are mindful of the potential impact of coverage on their audience. This may indicate another dimension to journalistic responsibility, one that pertains to journalists working within a disaster-affected community, with interviewees reflecting on the emotional response of their readers and the community to their newswork.

Local newspapers remain an important part of community life, and as this case study suggests, are invested in the longer-term recovery of a disaster-affected community.

### **Further discussion and conclusion**

Ultimately, much can be learned from disaster and how people and communities respond (Hood, 2012). This research has, therefore, attempted to provide some insights into the role of a local newspaper after disaster, and also how journalists evaluate their own responsibilities to a disaster-affected community by presenting a case study of two local newspapers in Ishinomaki, Japan after the tsunami of March 2011.

Two significant findings arise from this case study and provide avenues for further research. First, it suggests that journalists embraced the role of information-disseminator after the disaster but this role was enacted in different ways during the distinct phases of the disaster. The evidence presented shows that at the response phase the two newspapers sought to meet the immediate information-needs of the community, whereas more recently, as the city has moved toward recovery, they have attempted to reach audiences outside of Tōhoku with news and information about Ishinomaki. Second, it also provides some evidence to show how journalists are aware of and sensitive to the potential impact of their reporting on their readers, a responsibility that reflects the position of a local newspaper within their community. This chimes with the conclusions of two recent content-based studies of local and community newspaper's coverage in Iwate prefecture that identified how local newspapers were able to take up the concerns of disaster-affected communities and contribute to their recovery and renewal (Rausch, 2014, p. 256; Takekawa, 2014).

To what extent these findings may be attributable to the culture of Japanese journalism or are a reflection of the post-disaster situation in Ishinomaki, one of the areas most severely affected by the tsunami, is not entirely clear. It would certainly be valuable to consider whether these findings emerge across other cases, both culturally and for other local media. Further research, for example, could extend this single case study to include local and community newspapers from other areas in Tōhoku affected by the tsunami.

While it is imperative that greater attention is paid to journalism and journalistic practice in 'non-Western contexts' (Obijifor & Hanusch, 2011), this case study has attempted to avoid applying a cultural lens to the analysis. It is possible, however, that some of the findings presented in this paper are attributable to the features of journalism in Japan. In contrast, however, to this more essentialist view, the weight of empirical evidence from comparative studies of journalism cultures shows that there are in fact many practices and values that are shared by journalists across cultures (Obijiofor & Hanusch, 2011; Weaver, 1998).

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