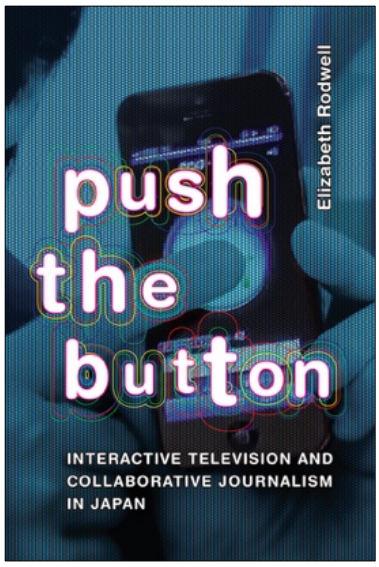
International Journal of Communication 19(2025), Book Review 2928–2931 1932–8036/2025BKR0009

Elizabeth Rodwell, **Push the Button: Interactive Television and Collaborative Journalism in Japan**, Durham, NC: 2024, 200 pp., $25.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Yasuhito Abe[1]
Doshisha University



The 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster is widely regarded as the first to occur in the digital age, prompting extensive scholarly and journalistic attention to the role of communication media in its aftermath (e.g., Abe, 2014; Yamada, 2013). Among these media, however, television, traditionally viewed as a one-way medium, has received comparatively little attention, aside from a few Japanese-language studies that primarily offer descriptive analyses of television content (e.g., Ito, 2020). In ***Push the Button: Interactive Television and Collaborative Journalism in Japan***, Elizabeth Rodwell addresses this gap by examining the production culture of media makers and investigating how mainstream broadcasters, independent media producers, and media startups attempted to incorporate interactivity into Japanese television in the post-Fukushima digital age. Defining interaction as "audiences taking an active role in the development of programming" (p. 5), Rodwell explores key questions such as: "What constitutes interactivity, and how do interactive media authors envision audiences and publics as coproducers? How do producers build programming around opportunities for interaction as they seek to bridge audience participation to television content?" (p. 4). Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in media workplaces in Tokyo, Aomori, Nagoya, and Osaka, along with digital ethnography from 2011 to 2013, Rodwell presents five case studies that highlight both the potential and the limitations of interactive television in Japan. The book ultimately shows that despite initial enthusiasm, major media conglomerates abandoned these initiatives due to persistent institutional constraints.

Chapter 1 examines how the Japanese television broadcasting industry responded to an interactive television experiment titled *60 Ban Shōbu* (60-year battle) jointly conducted by Nihon Hōsō Kyōkai (Japan's public broadcaster) and Nippon Television Network Corporation (NTV, a major commercial broadcaster). The program featured a mobile-responsive webpage with a "like" button, enabling real-time audience feedback to be visualized through in-studio graphs. In response, the Sōsharu Terebi Suishin Kaigi (Social TV Promotion Collective), a group led by senior-level professionals from various broadcasting agencies, analyzed the initiative and advocated for interactive television—or social TV—as a potential solution to the industry's ongoing economic challenges in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster. However, Rodwell contends that the Japanese television industry ultimately resisted adopting the social TV model. This reluctance stemmed in part from the industry's close ties to advertising agencies, as well as from structural constraints in the existing ratings system, which continues to define viewership based solely on television sets, excluding engagement through smartphones and other devices.

[1] This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant No. JP21K12910 and JP24K03614.

Chapter 2 analyzes *The Compass*, an experimental interactive news talk show aired during a non-prime-time slot on Fuji TV's secondary satellite channel (BS Fuji). The program encouraged audience participation in live discussions, aiming to introduce a range of perspectives into the news. While *The Compass* sought to foster a sense of intimacy between media producers and audiences, as well as among audiences members themselves, Rodwell maintains that it ultimately remained bound by the conventional gatekeeping structures of mass media, with audience input filtered through established corporate norms and editorial standards.

Chapter 3 shifts focus to independent news startups such as the Jiyū Hōdō Kyōkai (Free Press Association of Japan), GoHoo (a fact-checking initiative targeting misinformation), and the Independent Web Journal, examining them as forms of media activism that emerged in opposition to Japan's mainstream news media system in the wake of the Fukushima disaster. These initiatives shared a common ideal: They believed that "more comprehensive coverage and an open media landscape can transform political engagement among Japanese citizens" (p. 75). However, Rodwell highlights the vulnerabilities of these initiatives, particularly their exposure to trolling and attacks by right-wing extremists, and notes that their visions of interactivity often failed to materialize in practice.

