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# The Value of Public Broadcasting in a Network Era: A Case Study of TV Show “A Travel Journey with Local Friends” by Actor-Network Theory

KANAYAMA Tomoko and OHSUMI Ryo\*

## Abstract

The significance of public broadcasting has been questioned due to the digitalization of global media platforms and it has been pointed out that public broadcasting will have no future unless it can clarify what kind of value it has for our society. In 2020 NHK Hokkaido began broadcasting a TV show “A travel journey with Local Friends” using a completely different approach. Instead of a TV director, local players in rural areas take in charge of conceiving the content of the program. The program receives a thousand of messages a year from viewers and its awareness is significantly higher in rural areas than in urban areas, boasting a recognition rate of more than 57% in the areas visited by the program. It is worth mentioning that representative players of local autonomy have grown up among the program participants.

This study aims to explore the possible new value of public broadcasting through participant observation of the production and post-production activities of this program, focusing on the network of relationships among human and non-human actors in the local area. Based upon actor-network theory, the result indicates that local players have developed a sense of local autonomy with transforming own agency, that made them to be involved in local activities. Along with building trust with the station director through the production process, they have expanded the network of relationships through the post-production activities. Thus, this program shows the possibility of becoming a new way to broadcast from the perspective of local people with trust building between public broadcasters and local residents.

**Keywords:** public broadcasting, Actor-network theory, local player,

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trust, local autonomy,

## Introduction

What kind of value can public service media (hereafter PSM) provide to society in its network era? This question, which is being considered all over the world (Rodríguez-Castro, et.al., 2021), has a heavy meaning even in Hokkaido, which is located in the northernmost part of Japan. The area is experiencing an extremely rapid population decline, with more than half of the municipalities in the area expected to lose as much as 40% of their population within a quarter century (Hokkaido Government, 2020). Local towns will find it difficult to maintain public transportation, hospitals, banks, and supermarkets (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, 2021). And so will information. About half of Hokkaido's economy is concentrated in the mega-city Sapporo, and the majority of Hokkaido's commercial TV programs are about the Sapporo area. As long as it is based on market principles, there is little incentive to cover local topics. Under these circumstances, the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (hereafter NHK), whose important mission to "share regional attractions and issues" (NHK, 2018), is the only broadcaster that provides terrestrial broadcasting from rural areas of Hokkaido where both people and information are disappearing.

Concerning the role of NHK, there is a strong view that it is important to deliver information "far and wide" based on the income of receiving fees from the public. Behind this lies the right-of-access theory that has emerged as a movement in U.S. society since the 1960s. In the 1970s, from a legal and institutional perspective, a debate arose about its public role, whether it is commercial or public broadcasting (Horibe, 1978). In the 2000s, there was a growing interest in community media, and some argued that, as a major mass media, television broadcasting should be actively involved in citizen communication in local communities (Tsuda & Hiratsuka, 2006). In the 2010s, when the digitalization of terrestrial broadcasting took root in society and the digitalization and networking of information content transmission accelerated, some studies took a fresh look at the public nature of the media, about how it should work with local communities, and how public media should be viewed in relation to local communities in a realistic manner (Kanayama & Tsuda, 2011).

With the significant proliferation of the Internet and other advanced technologies, anyone can transmit a large amount of information through smartphones, SNS, video sharing sites, and so on. Mass media are required to do more than simply disseminate information based upon their traditional business model. In addition, a trend has been emerging from people who have numerous relationships closely tied to the local community, as represented by those who have created local media, and who are actively committed to a specific community through information dissemination activities are being called "local players." Local

players have become a catalyst for revitalizing local communities through their activities and have given birth to a new form of media called “media committed to the community.” The mass media have paid attention to such a new way of media in various regions. Local players, who are both editors and transmitters of local information and the main actors of local activities, begin to join hands with mass media such as TV stations and newspapers. As a result, mass media move beyond the role of mere information transmission and the temporary relationship between the sender of information and the recipient of coverage and is realizing a “media committed to the community” that activates the community through information transmission activities.

In 2021 NHK Hokkaido began broadcasting a local information program “A travel journey with Local Friends (hereafter Local Friends)” using a completely different approach. Instead of a TV station director conceiving the content of the program, local players living in rural areas take in charge of it. The program receives a thousand of messages a year from viewers. The awareness of the program is significantly higher in rural areas than in urban areas, boasting a recognition rate of more than 57% in the areas visited by the program (NHK Sapporo station, 2022). It is worth mentioning that representative players of local autonomy have grown up among the program participants. The TV program has fostered a spirit of “let’s improve our local communities by ourselves,” and was selected as one of the best community services in the major design awards in Japan (Good Design Award, 2022). Due to the high evaluation, some of NHK’s other regional bureaus adopted its format and started local-oriented programs.

