



TEPCO, Credibility, and the Japanese Crisis

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Since the 9.0 quake and tsunami struck Japan on March 11 and the situation at the Fukushima Dai-ichi power plant rapidly degenerated, Fukushima residents and politicians, those most afflicted by the current crisis, have criticized the lack of information provided by TEPCO (Tokyo Electric Power Company) and the government. Prefectures with a concentration of nuclear power plants like Fukui and diverse citizens' groups have also sounded off, condemning the lack of information and delay in releasing critical facts to the public. A particular [concern](#) is that the government initially left far too much up to the company, was slow in establishing a headquarters to coordinate joint response, and initially accepted TEPCO's vague description of the situation and assurances, many of which have since turned out to be suspect. Tabloid [Sponichi](#) gives a credible account of an exasperated Prime Minister Kan Naoto blowing up at TEPCO representatives asking, "Just what the hell is going on!?" (一体どうなっているんだ) on the 15th. This is a question and, indeed, a tone shared widely among the general public. [Jiji](#) now reports that Kan subsequently continued his private criticism of TEPCO, accusing them of having a "very shallow sense of urgency", even on the 16th as the situation at the site deteriorated. The popular press [continues](#) to take shots at the "irresponsibility" and lack of transparency of TEPCO higher ups while nuclear energy specialists share their [criticisms](#) with the public. Scientists and even amateurs with Geiger counters, many of whom are communicating through blogs and social media, a dimension of civil society that has proven enormously important in the aftermath of the earthquake, have worked to make [independent information](#) available. In some cases, this has assuaged public fears, in others, however, by calling into question bland official nostrums and presenting evidence of a deteriorating situation at the plants, it has simultaneously increased public understanding of the evolving situation and elevated fears.

Concerns about the quality of public information are also being echoed outside of Japan. In a [press conference](#) in Vienna, IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) Director General Amano Yukiya criticized the lack of information provided by the Japanese government. While he has [stressed](#) that this may be due to confusion and the importance of trying not "to second-guess the people on the ground" the lack of information is proving a universal frustration. Initial trust in TEPCO's response now seems misplaced in the light not only of the company's reports in the present crisis, but perhaps above all its track record in handling past controversies.

As the crisis at the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant develops, investigative journalist Tim Shorrock [highlights](#) recent examples of TEPCO deception on issues relating to the safety of its nuclear operations dating back to 2002. "Ever since the tsunami knocked out the plant's cooling system on Friday and the reactor cores began over-heating, the official word has been confusing, contradictory and downright mysterious," Shorrock writes, drawing attention to the company's sorry record of providing inadequate and misleading information. Describing "a history of obfuscation and falsification when it comes to safety", Shorrock highlights two serious incidents. Quoting The Australian of July 25, 2007, he describes TEPCO's handling of the 2007 quake in Niigata:

12 hours after the quake triggered a series of accidents at the plant, a senior Japanese government official hauled TEPCO's president into his office "for a rare and humiliating verbal caning." The official was "furious" because TEPCO management had "initially misled his officials — and not for the first time, either — about the extent of breakdowns at Kashiwazaki-Kariwa, the world's largest nuclear electricity-generating complex." The paper continued: The magnitude 6.8 quake which struck 10 km offshore from the Honshu west coast plant caused subsidence of the main structure, ruptured water pipes, started a fire that took five hours to extinguish, and triggered small radioactive discharges into the atmosphere and sea. Japan has had reactors shut and superficially damaged by earthquakes before, nuclear power stations have had safety failures before, and TEPCO management has been caught before covering up its plant problems. But this was the first time all three circumstances had coincided. This was the nearest thing Japan had seen to genpatsu-shinsai (a nuclear power station earthquake disaster). Had the epicentre been 10km to the southwest and at magnitude 7, claims eminent seismologist Katsuhiko Ishibashi, Kashiwazaki City would have experienced the real thing — a nuclear plant emergency, possibly a damaged reactor, breaking out in the destruction and chaos of a population-centre earthquake. TEPCO's activities reached scandalous proportions in 2002, when an employee from GE revealed to the Japanese government that TEPCO had been falsifying its records of inspections of its nuclear power plants and hiding the facts for more than 10 years. According to a September 14, 2002, story in The Daily Yomiuri, Japan's largest-circulation newspaper: The case came to light only after a U.S. employee of a subsidiary of General Electric Co., who inspected nuclear reactors together with TEPCO engineers, tipped off the International Trade and Industry Ministry, the predecessor of the present Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry, two years ago. The Yomiuri also revealed that MITI itself had conspired with TEPCO to bury the information later revealed by the GE whistleblower.

Shorrock also draws attention to [documents](#) on TEPCO's own website promising reflection, improved safety, and increased transparency after the earlier scandals . . . apparently information that the company was required to post and maintain as part of a legal settlement. TEPCO's campaign to promote the safety of its nuclear power operations includes cartoon mascot "[Genshi-chan](#)" (Lil' Atom), [comics](#) drawn by leading manga artist Hirokane Kenji of "business manga" Shima Kosaku fame, and its "[Energy Hall](#)" which features not only a café and Japanese-style garden but cartoon versions of Einstein, Marie Curie, and Edison who guide children through the science of safe nuclear energy. What last week was typical of the promotion of the safety of atomic energy to the Japanese public now takes on grim irony.

Whatever the organizational problems, contradictions, and examples of dishonesty, we should take this opportunity to praise the efforts of the group of TEPCO workers that *New York Times* reporter Hiroko Tabuchi has termed the "[faceless fifty](#)", the crew remaining at the beleaguered plant that has been working selflessly to save lives. By the 16th the 800 other TEPCO workers who had been striving to save the plant left the area given the risk of radioactivity, and the Pentagon [announced](#) that its ships would not go within fifty miles of the nuclear facility for the same reason. Many questions will emerge in the coming weeks concerning the nexus of institutional and policy failures that led to and aggravated the tragedy. For now we can only hope that these sacrifices will protect others from harm and that it will be possible to prevent meltdown in the plants at risk.

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See Norimatsu Satoko's [blog](#) for up to the minute updating of events in the crisis.