



**What I Have Learned Since March 11, 2011
 About Radiation, Fukushima...
 ...and the Shameful Failings of my Former Profession**

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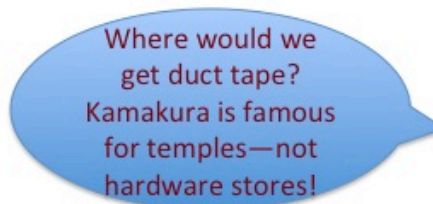
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At the time of the Fukushima accident, I knew little about radiation.
My first plan was to buy lots of duct tape, and seal up our house.



- About me: I am a journalist and author, specializing in international economics.
- I spent 19 years as a reporter at *The Washington Post* and 8 years at *The Wall Street Journal*.
- I live with my wife and two sons in Kamakura, which is about 320 km from Fukushima Dai-ichi.

My wife was concerned that my idea was impractical.



So I decided to do some research, and spent many hours on the internet that week, learning as much about radiation as I could.

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The answer, of course, is: “Neither.”

- The media should obviously strive to inform the public as accurately as possible, not warning too much—nor too little—about potential dangers.
- Perfect accuracy and total objectivity are unattainable, however. So which direction should the media err—too much or too little alarm?
- Most journalists (certainly in the U.S.) believe it’s better to err on the skeptical side, even if that means exaggerating dangers—and during my newspaper career, my instincts were similar.

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But the foreign media’s coverage was, in many cases, severely distorted and misleading

- As I will show, this coverage can be proven to have been biased
- Excessively alarmist coverage has inflicted considerable harm on the Japanese public
- This has led me to realize: There are many virtues to erring in favor of the “Japanese” approach (“a passive media that doesn’t warn you enough”)

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In the days after the accident, I found plenty of scary material on the internet, of course

The Telegraph

Home News World Sport Finance Comment Culture Travel Life Women Fashion

USA Asia China Europe Middle East Australasia Africa Nelson Mandela South America

Alghuniatan Pakistan India North Korea South Korea Japan Kazakhstan

HOME > NEWS > WORLD NEWS > ASIA > JAPAN

Japan nuclear plant: Just 48 hours to avoid 'another Chernobyl'

Japan has 48 hours to bring its rapidly escalating nuclear crisis under control before it faces a catastrophe "worse than Chernobyl", it was claimed last night.

NIGHTMARE WARNING TO BRITS AS NUKE CRISIS WORSENS... GET OUT OF TOKYO NOW

By John Ferguson | 16 Mar 2011 00:0

Disaster in Japan: Thousands flee Tokyo as radiation levels reach danger levels & fears of meltdown at nuclear plant grow

THOUSANDS of people were last night fleeing Tokyo in terror of an apocalyptic meltdown at Japan's tsunami-hit nuclear power plant.

theguardian

News Sport Comment Culture Business Money Life & sty

News World news Japan disaster

Japan radiation leaks feared as nuclear experts point to possible cover-up

Lack of radiation readings echoes pattern of secrecy employed after other major accidents such as Chernobyl

John Vidal and Damian Carrington
The Guardian, Monday 14 March 2011 21.03 GMT

Jump to comments (51)



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But the most reliable information I could find—
that is, information based on scientific analysis

—

was surprisingly comforting

Among the facts I was astonished to learn:

- Radiation is a rather weak carcinogen
- Even among the *hibakusha*, cancer rates have not been much higher than the general public
- Chernobyl’s most important impact on public health was not physiological—it was psychological, i.e. people who *thought* they had been irradiated suffered from elevated levels of emotional stress, substance abuse, depression, etc.
- These facts, and others that I learned that week, eased my fears (and we never did buy that duct tape)

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While my “education” continued, a stark contrast between foreign and Japanese media coverage became increasingly manifest

Japanese coverage

- Most reporting was dry and factual, relying heavily on official statements
- NHK broadcasts provided insight almost every night from academic specialists
- The clear conclusion anyone in the Tokyo metropolitan area would draw was that we were perfectly safe

Foreign coverage

- CNN and tabloid media were predictably sensationalistic



- More importantly, much of the coverage by “respectable” mainstream media was alarmist..

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...as witnessed by the following phrases from
March 2011 articles in

The New York Times

- “Japan and the rest of the world braced for a potential nuclear catastrophe...”
- “Engineers were struggling to avert meltdowns...”
- “...could spread radioactive materials far and wide in dangerous clouds...”
- “would release catastrophic amounts of radiation.”

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Strictly speaking, the accuracy of those phrases is hard to dispute

- Japan and the rest of the world *were* “bracing”
- Engineers *were* struggling
- The radiation release could be described as “far and wide” and “catastrophic,” depending on the definition of the words

But such articles conveyed a massively misleading impression, by suggesting that all of Japan—or at least eastern Japan—was in grave danger.

Although few Japanese were reading the *Times* or other foreign media, many heard (through social media, blogs, etc.) that foreign coverage was far more disturbing than domestic.

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