Why, then, do the citizens’ proactive involvement in the production of the TV program foster a sense of local autonomy and activity? Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the possible new value of public media through observation of the production and post-production activities of this program.

## Related Studies

### ***Broadcast Localism in Japan***

The central government’s licensing policy based on prefectures, which has been in place since before World War II, and the preservation of local power by governing bodies centered on prefectural newspapers, have formed a reality that can be called “Japanese-style local broadcasting” (Higuchi, 2021). Even though broadcast localism has been considered an important principle in Japan’s postwar broadcasting system, no drastic reform has been made up to the present day. While local commercial programs had developed in the early postwar period, NHK’s programs have been produced based on the central government’s policy since the prewar period.

Because of the history of local broadcasting in Japan, most of the research has

focused on commercial local broadcasting. As the population of Japan declines and the outflow of population to urban areas and local autonomy becomes “consolidated and networked,” the role of local TV stations in their respective prefectures become increasingly important in monitoring local power and securing local information. Under these circumstance, Hashimoto (2016) pointed out that the current broadcasting system has been almost uniform throughout the country and has lacked the flexibility to respond to local conditions. So previous studies and discussions were limited to external examination of broadcasters based on the ratio of in-house produced programs and management indicators and lacked internal examination of what kind of power relations were at work within the broadcasting industry. He then conducted a survey of all local bureaus to understand the challenges they would face in the preliminary stages of their operations. The result showed that there was a common understanding among local stations that “community-based” refers to “programs, projects, and contributions to the local community that are conducted on the premise of interaction and branding with the local residents, and in which the uniqueness of the county is acquired” (Hashimoto, 2016, p.65). Hashimoto (2016) emphasized that it should be paid more attention to the actual situation of the residents, who are the viewers, and consider what functions local stations have for the residents in the current media environment, how the programs and businesses of the local stations are actually consumed, and how to connect these to the system with various methods of other adjacent disciplines, such as audience studies, communication theory, and political economy.

### ***NHK Local Broadcasters and Community-based Services***

The NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute regularly reports on trends in local broadcasting on NHK in the NHK Monthly Report on Broadcast Research. In recent years, Murakami (2019) reported that while local commercial broadcasters, NHK, and cable TV stations based in rapidly depopulating areas have been experiencing structural changes such as restructuring and consolidation, many stations have believed that media would be necessary in local communities where issues have been increasing. She mentioned that an increasing number of bureaus have begun to take a proactive approach in dealing with the local community, rather than a self-righteous approach for the sake of survival.

Even COVID-19 pandemic, the 97 COVID-19-related programs had broadcasted on NHK’s regional stations from February 2020 to May 2020, and these programs focused on region-specific themes and perspectives such as the impact on the promotion of foreign tourists and immigration, the voiceless voices of foreign workers, and discrimination and prejudice against infectious diseases in areas that have experienced foot-and-mouth disease. The program was found to have served the function of providing diversity in television broadcasting (Takahashi & Suganaka, 2020).

A recent study also reports that NHK's regional broadcasters are focusing on "problem-solving" news projects and programs that take local people's questions, concerns, and problems as a starting point for coverage and production and seek solutions together. Miyashita (2022) reports that one reason for increasing such content is that, as digitalization progresses and people have been turning away from television and newspapers, reporters and producers have felt a sense of crisis about whether they are able to be essential media. Since the current NHK's management plan (2021-2023) emphasizes social contribution and focuses on strengthening local information dissemination, the content of common local issues may be emphasized. It will be more important to improve the ability to produce content that satisfies viewers and to maintain opportunities for dialogue and relationships between those who cover the issues and residents (Miyashita, 2022).

Thus, in local communities where the population is declining, the birthrate is falling, the population is aging, and local industries are rapidly declining, the role of the media is rather important, and more community-based efforts are required than ever before. In particular, NHK that has its regional bureaus throughout Japan is called upon to create programs that reflect the voices of local communities, and through such programs, to solve problems and revitalize local communities, using different methods and building relationships with local communities than in the past.

In fact, TV program "Local Friends" has been focused by the journal in 2023. Takahashi (2023a) reported that the unique approach of the program could be possible to change the vertical relationship between the local station and its audience to more horizontal one. In order to understand what was made it possible to alter the relation, Takahashi (2023b) paid more attention to the off-broadcasting activities of the program. He concluded that by continuing the relationship with Local Friends after broadcast and having them continue to be involved in the program in various ways, the relationship between the broadcast station and the viewers could be strengthened.

