

published an article in which everything was already taken for granted» recalls physicist Giovanni Mazzitelli from the National Institute for Nuclear Physics in Frascati. The headline of the article read: «Earthquakes, failures, human errors: nuclear safety is impossible».

«The scientific community around me (in which are represented both positions pro and against nuclear plants) is very upset by the sloppiness that characterised the coverage and the way the accident was exploited» Mazzitelli says.

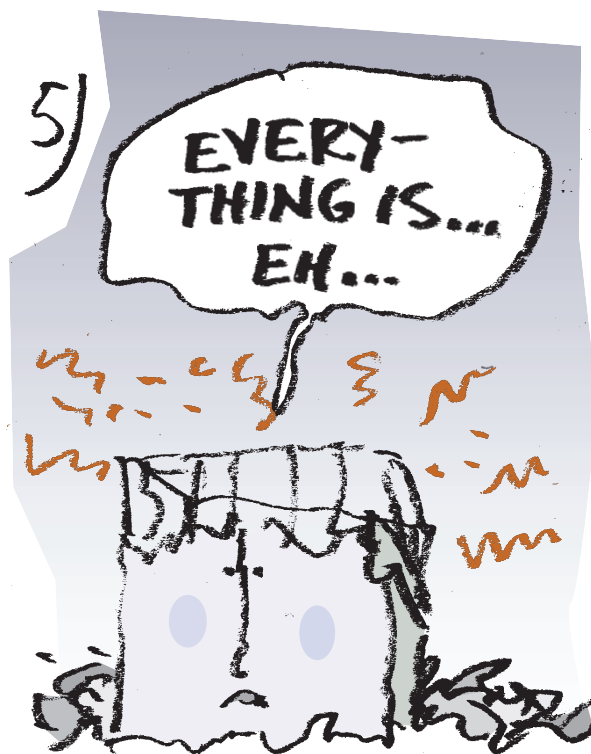
Such lack of objectivity appeared to be coupled in many cases with lack of precision, as it was noticed by Italian expatriates in Japan, who reacted by creating a Facebook group (called «Japan truth – what the Italian press is hiding») to point out and correct the mistakes. Group founder Paola Teresa Ghirotti declined to comment for EUSJA news about the experience with the Facebook group, that she left after a few weeks, but that unusual experience was described in an article published on the website of the European Journalism Centre under an explicit headline («Japan earthquake shakes Italian media»): «Those who live in Japan just report what they see and hear while a correspondent reconstructs the facts and often applies Italian filters» Francesco Formiconi, president of the Italian Chamber of Commerce in Japan, was quoted as saying. «The journalists overlooked their duty to consider the importance of a truthful information for the [Italian expats] who decided to stay in Japan».

For instance, the media reported dramatically about the Italian orchestra «Maggio fiorentino» that was said to be «trapped in Tokyo» in a «nightmare»: «The emergency is now bigger and bigger» wrote «Il corriere della sera» on March 15th. «They are among the very few Italians who are still in Tokyo, and the fear is about nuclear and radiation».

The use of such emotionally charged language was also typical of most articles that pretended to discuss the science behind the news: «I think that in such cases one should first stick to the facts. Then, when the time for a balance comes, one can discuss about the nuclear issue, the frailty of our technological society and the massacre caused today by natural disasters, in such a crowded world» wrote in his blog Marco Cattaneo, editor in chief of the monthly «Le Scienze», Italian edition of «Scientific American». «When things happen one should listen to the facts, the naked reporting of facts. Then comes the time for the analysis. On the contrary, with every passing day I realize that in Italy, with the information we have, we'll never know the facts. Because we are capable of distorting them in real-time».

After the Fukushima accident, Prime Minister and media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi announced formally that the Government would not restart the nuclear program. But just a few days later, while meeting French Prime Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, he openly confessed it was just a trick not to hold the referendum, and that the agreements with the French power company Electricité de France would just be delayed a couple of years.

**Fabio Turone, Italy**



#### Interesting links:

About coverage in the Italian press: [http://www.ejc.net/magazine/article/japan\\_earthquake\\_shakes\\_italian\\_media/](http://www.ejc.net/magazine/article/japan_earthquake_shakes_italian_media/)

General about earthquake coverage: "http://www.journalism.org/numbers\_report/japan\_coverage\_it%E2%80%99s\_all\_nuclear" [http://www.journalism.org/numbers\\_report/japan\\_coverage\\_it%E2%80%99s\\_all\\_nuclear](http://www.journalism.org/numbers_report/japan_coverage_it%E2%80%99s_all_nuclear)

## United Kingdom

**M**any British science journalists, like their counterparts across the world, were severely tested following the devastating earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan on 11 March.

Not only did they have to explain every scientific aspect of the natural disaster which killed about 25,000 people, but they were soon faced with the task of providing a running expert commentary on the crisis unfolding at the crippled Fukushima Dai-ichi (No 1) nuclear power station.

