

IN BLACK & WHITE

MEDIA'S ROLE IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION

by Choi Yearn-hong



In a modern, democratic society, the newspaper's role is important and critical in shaping citizens' opinions on nuclear power and other issues. Citizens acquire knowledge on current issues in their society, nation, and the world through newspapers. Today, television and internet media is increasingly becoming more popular among citizens, but newspaper media continues to affect intellectual citizens, policymakers and think

tanks. Therefore, assessing major daily newspaper editorials covering nuclear issues and affairs is necessary for their sound bridging between nuclear science and engineering and the public. Bridging the two cultures, science and humanities, is an enormous task for modern democratic society.

Ultimately, the public's understanding of nuclear issues should be healthy

and sound. In a democratic society, citizens cast their votes for the public servants who they agree with most and for who they believe will influence and change public policy. The citizens also look to their representative government to bring light to issues in the good of public interest. If they are not well equipped intellectually for societal issues, their choice of government representatives and support for certain policy issues can be dangerous. This jeopardizes the success of a modern democracy.

The social implications of risk and the public's understanding of public challenges to modern society and technology have been seriously discussed in the United States and European nations. South Korea is starting to discuss the public's understanding of science and technology issues, including nuclear power plant safety and nuclear waste disposal.

Many daily newspaper editorials on nuclear issues were concentrated on nuclear weapons, non-proliferation, arms reduction talks, and weapons testing bans. The US editorials covered the US-Russia arms reduction talks and implementation of the treaty, North Korean nuclear weapons program, nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan, emerging nuclear power in Iran and Iraq, nuclear lab and spy infiltration of US nuclear science and development information, and IAEA inspection and its role for world peace. The South Korean editorials covered extensively North Korea's suspected nuclear weapons program, long distance missiles, and Japan's possible nuclear armament.

Concentration on nuclear arms is understandable. The mass destruction of human civilization is feasible with a possible nuclear war, or human mishap at nuclear facilities. Concern for nuclear energy, nuclear power plant safety, nuclear waste management, nuclear medicine, and nuclear research and development issues are scarce, because they are, unlike the nuclear arms issue, not at the forefront of concern. This research outcome shows the unbalanced approach by newspaper editorial writers on nuclear issues. Readers of newspaper editorials can be influenced by the concentration on the nuclear weapons issue, and scarcely other issues, resulting in the public's understanding of nuclear issues to be quite skewed.

The US editorial writers defended the scarcity of nuclear issues outside nuclear arms issue saying, "There has been no new construction of nuclear power plants since Three Mile Island. Nuclear power plant safety has been long proven, so that there is no critical issue. Editorials are basically comments on current issues. There are no current issues. That is why." Some writers have also claimed that they were influenced by the anti-nuke environmentalists.

In interviews with more than a dozen editorial writers, I asked a couple of questions: "Is the newspaper educating the public?" and "Don't you think the newspaper editorials should take a balanced approach toward various nuclear issues?" The first answer was, "Yes, it does." The second answer was, "Yes, they should." These answers are normative. Mr. J.W. Anderson, a former *Washington Post* editorial writer and journalist-in-residence at Resources for the Future, an environmental think-tank in Washington, told me, "The newspaper's role as the public educator has been diminishing. Its role is becoming more as that of entertainer like television. Education belongs to the schools and colleges. Don't you think so?" He added, "All editorial writers attempt to approach evenly on the



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issues. However, they have their own views and they reflect the newspaper's image."

A majority of editorial writers accepted the educational experiences for a better understanding of nuclear science and technology as a part of science policy and/or energy policy. Some frankly told me they were not experts on nuclear issues. They learned things at news sites, in the street or in the field. Their educational backgrounds were diverse. Some studied humanities, some social sciences, and very few the natural sciences and engineering. They were mainly journalists.

Harvard, Indiana and Missouri journalism schools have educated many of the US and foreign journalists, including Korean reporters, editorial writers, and newspaper executive directors. The Korean colleges and universities should create similar programs to educate journalists.

The newspaper's role as a bridge between science and the public is not particularly visible or conspicuously evident. Their role is subdued to populism. Anti-nuclear environmental movements are persuading or forcing the newspaper's role as a middle-of-the-road mediator or fair and objective educator. Newspaper's role as a bridge may be abandoned in the future under popular trends. Korean

newspapers report on German and Scandinavian nations' decision to seek alternative energy sources over nuclear power. They do not report on China, India and other Asian nations' search for nuclear power. They do not report on how much energy can be possibly generated from alternative energy sources such as solar, wind or tides in Korea in next 10 or 20 years.

The US reliance on nuclear power is about 10 percent of its total energy consumption. However, South Korean reliance on nuclear power is about 50 percent of all electric power consumption. South Korea's future economic development and energy policy should more seriously and frequently be discussed in the newspaper opinion pages. A more realistic approach toward nuclear energy policy should be discussed in depth.

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