## Theoretical Perspective

The TV program "Local Friends", which is the subject of this study, is produced by local residents who live in the local area. In each broadcast episode, local friends select and introduce friends or acquaintances who live in the area. The local people who are introduced in each episode vary in age, gender, job, length of residence and reason for residence, background, etc. Thus, this program is made possible by the relationships of local friends and the station director becomes a part of the network. Local friends are themselves producers and viewers at the same time. The director becomes, albeit temporarily, a resident of the local area, and through own living experiences, becomes involved in the production of the program. It is difficult for existing media communication theories to understand programs that

are created based on this kind of relationship. The method, content, and purpose of this program is so different from the traditional production that a different theoretical perspective is needed to understand it. Since the program is based on the network of relationships with people (and/or things/events), this study applies the actor-network theory as the theoretical perspective.

### ***Actor-Network Theory***

Actor-network theory (hereafter ANT) treats technology, people, and social institutions as equivalent actors and presents the importance of a view of society that is not based on the traditional dichotomy of technology and society, as they are inseparable networks. Latour (2005), Callon (1986), and Law (1986) consider human and non-human actors as mutually shaping, transforming, and translating each other in the course of networking practices. Actors in ANT are uniquely conceptualized as actant with agency, i.e., “the capacity of all beings to act, think, and experience emotions” (Caron, 2004=2006, p. 236) that is delegated to mutually indivisible networks, rather than as actors themselves having their own independent and essential characteristics.

Translation is a concept that underlies ANT. Translation is simply defined as “a way for one actor to incorporate another actor.” In other words, in ANT, there is a meta-methodology of “following actors’ practices” in connecting with other actors. To describe the network and its formation process, it is necessary to set up actors to serve as translators. The actor who becomes the translator depicts an “actor world,” a place where multiple actors interact with each other. The main actor enumerates and defines other actors in order to achieve its objectives. In doing so, it is necessary to identify the location of the problems that differ from one actor to another, and the main actor itself must be in a position to coordinate these problems. When the other actors are required to go through the main actor in order to solve the problem, the main actor will assume an important position in the network as an “obligatory passage point.”

Mediation is also a concept that does not consider the interaction between entities as a single input/output (intermediary). Human and non-human actors, each with agency (bodies of action, capabilities, and resources), are assumed to update their translations, connecting, interpreting, and using the existence and activities of other actors to suit their own intentions, while reacting to the activities of the other actors. In other words, actors try to form relationships with other actors to construct a network that includes them and serves their purposes.

In ANT, media have rarely been addressed explicitly, but the theoretical and methodological agendas of ANT indirectly accommodate the media (Thielmann, 2013, as cited in Spöhrer, 2017). The concept of performance, or the network of relationships between human and non-human actors as an important component of living space, is central to ANT. The events and groups under investigation are

considered to be produced by and the result of these practices.

Latour (2005) identifies two concepts of performance—intermediary and mediator. An intermediary is what transports meaning or force without transformation: defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs. For all practical purposes, an intermediary can be taken not only as a black box, but also as a black box counting for one, even if it is internally made of many parts. Mediators, on the other hand, cannot be counted as just one; they might count for one, for nothing, for several, or for infinity. Their input is never a good predictor of their output; their specificity has to be taken into account every time. Mediators transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry. No matter how complicated an intermediary is, it may, for all practical purposes, count for just one – or even for nothing at all because it can be easily forgotten. No matter how apparently simple a mediator may look, it may become complex; it may lead in multiple directions which will modify all the contradictory accounts attributed to its role (Latour, 2005, p.39). If media are treated as “mediators,” they can no longer be seen as merely representational technologies, and thus are capable of explaining or analyzing essential or inherent logic with regard to relevant elements within the actor-network. Nor can they be treated merely as a means to an end, an instrument that passively serves the interests of producers and consumers. This notion of passive, static media as “channels” has been discussed in the context of the sender-receiver model. ANT-based media analysis asks, “how interest groups are negotiated and translated into each other in relation to the composition of their records and purposes” (Spöhrer, 2017, p. 11).

For this study, ANT can offer a way to approach relationships between participants including program directors, and local residents who are a creator, audience, event, and/or creature. By applying ANT, this study considers TV show “the Local Friends” as obligatory transit point and what actors were involved in it, what translations those actors attempted, and how they renewed those translations.

## Research Question and Method

### *Research Questions*

The purpose of this study is to explore the possible new value of public broadcasting through observation of the production and post-production activities of TV show “the Local Friends”. This study particularly pays attention to the local friends’ proactive involvement in the production of the program, asking why it could foster a sense of local autonomy and activity. Based upon the theoretical perspectives, the following research questions are made.

RQ1: How is the agency of actors transformed in translation over the time?  
And how does this relate to their sense of autonomy?



RQ2: How did their network of relationships affect their post-broadcast activities?

