

From Destruction to Reconstruction

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It was 5:46 in the morning, on January 17, 1995. An earthquake scaling magnitude 7.2 shook the beautiful port city of Kobe in western Japan – suddenly and violently. Who could imagine that Kobe area with its mild climate and charming scenery, would be hit by such a violent quake? Those who died beneath the rubble may never have known the cause of this major disaster. At that nightmare in Kobe, not only many wooden and lightweight-steel structures collapsed, but also tall apartment buildings and high-rise offices even before we knew it.

Our radio station, AM Kobe was broadcasting a live program when the earthquake struck. Suddenly, our building was heavily damaged and everything was shattered. Four studios out of five became unusable. The equipment in the Master Control Room for sending audio signals to the antenna, was almost completely destroyed. Moreover, we were unable to transmit any signals for about 13 minutes. Even the less-damaged studio was now tilted and the door would not shut at all. Soon, we realized gas was leaking, too. The whole building was blacked out. Even after the back-up generator came on, the situation was barely improved with only the emergency exit lamps on. Perhaps it was the first time in the Japanese broadcasting history that a broadcasting station, requiring a massive power output, had been damaged by a M7.2 earthquake and had to interrupt a live broadcast. The engineers of AM Kobe who were on duty that night, worked feverishly to recover the service. They cut the normal circuit to carry voices directly from the microphone to the antenna. That was how we were able to restart broadcasting in only 13 minutes. Even so, the announcer simply repeated the statement, "This is AM Kobe. Please stay calm. We will bring you fresh information as soon as possible..." An emergency announcement to be used in case of disaster was somewhere there in the studio, but things were all over the place and we could not find it anywhere. With the resumption of broadcasting, the severely hit studio of AM Kobe aired not disaster information, but rather an SOS from the middle of the disaster-stricken area.

We had always believed that the broadcasting station would not be vulnerable to any disaster, and that information would reach it from many sources. However, that was an illusion. The broadcasting facilities, that should have been safe, were damaged completely. The broadcasting station, that should have been able to receive continuous information updates, was cut off from all new information sources. All this happened in a matter of minutes. Even our solidly constructed building was in a miserable state. Naturally, private houses were all too much at the mercy of the disaster. Particularly in the shopping and entertainment district of Kobe, thousands of wooden houses collapsed and many residents died under the debris. Even worse, fires broke out in the fallen houses, and spread quickly. Tragically, many still living people under the rubble were burnt to death. The local police stations, fire stations and city office were also damaged heavily, losing some personnel. Public offices that should have dispatched rescue workers became the subjects of rescue work instead.

Our broadcasts, resumed shortly after the quake, were an SOS transmitted to other districts not hit by the Great Hanshin Earthquake. For nearly 3 consecutive days after the quake, we reported the situation in the disaster area from the studio and radio cars on the ground. These broadcasts had the purposes of saving lives and providing first aid, and were aired with no advertisement. Even after commercials were inserted, we continued this special programming virtually all day for an additional two and a half months. The radio program initiated right after the quake soon changed into an information program enabling listeners to inquire after family members. AM Kobe received about 20,000 inquiries. While other phone lines were cut, and controlled in the disaster area, our phone miraculously kept working all through. Citizens also lined up patiently at public telephone booths, which were not regulated, to ask for and give us information. We broadcast their inquiries one by one, and quickly received responses from the disaster area. We aired these responses immediately. "This is A of Hyogo Ward, Kobe. My family is all right. We are in B Elementary School." "This is C Hospital in Higashi-Nada Ward. We have too many injured people here!" Hundreds, thousands, of items and inquiries were phoned in. This emergency information network grew in chain reaction. The

suspension and control of the telephone service deprived citizens of a direct means of communication. Radio broadcasting became a substitute medium for emergency broadcasts. Before long, our program had changed once again, this time into a program to furnish useful daily information for people in the disaster area. Let me tell you about that later.