Chapter 4 explores how major Japanese commercial television networks, particularly NTV and Fuji TV, experimented with interactive game shows as a means of fostering a sense of community and national belonging among audiences. Rodwell focuses on programs such as *Ongaku no Chikara / Arashi feat. You*, an initiative by NTV that featured the immensely popular boy band Arashi during a prime-time slot. This program sought to revitalize television's role as a shared national experience and promote the ideals of "social television" through real-time audience participation. While these efforts appeared to encourage collective engagement, Rodwell argues that mainstream media ultimately co-opted interactivity to manage and control its audiences, rather than to cultivate genuine intimacy or peer-to-peer interaction within the interactive space.

Chapter 5 focuses on Our Planet-TV, a citizen journalism initiative in which the author participated through a video production workshop and a collaborative documentary project. Founded by Hajime Shiraishi, Our Planet-TV is an independent media organization that serves as an educational platform for media production, aiming to amplify marginalized voices and present alternative news content within the Japanese media landscape from the perspectives of citizens. Rodwell illustrates how participants created content that felt authentic by incorporating their own experiences as media consumers, and argues that interactivity is ultimately "a dialectic between the media maker as creator and the audience as receiver, both conceived as parts of a unified whole" (p. 126).

In the conclusion, the author situates the findings from the case studies within broader theoretical contexts and notes that

> ...a problem with a cynical view of interactive media is not that it misrepresents the material conditions of its production, but that it *oversimplifies the motivations of those who create it* and substitutes the idealism of earlier scholars of interactivity for the lingering idealism of contemporary media makers. (p. 140; emphasis in original)

In doing so, the author critically reflects on the relevance of revisiting interactive television projects launched over a decade ago, some of which, as the author notes, have since been discontinued.

In *Push the Button: Interactive Television and Collaborative Journalism in Japan*, Rodwell offers valuable insights into how interactivity was understood and practiced by Japanese TV professionals, independent journalists, citizens, and major media conglomerates in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster. Drawing on a wide range of literature in both Japanese and English, the author clearly demonstrates that mainstream television programs in Japan largely upheld the conventional structures of mass media, ultimately failing to capitalize on what might have been a critical—and potentially transformative—moment in the country's television history.

However, the book would have benefited from a more sustained engagement with the perspectives of those who sought to uphold the traditional norms of mass media. For example, proponents of the *kisha* club (reporter's club) system are often portrayed as conservative holdouts, but is their position reducible to a mere defense of vested interests? What rationales were offered by those who opposed the adoption of interactive television? These questions merit deeper exploration through closer attention to their own viewpoints.

Additionally, while the author frequently draws on secondary sources written by both scholars and journalists to characterize Japanese mass media and journalism, several of these texts date back to the 1990s. Even if their use is intended to underscore the enduring structures and perceived rigidity of Japan's conventional media systems, it nonetheless raises questions about their relevance and adequacy for analyzing the post-Fukushima media landscape, particularly in light of evolving television practices.

Finally, the book contains several factual inaccuracies that may undermine the strength of its overall argument. For instance, in chapter 5, the author repeatedly claims that Shiraishi was employed by the mass media conglomerate TV Asahi. In fact, as Shiraishi herself clarifies in her own publication (Shiraishi, 2011), she worked for a production company affiliated with the TV Asahi network. Although likely unintentional, such misrepresentations are unfortunate, as they may diminish the credibility of the book's broader claims.

Despite these issues, *Push the Button: Interactive Television and Collaborative Journalism in Japan* makes a meaningful contribution to the growing body of scholarship on Japanese television, particularly in light of recent work on its historical trajectories (e.g., Chun, 2006; Matsuyama, 2024), by shedding light on underexplored aspects of contemporary broadcasting institutions. It also serves as a valuable resource for understanding the aspirations that certain Japanese media professionals, independent producers, and citizens placed in the media in the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

References

Abe, Y. (2014). Safecast or the production of collective intelligence on radiation risks after 3.11. *Asia-Pacific Journal*, *12*(7), e5. doi:10.1017/S1557466014027417

Chun, J. M. (2006). *A nation of a hundred million idiots?: A social history of Japanese television, 1953–1973*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Ito, M. (2020). *Dokyumento terebi wa gempatsu jiko o donoyouni tsutaetanoka* [Document: How did TV report the nuclear accident?]. Tokyo, Japan: Heibonsha.

Matsuyama, H. (2024). *Hajimari no terebi: Sengo masu media no sōzō to chi* [The origins of television: The creation of postwar mass media and knowledge]. Kyoto, Japan: Jimbun Shoin.

Shiraishi, H. (2011). *Media o tsukuru: "Chiisana koe" o tsutaeru tame ni* [Making media: To give voice to "small voices"]. Tokyo, Japan: Iwanami Shoten.

Yamada, K. (2013). *3.11 to media: Tettei kenshō shimbun, terebi, webu wa nani o dō tsutaetaka* [3.11 and the media: A thorough examination of how newspapers, television, and the Web reported the disaster]. Tokyo, Japan: Transview.