**Research Methods**

In ANT, networks are also a methodological research tool deployed to describe the way the collectivities and events are organized and inter-related (Latour, 2005). This study traced the network of relationships among local friends, program directors, and the interviewees they covered. From 2020 to November 2023, it has been observed changes over time in all 27 pairs of the local friends and program director. Regarding changes over time, posts on SNS such as Facebook or Twitter have been continuously observed. The participant observation was conducted at the friends meeting on March 11-12 at Shari town, June 3-4 at Nishiokoppe village, and August 5-6 at Shari town in 2023. In-depth interviews were also conducted from April 2022 till August 2023 with 11 local friends as shown in Table1. Interviews were conducted in both formal and informal setting. In formal settings, all interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interviews in informal settings were note-taken by the researcher.

Table 1. Areas Covered in Each Episode (Interviews are Indicated by Color)

2020	2021	2022	2023
Eastern Hokkaido	Nakashibetsu	Ebetsu	Shimokawa
Hakodate	Soya	Toyoura	Tsubetsu
Date	Kimobetsu	Yakumo	Nakatombetsu
Shiretoko & Kiyosato	Teshikaga	Rishiri - Rebun	Iwanai
	Nishiokoppe	Otobe - Hiyama	Nishikagura
	Tokachi	Hiroo	Nemuro Strait
	Kankoma	Urahoro	
	Ashoro	Esashi	
		Kushiro city	

**A Brief Summary of Case: NHK’s TV Show “LOCAL FRIENDS”**

In the summer of 2019, a reform proposal team called the “Hokkaido Task Force” was formed within NHK Hokkaido. The idea was to partner with local players to answer the question, “how would NHK Hokkaido be needed by the community in 2030?” The idea was that by partnering with people who are rooted in the community, NHK could compensate for its weakness of being comparatively ungrounded in the community due to relocation, and conversely, NHK could compensate for the lack of authority in the local players. When the event, “NoMaps 2019 Thinking from Hokkaido: the Future of Rural Area” was held with popular

local players in Hokkaido, the staffs of NHK Sapporo Broadcasting Station participated in the event. After the event, one of the local players proposed the NHK Sapporo station a plan that local players would introduce their community. With the plan, NHK produced a program “A travel journey with Local Friends” in which local players introduce various people in the local community and in April of 2021, has reformatted the program in which one NHK program director stays in a community for a month and transmit local information together with local friends once a week.

TV show “Local Friends” is a roughly eight-minute corner that is broadcast on the evening news program every Thursday in Hokkaido. This program conveys the lively and fulfilling lifestyle of people who have not been focused on until present. In this program, people with deep personal connections to the local areas are called “local friends,” and are openly recruited. They are expected to plan the program, and the program director of the station helps them by staying for a month in their area. In many cases, they have little or no experience in content production processes.

Based upon the classification that Skibsted and Bason (2022) list, a comparison between traditional TV programs and Local Friends is shown in Table 1. Almost all categories are different from traditional TV show. Particularly, by focusing on the temporal length of the production period (1), traditional TV shows typically requires to be as efficient as possible and an eight-minute program takes about three or four weeks to produce. On the other hand, Local Friends requires a longer preparation period, taking six months to two years. So, the relationship (6) built between the participants and directors tends to become equal and intimate (2).

Table 2. Six Differences between Traditional TV Programs and Local Friends

	Traditional TV Show	Local Friends
(1) Time	Short Term (3-4 weeks)	Long Term (6 months- 2 years)
(2) Proximity	Interviewer > Interviewee	Equal and Intimate
(3) Life	Viewer satisfaction	Regional development
(4) Value	High audience rating	Proactive involvement
(5) Dimensions	Broadcasting	Broadcasting + Social Network
(6) Sectors	PSM	PSM + Local residents

In addition, the meeting called “Friends Meeting” has been held regularly as extracurricular activities, loosely attended by local friends who have been or will be in charge of the program, the directors in charge of the program, NHK staffs and friends of local friends. In the meeting, participants report on own activities, discuss local issues and topics, and socialize over food and drink. The location of the event is decided by the request of the local friends, ranging from southern Hokkaido to the Okhotsk area.

## Analysis

The two cases of the actors that were interviewed were described in this section— (1) a car painter of a small town in the northeast and (2) a couple of nature guide at a World Natural Heritage site Shiretoko.

### *(1) Case of a Car Painter of a Small Town in the Northeast*

Located 300 km east of Sapporo, Nakashibetsu town has a population of 24,000. Kazutaka Shiozaki, born and raised in a dairy farming area, is one of those who have always felt that his town was “provincial.” After graduating from a junior high school, he worked part-time harvesting radishes and squid, and then became involved in the automobile painting business. He disliked his hometown, which he felt was more homogeneous than urban areas.

