

Japan As It Really Is

The Japan Journal: Tell us about the background to the inception of Japan International Broadcasting Inc. What are your goals?

Hatsuhisa Takashima: International television broadcasting from Japan was begun by NHK in 1995. However, this broadcasting was not completely successful, mainly because it had two target audiences: non-Japanese people and Japanese expatriates; the need for a mix of programs in English and programs in Japanese made it difficult for NHK to increase viewership among non-Japanese people. The idea that Japan should bolster its international broadcasting efforts and establish an all-English channel was raised three years ago, when the Japanese private and public sectors were saying loudly that Japan was seriously lagging behind other countries in terms of transmitting information to the world through international broadcasting. The following year, the Japanese Diet



Launched on February 2, Japan International Broadcasting Inc. (JIB) works with Japan's public broadcaster NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) to offer round-the-clock English-language TV to the world. *The Japan Journal* asked President and CEO **Hatsuhisa Takashima** about the launch of JIB and the company's goals.

accepted this idea and passed a bill to let NHK start a brand new all-English TV broadcasting service solely for non-Japanese people living outside of Japan, together with a newly established private company called JIB. By law, most of JIB's shares are owned by NHK, but the rest are jointly owned by fifteen companies including commercial TV networks, trading houses, and information technology (IT) companies. The main goals of JIB and NHK are to catch up with the international television broadcasting of other countries and to use television to actively transmit information from Japan. In addition, JIB, as a private company with participation from commercial TV networks and others, has a strong ambition to create an "All-Japan" program production team that is composed of the private and public sectors and can show Japan as it really is. The new English-language overseas television service, which we call NHK World/jibtv, started twenty-four-hour broadcasting on February 2, 2009, and since then, JIB programs have been "piggybacking" on NHK World on the same channel.

Tell us about the particular content that makes JIB's programming unique.

On this new channel, basically the first thirty minutes of every hour are taken up by a news bulletin produced by NHK and the remaining thirty minutes are shared by NHK and JIB. NHK's content for the shared slots con-

sists of newly produced English-language programs and English translations of highly acclaimed NHK Japanese-language programs. JIB's content consists of tailor-made English-language programs for non-Japanese viewers, and they contain commercials. Why commercials? Because JIB is a private company and the production costs are paid by its underwriters and sponsors. For example, in the first week of broadcasting we aired a series of programs showing interviews with several very well known Japanese people such as violinist Midori Goto, Olympic swimmer and multiple gold-medalist Kosuke Kitajima, and Her Imperial Highness Princess Hisako of Takamado, who has a deep knowledge of traditional Japanese culture. These programs were all made with commercial sponsorship from four major Japanese corporations, and they were made by private-sector production companies affiliated with Japan's major commercial television networks, resulting in extremely high quality. The program series, entitled "Japan in the First Person—My Life, My Nation," presented various aspects of Japan through the personal views of prominent people who speak very fluent English, and I believe they promoted better understanding of Japan and its people among the viewers all over the world. At the same time, I am pleased to see this series achieving a very successful and fruitful realization of an "All-Japan" production team and of private funding for international broadcasting from Japan. Another

"The ultimate goal of these international television broadcasts is for people to understand Japan and, hopefully, become 'fans' of Japan."

—Japan International Broadcasting Inc. President and CEO
Hatsuhisa Takashima

program we broadcast during the first week was “Delicious Nippon,” which introduces Japanese food and cooking to non-Japanese people. So the uniqueness of JIB is that we produce and broadcast high-quality programs of various kinds including talk shows, documentaries, and culture and lifestyle programs in cooperation with the “All-Japan” team. By gaining the expertise of private broadcasters and the cooperation of commercial broadcasting conglomerates, we can produce a different kind of program than the kind that NHK has produced until now. In other words, we have been able to combine the best of the public and private sectors.

Another new initiative for Japan in terms of international broadcasting, is that we are showing commercials. This is very significant. It is widely assumed that one of the reasons for the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was that television commercials from the West made people in the East aware of the difference in the standard of living between West and East. I believe that television commercials are one of the most direct ways of introducing a country’s way of life.

Did your decision to start with interview programs come from an awareness that Japan is often perceived as being “faceless”?

In November last year, a meeting of the leaders of the G20 nations was held in Washington to discuss the global financial crisis. A major British newspaper published a cartoon of the leaders at the meeting, but the face of the Japanese prime minister was not shown even though the Japanese prime minister participated and delivered a strong message from Japan. It seems that Japan was not on the radar screen of this global newspaper. Japan tends to be seen through things such as automobiles, high-tech products, food, and youth or pop culture such as *anime* and *cosplay*. But in the mainstream of world political and economic developments, information from Japan is almost entirely absent. Which is precisely why we asked various people who represent Japan to talk about Japan and themselves as a way

of raising Japan’s profile. I think that providing as many of these kinds of opportunities as possible will be one of JIB’s major roles.

NHK President Shigeo Fukuchi has said that he has high expectations for the coverage of the Asian region. How has your awareness of the Asian region shaped your programs?

NHK has more comprehensive coverage of Asian issues than any other broadcaster in the world. It has a very large news-gathering network covering almost every nation in the region. To complement and expand upon the Asian news coverage and programs of NHK World, we are planning an original JIB program about Asian issues. Rather than producing this program in Tokyo ourselves, we will ask producers in various parts of Asia to create editions that consolidate information about Asia, and we will air the program in JIB’s time slot. We want to be a channel that directly transmits our perspectives and sentiments as both Asians and Japanese to the world and a channel that conveys an Asia that is not fully covered by the Western media. I’m certain that this will be useful for promoting mutual understanding around the world.

What about Web-based broadcasting?

At the moment, NHK World/jibtv is accessible by 84 million households (mainly in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Oceania and to some extent in North and South America) by cable and satellite. In order to increase this figure and make the channel truly global, we have decided to fully utilize Internet technology to deliver our programs to every corner of the world. We have leading Japanese telecommunications company NTT Communications and global IT giant Microsoft among our shareholders. They are helping us greatly to expand our Internet operation with services such as simultaneous broadcasting of our programs as Internet streams and, in certain areas including Hong Kong, the IPTV system (a new kind of broadband Internet-protocol television that is rapidly becoming available in

many parts of the world).

There is also another reason for us to put emphasis on the Internet: around the world, experts, opinion leaders, and decision-makers are no longer depending only on conventional media like television and newspapers for information. Instead, they use the Internet to gain the latest information from their favorite websites. We will try to be one of the main websites those people visit regularly. Moreover, in the future, we want to transmit our programs to the world by simultaneously translating the language into various languages—French, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, and so on—using computer and Internet technologies.

As the first president of JIB, do you have a message for our overseas readers?

First, I think that television is a powerful medium that goes beyond just images. I believe that, through television and, indeed, the Internet, people around the world are able to see the world as it is and people as they really are. In this sense, JIB will be sure to show the world a true-to-life image of Japan, and we will continue making television programs with that intention. So I hope that as many people as possible can see our programs, because that is how we should be judged.

Until now, it has not really been clear to the world what Japanese people are thinking, but there are now many people in Japan who can talk about Japan in languages other than Japanese. We also intend to invite foreign businesspeople, journalists, and diplomats living and working in Japan to appear in our programs and talk frankly about their views on Japan. We will do the same thing in other places in Asia as well. By making these kinds of programs, multi-faceted and diverse information about Japan and Asia will become available, which I’m sure will be very interesting. And there are still many, many attractive features about Japan and Asia that we want to convey. I really hope that our channel will give people a chance to see these things. □

Interview by Hitoshi Chiba, *The Japan Journal*