However, one of the biggest challenges faced by some was tempering the desire of their colleagues to elevate the crisis into a catastrophe, with many newspapers and broadcasters competing to paint the most apocalyptic picture of the potential consequences.

While there was obvious confusion surrounding the exact situation at the power plant during the first few days after the tsunami, some newsrooms sidelined their science specialists in favour of uninformed speculation by general reporters on the ground in Japan, interspersed with and appeals for help from frightened survivors of the tsunami prophecies of doom from anti-nuclear campaigners.

One science journalist told me a few days after the crisis began at the power plant: "I've been taken off this story after saying the risk of disaster was fading rapidly".

The news editor no doubt expected reports that Fukushima could become 'another Chernobyl', an underlying message across much of the UK media coverage. The trouble was that there was actually little comparison between the two events.

The Chernobyl disaster in 1986 resulted from an explosion and fire that burned for ten days, creating a large plume of radioactive material that rose some 30,000 feet into the air. The Fukushima plant was a different design, and while the hydrogen explosions made spectacular television footage, the amount of radiation released so far is ten times less than spewed from Chernobyl.

There is also a widespread assumption, including in newsrooms that Chernobyl resulted in a large number of deaths. The United Nations has noted that 28 staff and emergency workers were killed by exposure to high levels of radiation, and about 6,000 children and teenagers have developed thyroid cancer, of whom 15 had died by 2005 (although this number would have been much lower if the authorities had provided iodine tablets to the exposed population as the Japanese have done around Fukushima).

Meanwhile, there have been just three deaths confirmed at the Fukushima power plant to date, all caused by the earthquake and tsunami rather than radiation.

Nevertheless, many newspapers and news bulletins chose to ignore the advice of their specialist correspondents and instead ran headlines that suggested a severe and widespread threat to human life, with one 'red top' tabloid even warning of a radioactive cloud floating towards the UK.

Another correspondent told me: "This really is an extraordinary story of everyone getting the wrong end of the stick, quite deliberately I fear".

One other consequence of newsrooms' expectations of impending nuclear Armageddon was that some interviewees who offered sober assessments of the risks were treated as if they were 'apologists for the nuclear industry' even when there was no evidence of them having any vested interests.

There was much to admire in the way that the UK media covered the scientific aspects of the tragic events following the earthquake and tsunami in Japan. But there are also worrying signs from the coverage of the Fukushima crisis that some newsrooms treat the expert insights of their science specialists as inconvenient truths that can simply be ignored for the sake of a scare story.

**Bob Ward** is policy and communications director of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at London School of Economics

## Russia

My first impulse after the earthquake and the tsunami, which has brought such a great disaster to Japan and destroyed Fukushima nuclear plant, was to contact my Japanese friends. I sent e-mails and tried to call them to be sure they and their families were alive. Sure I was not alone who was worried and tried to contact people in Japan - there were even enough volunteers who were ready to leave for Japan to offer their help. Our association "Intellect" has sent a Letter of Support to the Japanese people, which was published on the WFSJ web page. Later several journalists created a site "Ideas for Japan" exchanging news, photos and proposals on how to help the country which was facing such difficulties after a tragedy.

We in Russia knew well what kind of tragedy it was. Nobody forgot what had happened in Chernobyl exactly 25 years ago, one could still hear the echo of that terrible event. And it was natural that journalists began to compare these two nuclear breakdowns in Chernobyl and Fukushima. And there was also another extra topic for us: we watched the accessibility of the information in Japan and we remembered that the proved information about Chernobyl was closed for Soviet people for long time. By the way, it was one of the reasons which brought the Soviet Union to its crush. Do we have the true information now, do we write today the truth about the catastrophes? However, these questions are not only for my colleagues in Russia, but for each journalist.

I believe it is impossible to hide any information in the internet era. We speak loudly about everything. But do we really analyze the information? I thought over it having read the articles about Chernobyl and Fukushima published in the Russian media. I noticed two different trends. I understood my observation was true having taken a part in science café which was devoted to Chernobyl and the Fukushima events. The Science cafes are run by two well known science journalists, members of "Intellect" Lubov Strelnikova and Sergey Katasonov, they always try to invite the famous scientists and very good experts. The same was this time: there were the experts from the different fields of science, and the discussion showed two opposite views.. The very same one can find in our media today.

A first look: the nuclear energy is very dangerous for nature and humanity; there is no need to continue the development of nuclear industry; no sense to follow that way, there is a need to concentrate on the traditional and new sources of energy. A second view: the nuclear energy is important and the only possible source that mankind will have in the future. The breakdowns in Chernobyl and Fukushima happened because of mistakes. And it was only the speculations of politicians and the media to describe the thousands of victims after Chernobyl. A scientist from the Institute for the safe development of nuclear energy told us about the statistics: not so much deaths and illness that the media has described followed the Chernobyl catastrophes. She said: the danger of nuclear plants is mostly a problem of human's psychology and stress.