Nakashibetsu town? The culture isn’t deeply rooted, so you have to be on the same level as everyone else or you will be seen as a freak. I felt it was always difficult to live like that.

In order to overcome his sense of blockage, Shiozaki devoted himself to DJ for house music, a musical genre that was oriented toward transcending barriers such as gender and national borders. Eventually, Shiozaki reached his 30s, and while searching for ways to get involved with his town, he learned of the existence of a TV program “Local Friends,” in which citizens could participate.

TV show “Local Friends” requires a long preparation period. In the case of Shiozaki, it took 12 months from when he applied for Local Friends to when the program he produced actually aired. During this long preparation period, he watched about 10 TV programs that were produced by other applicants of Local Friends. Watching these programs while considering who and how to introduce his own episode is not just viewing as a viewer. Rather, it is viewing as a producer. For Shiozaki, these TV programs were not just information (intermediary) but were seen as something that influenced his life (mediator).

In this way, Shiozaki strengthened three relationships during the preparation period. The first is the relationship with other people who have applied for or complete a Local Friends episode. The program directors and the Local Friends had held joint online meetings once every two weeks and discussed the TV programs and local activities. During the meetings, a sense of camaraderie among the Local Friends began to grow. Through the production of the program, the local communities were connected to each other. The second is his own community members. In order to produce the TV program, Shiozaki began to speak with his local peers more often and made new acquaintances. The third is Shiozaki’s wife.

She was more deeply involved in the discussions with him concerning the production planning than anyone else.

My wife told me, “Do you know the meaning of appearing on TV as the person, Kazutaka Shiozaki, who introduces Nakashibetsu Town. You have to think about your daily life, and to think deeply about what you are going to put on TV.”

Again, for a traditional TV show, the interviewees are involved for a few days at most. There may be a moment of festive exuberance to appear on TV, but there is no time to reflect on the meaning of appearing as one’s self on TV. On the other hand, in the case of Local Friends, the participants internalize the meaning of broadcasting on TV during the long preparation period. The important actors here are not the program directors, but the local residents and their families.

The program that Shiozaki conceived in this way was something that the program director did not anticipate. When producing the program set, Shiozaki submitted six candidate groups, five of which included women, to the program directors in charge. Shiozaki’s proposal was intentional, given that Japanese News shows are still heavily male-dominated by a 7 to 3 ratio (Aoki, 2022).

When I said that I wanted to do that (increasing the number of female interviewees), the program director also said “yes, of course.” I am also a person without any title, an unremarkable person. I thought it would be better to feature people like me. If that’s the case, who stands out in this town? It is all men. Thinking so, I wanted women to be featured as well. That was what I was thinking about (during the preparation period for the program).

As such, he produced a program that was gender-balanced. His ideas were later passed on to the program directors as well as other Local Friends. Furthermore, Shiozaki produced other programs that took up the activities of foreign workers and developed them into NHK’s international broadcasts. It can be said that Shiozaki’s attitude of transcending nationality and gender differences cultivated an internal movement that flowed into television broadcasting through Shiozaki.

The fact that Shiozaki produced the program on NHK about his community and that it was seen by the local people created awareness about him, which led to expectations from the community. After broadcasting the program, Shiozaki was invited to join a committee of the town office to discuss the use of vacant land with various types of local people including local politician and government officials. He also became the organizer of a festival that drew thousands of people and became a DJ on the local community radio station. He has gained more opportunities to bond

with other local people through various types of local media.

In this long-lasting relationship, Local Friends did not simply create local TV programs, but also created a variety of other media activities including, community radio, international broadcasts, webcasts, free newspapers, local festivals, creative conferences, and pitch events and more. As Latour noted, these media activities made people strongly connected. And each of these fostered a sense of local autonomy.

As this study analyzed the Shiozaki's relationship with people, he became aware of the public through his wife's words, deepened his thoughts on "publicness" during the preparation period for the program production through conversations with his friends and neighbors, and gradually became a leader in local autonomy. He has become, as it were, a small PSM.

## ***(2) A Case of Nature Guides in a World Natural Heritage***

Satoru Wakatsuki and Ai Wakatsuki, a couple who run a nature guide business in the World Heritage-listed Shiretoko area, were also transformed by their involvement in the production of this TV program. Especially after the program was aired, they experienced even greater changes.

They grew up in Tokyo and Osaka but became nature guides when they moved to their current town, Shiretoko. Since then, this area has been registered as a World Natural Heritage site, and many tourists and media have come to visit it. Whenever the couple has been interviewed by the media, they have responded in a passive manner. In contrast, the Local Friends program was completely different.