AM Kobe was located in the middle of the disaster zone and was itself damaged, as I mentioned, but it became an indispensable communications means for residents there. The final official death toll stood at 6,480, and an estimated 44,000 people were injured. 250,000 office and residential buildings were completely and partially destroyed. Our own building was registered as completely destroyed. On reflection, I might say that we continued to air this special radio service in the building most likely to collapse in any aftershock. This earthquake turned the international city of Kobe into wasteland of rubble, crippling its municipal functions in an instant. The lifelines upon which urban life depends were cut instantaneously. The basic systems of urban life, which citizens take for granted, were demolished. The citizens of Kobe at least gained a new appreciation for the vitality of these lifelines as they waited for their reconnection. Under these circumstances, hundreds of thousands of survivors had to carry on their lives in the ruins, exchanging hands-on information directly with each other. Radio played a major role as a means of exchanging such information. Tips on all aspects of daily life, including water, food, clothing, hospitals and medicine, were delivered to AM Kobe. "We want winter clothes." "The hospital where I have dialysis was destroyed. I don't know what to do." "We need sanitary napkins." There were so many cries for help. AM Kobe gave first priority to sending out these SOS's. As a result, most were answered promptly by listeners in and around Kobe, just like those inquiries I cited earlier. In addition, relief items were delivered directly to those who asked for them, in many cases. The situation was different from the normal, a new system of mutual aid in our daily lives was formed, with radio as the medium. No particular person told others to establish it. This was spontaneous. During the period of inactivity until the administrative and lifeline personnel could begin their recovery work, the mutual help network by radio supported people in the disaster area. The power supply returned to normal in about one month, and water and gas in a few months. Railroads took more than one year to resume their former conditions. Rebuilding of the collapsed portion of the expressway took nearly 3 years. It was extremely difficult, in fact, to rebuild our own destroyed building. Although we were ordered to evacuate the building 3 days after the quake, we could not stop broadcasting.

Without sleep or rest, we had first to recover the bare minimum broadcasting systems. In the morning of the 4th Day after the shock, we set up a temporary studio in the building next to ours, and continued to air radio programs without cease. However, we failed to bring out most of the materials and recorded tapes kept by the station for over 30 years, because we placed priority on removing the broadcasting equipment. After that, we built temporary headquarters with studios in a prefabricated structure in a parking lot, behind the destroyed building. We transmitted programs from there for a year and a half. We reported from the disaster area to the stricken area and its vicinity during that whole period. The more people relied on us, the harder we worked. Many AM Kobe employees, including announcers and reporters, were themselves also victims, but we did the best we could without showing our fatigue. Eventually, we abandoned hope of restoring our building and moved to a building in central Kobe. We continued to watch and report on Kobe and the other damaged areas where restoration work was in progress.

The special programming for reconstruction has now continued for more than 8 years. But we do not think that our role is finished yet. We now know that a major earthquake like this does virtually destroy the buildings of a broadcasting station, its functions and the broadcasting system very easily. We also know that information available just after the first tremor is very limited. Moreover, we have found that, in the event of major earthquake, a single station cannot do so much on its own. And we have a new appreciation of our role as a local disaster-prevention body. Accordingly, in the second year, when reconstruction work got into gear, we set out to build a local disaster-prevention network in Kobe. We established a hot-line system and concluded many agreements on mutual aid and information exchange, with the local government offices, news media, lifeline companies and schools. Altogether, eight new systems were established. We were the first local radio station to take this initiative in building new networks. The citizens of Kobe experienced and suffered much from the Great Hanshin Earthquake. They have learned the bitter lessons of this heavy toll in human lives and devastation, and are now seeking to turn the entire disaster area into a disaster-resistant town. The

infrastructure, including lifelines, has been thoroughly improved. Walking along the main streets in the disaster area, we can hardly tell now that this is where the earthquake occurred. Yet, more time is still needed to soothe the mental distress. I think that we still need more time to revive the warmth of community feeling. At AM Kobe, We are now busy producing the special program for the 9th Anniversary of the Jan. 17th Earthquake, which is to come in about one months from now. It is our sincere hope that city of Kobe will become a more beautiful, friendlier, more livable and safer city than ever before in 3 years, five years from now on.

Thank you for listening.