Satoru: It is like there is nothing like this anymore. It was a kind of a shock that they would leave it up to us. (I've had a few other TV interviews,) whenever the press has interviewed me, I have provided them with what they have asked for.

Ai: They tell me what they want me to say, and there is a kind of pressure.

The program that was produced under their proactive attitude was broadcast in 2020, and the relationship between the participants of the program and the couple did not end there. The couple continued to join in the joint meetings even after they had finished their own production, acting as senior advisors to the other participants.

Satoru: I felt that it was a little strange for me not to support them after they all supported me, so I wanted to work with them until I got their support and wowed them. It was actually fun. I think the best thing was how much enjoyment I got from that kind of environment.

Even after they finished producing the program, many Local Friends continued

to belong to the program community. Since 2020, the number of Local Friends has already exceeded 20. They have begun to contact each other via SNS on a daily basis, and a network of people who active engage in community activities has been formed.

In fact, the network established was already functioning in spring 2022. In April 23, a sightseeing boat sank in the Shiretoko area where the Wakatsuki couple lived, and all 26 crew members and passengers died or went missing. As one of the few major water accidents in recent years, the town was inundated with press coverage. Many residents were disgusted by the media pointing cameras and microphones at the people paying their respects at the flower memorial, and the Wakatsuki couple refused to be interviewed by any media.

Under these circumstances, the program directors of Local Friends hesitated to contact the Wakatsuki couple. On the other hand, the members of Local Friends network were concerned about the Shiretoko area so some contacted and visited the Wakatsuki couple. Thus, the couple attended the joint meeting and shared their hearts with the others. Only those involved with Local Friends gained their special trust. The Wakatsuki recognized that the program was not an activity to “make a program” but an activity to “change society.”

Satoru: We felt such momentum that we could improve common problems in society. There are a lot of things that I don't like, but for once there seemed to be momentum to change something a little.

One month after the accident, Satoru Wakatsuki appeared on a NHK's TV program as a representative of nature guides in Shiretoko and stressed the harshness of living with nature. Appearing on TV at this time risked being viewed critically by society. Nevertheless, he decided to appear on the program because he had confidence that his fellow members of Local Friends would understand him, even if he was bashed.

Satoru: If I am wrong, they (Local Friends) will criticize me, and I will not be complacent. Even if I get bashed, I have friends who will support me if I'm right. This pushed me to get involved.

The couple's behavior gives us important suggestions when considering the credibility of the media. It is more likely to be unreliable when the media is separated from the local community, but it is more likely to be trustworthy when it is connected to the local community.

Unlike commercial broadcasters, PSM does not need to pursue profitability, which allows them to devote more time and manpower to covering urban as well as rural areas. By taking the time to connect with the local community in this way,

PSM gains a high credibility that no other medium has. It can also provide in-depth information that no other media can.

Eleven months after the accident, about 30 people, including Local Friends, the program directors, and local residents, gathered in Shiretoko for an offline meeting. They discussed how to break away from the unfortunate media scrum-like coverage. At that time, Local Friends and program directors noticed that one of the local residents who participated in this meeting was struggling to revitalize the area by building a new guesthouse. The content was broadcast later as a news feature. It has been shown that social networks created to portray lively and fulfilling lifestyle may also be able to address more serious social issues.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Based upon actor-network theory to analyze TV programs produced by local residents on their own initiative, this section summarizes the results of the analysis and discuss research questions.

### *Obligatory Passage Points*

Most of the main actors who introduced people from their own community in the program were surprised at the concept that the program would first be led by local people and created together with the program director. When the mass media cover local areas, the station typically decides in advance on the location, people, and content of the program, and many of those actors had experience of appearing in the program. It created a sense of distrust toward the mass media, and many people were reluctant to appear on the program. Therefore, most of them were surprised at the completely different concept and participated with high expectations and a little apprehension. Although some actors applied for the program, mistaking it for an appearance in a TV show, many of them thought that such a concept sounded interesting and that they would like to try it. Among them was a young man who quit a local commercial TV station because of its conservative style of program production, moved to a small community, and is working to revitalize the community through web media. When he found the program, he could not believe that at first, then applied for the program with thought of no way not to take advantage of this.

For the main actors, this program is the obligatory passage points (OPP), and from the moment they applied and decided that they would become Local Friends and that their area would be the subject of the program, they began to think seriously about what and how they would communicate about their community. At the same time, it was also a process of confronting themselves in their community as what they could convey because of who they are, as seen in the case of Siozaki and the Wakatsuki. The program as an OPP had such a function.

### ***Transformation of the Agency and Interest in Sense of Autonomy***

The first research question asks how the agency of actors was transformed in translation over the time, and how this related to their sense of autonomy. Unlike the passive, short-term program production, in a proactive, long-term production environment, such as Local Friends, participants have plenty of time to talk with their families and friends. Through these conversations, they become aware of the importance of appearing in the PSM and think deeply what they really want to tell about their area through the program and what they can do with their own characteristics. In this process, the actors had transformed own ability and perspective into agency for involving other actors. Their gradual increase in agency eventually fostered their awareness of and interest in local autonomy. In the case of Shiozaki, he transformed even his negative standpoint in the area into the important perspective to select persons (minorities) in the area as actors for his program. This shows how the actor transforms his agency for involving other actors. Since family members, friends and local people are involved as the important actors in this media, it is also an opportunity for them to reaffirm their awareness of the community through Local Friends and to think about communicating this through the media themselves. Eventually through the production of the program this is transformed into participation developing local autonomy.

When thinking about what is available in their community, many actors think about what they like to eat, nature, stores, and places, etc. These non-human actors actually play an important role in the program. In particular, for the region of Hokkaido, agriculture, fishing, and forestry are important as well as nature, creatures, history, and culture unique to the region, and in some programs, people related to such non-human actors are selected. This process is not simply to promote the local industry and culture, but to show how the community values the industry and how the local people love it, which in turn gives the actors themselves an opportunity to take a new look at the industry and feel proud of it. And this in itself becomes part of the actors' agency.

For the director in charge of the project, this process also requires that he or she experience it. For example, by experiencing what the actors do, such as farming, going fishing, or making things together, the director can physically experience a different feeling from that of the interviewer, and thereby gain a closer perspective on why the actors want to convey what they are doing. This also leads to gaining the trust of the local people. At the same time, it is also a process of learning for themselves how local people communicate in the media.

Moreover, in traditional television programs, interviewees almost always complete their relationship with a single television program. They do not influence anything further. A program is, so to speak, an "intermediary." On the other hand, the program "the Local Friends" created by the proactive involvement of the



participants can be a “mediator” in which one cannot know what will happen. For the actors through Local Friends were connected, it seemed that the programs produced by broadcasters were also intermediary. However, even though their own indirect involvement in the production of Local Friends, these programs become mediators that bring something back to their participating communities.

TV programs change their lives, and they also greatly transform TV programs and program directors. In this way, “broadcasters,” “participants,” “family and friends,” and “program directors” form a network of mutual influence and trust. And as the relationship becomes long-term, various media activities including community radio, local festivals, and town meeting are added as mediators to strengthen the ties as well as their agency. It can be said that the sense of autonomy in the region and the credibility of the media improved through this interaction.

### ***The Network of Relationships and Post-broadcast Activity***

The second question asks how their network of relationships affected their post-broadcast activities. Once a network of relationships among participants is established in this way, something new is generated. As shown in the case of the Wakatuki, a news program on a tourist boat accident was produced based on the relationship of trust created through the Local Friends program. The relationship of trust also made it possible to hold a friend meeting where diverse actors could frankly exchange their voices about media coverage.

Although trust in the mass media has declined, there are still many people who watch television media in rural areas. Among them, many actors have come to be expected to participate in various local activities during and after the broadcast of NHK’s public broadcasting programs, as they played a central role in the programs. Participation in such local activities also encourages interest in local autonomy and self-governance as seen in the case of Shiozaki. Some of the actors are thankful that they were able to gain interest in the community because of their participation in the Local Friends. Many of the actors say that it is important for small communities, especially those that have built on primary industries such as fishing, agriculture, and forestry, to be able to think that their community is interesting, and that the program “Local Friends” makes this possible. Actors who have experienced “using” NHK, the public broadcaster, also begin to think positively about how to interact with the mass media.

In addition, the Friends meeting, an extracurricular activity, played an important role in the continuation of the activities, as the actors have continued to talk about topics and issues in their respective areas after the broadcast, sharing similar problems and solutions, visiting areas that might be helpful, participating in events held by other actors, and planning new projects together. Also, new actors who will produce the program in near future can get advice from actors who have already produced the program at the meetings. A latest program (broadcast in October and

November 2023) covered a wide area around the Nemuro Strait, a sacred place for salmon, where Satomi Saito, a female local tour guide in Nemuro Strait became a main actor and a young station director was in charge for the episode. Both participated in previous Friends meetings. Although the director did not know whether he would be in charge of the program at the time (on March 11-12, 2023), it was an opportunity for him to think about the relationship between the community and the media. On the other hand, it was the opportunity for the actor to receive advice and encouragement from senior actors at the meeting on August 5-6, 2023. After the program aired, she wrote the following post on November 12, 2023 on her Facebook page.

I want to do it in a wide area! After several online meetings, the director, Mr. Shumpei Sasa, started his stay on September 27. From there, we spent a month together going through the Nemuro Strait coastal area. Before the broadcast, we were excited together every week, and after the broadcast, we wondered how the video turned out for everyone who cooperated with us. What kind of response did we get from the viewers? After the broadcast, we would get nervous together, wondering how the video would turn out for the people who helped us. But after all was said and done, we were able to produce four very important videos.

...

It portrayed the sacred place of salmon from a perspective I had never noticed before, and I myself had new encounters. In asking for cooperation to other actors, we shared again what we would like to realize in the Nemuro Strait coastal area.

...

And then,

Mr. Sasa, the director of the project, who spent a month in a wide area, continued to face the challenge of drawing the theme of a sacred place for salmon, while taking care of the local side of the project as much as possible. His face changed from when he arrived in Shibetsu to when he left, and his back became more reliable. If it weren't for Mr. Sasa, I don't think we would have made it through this location shoot.

Her post shows how they had developed the relationship and trust each other through the process of producing the program together. Actors who have experience in the previous programs also praised them during broadcasting the program and after. Physical meetings and interactions through social networking sites have also provided emotional supports, such as sharing concerns and feelings about producing the program and living in the countryside and encouraging each other.

Figure 1. Obligatory Passage Points and Connecting Actors

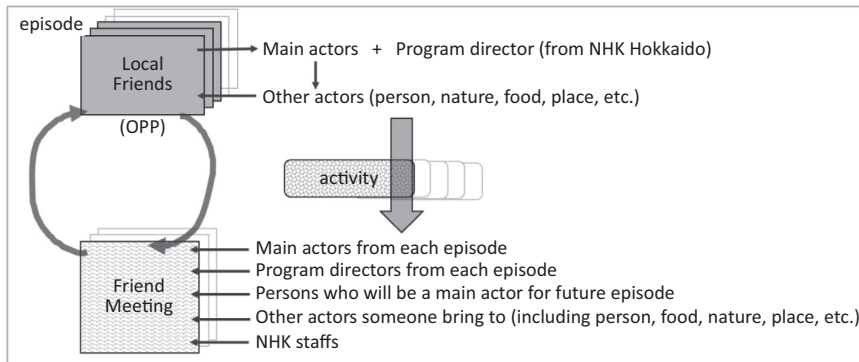


Figure 1 shows the connection between the program functioning as an OPP and the Friends meetings regularly held. In a sense, the programs and meetings are cyclical. After the program, each actor experiences a variety of activities, which become their own initiative. Therefore, they meet with even more empowered actors at the next meeting, and the discussions become more diverse and interesting. Through these connections, the network is loosely expanding and the connections through SNS are also intertwined with the program.

Thus, actors of the programs targeting different regions have been expanding their network of relationships through these activities. As a result, new activities have been occurred in wider areas of Hokkaido.

In a network era, what kind of value can PSM provide to society? With this question in mind, this study analyzed one TV program “A travel journey with Local Friends.” As a result, PSM that do not rely on market principles can allocate management resources not only to urban areas but also to rural areas. At that time, if it is possible to build long-term relationships with local residents, the following values may be created.

- (1) Updating: New sense of progressive residents, such as improving gender balance, will flow into relatively conservative TV programs of PSM.
- (2) In-depth information: By gaining the trust of local residents, PSM can convey in-depth information that cannot be obtained from other media.
- (3) Resilience: Constructively repair relationships between media and local community, such as the distrust that media sometimes provokes.

This study explored to understand how the network of relationships established through Local Friends were further extended and developed into self-governing

activities after the production by applying the ANT. This study focuses mainly on the citizens' side, but a similar shift was observed in the attitudes of the program directors of the stations that participated in the production as well. They were rather bound by their professional production methods and awareness, but during their one-month stay in the local area, they gradually began to see themselves as local residents, which greatly affected their awareness and attitude toward the region and their relationship with it, as well as their very idea of producing a program in the region in the first place. This study needs to explore whether this can be a new possibility for PSM through further research.

In April 2023, the Local Friends has begun in Kagoshima Prefecture by NHK Kagoshima station, located in the south of Japan, 2,600 km away from Hokkaido. The director's stay in the region is two weeks, half the length of the Sapporo station's program, but other than that, the program format is basically the same. By December 2023, eight episodes have been already produced and broadcasted by the Kagoshima station. This study has begun to interview with some actors and director who produced the program in Kagoshima, and similar findings to the results of this study have already been seen. It is necessary to understand through further research whether this program can contribute to building new relationships between local areas and the broadcaster and to developing activities of local people. At the same time, it will be also necessary to further examine whether this program, which uses a completely different approach and methodology, has the potential to become a new way for the mass media to contribute to the lives and well-being of people living in the local areas, as well as to construct the good and lasting relation with local people.

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