

NHK and “Black Lives Matter”: Structural Racism in Japan

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Abstract: On June 7, 2020, NHK aired a TV program to explain racial divisions in the United States, following protests after the killing of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police. However, a computer graphic aired during the program and posted on NHK’s official Twitter account drew widespread criticism for distorting the image of black people and the reasons for their anger. NHK quickly retracted the graphic but a group of American Studies’ scholars in Japan and the US found flaws in the entire program and sent a letter to NHK. This article explains the problems of the program, and considers why NHK aired it, while looking at the wider issue of racism in Japanese society.

Introduction

On June 7, 2020, NHK (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai), Japan’s main public service broadcaster (roughly equivalent to BBC in UK) aired “Kore-de-wakatta Sekai-no-ima” (“Now I understand what’s going on in the world,” to use the translation of the *Japan Times* (2020); hereafter “Sekai-no-ima”). The 40-minute, Sunday-evening show is billed as an attempt to “illustrate foreign affairs in a way that is easy to understand” and, according to the [program website](#), “reports international news with the flavor of a variety show” (NHK 2020a). Although the website does not mention its target audience, children seem to be a priority, given its 6:05 p.m. starting time. The main topic of the day was the killing of an innocent

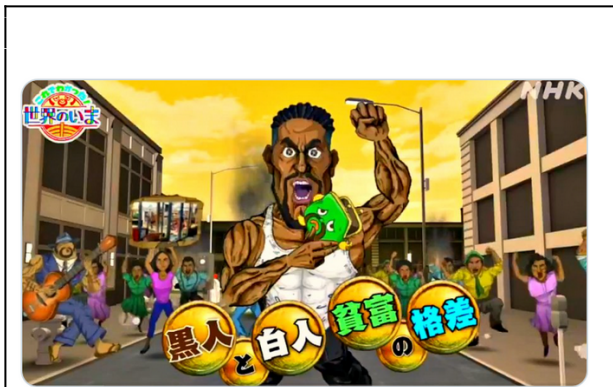
black man by the police in Minneapolis and the resulting demonstrations across the United States. The slot NHK devoted to the report on the topic was 26 minutes long.

However, an 80-second animated segment that was used as part of the show, and distributed by NHK on its [official Twitter account](#), sparked much criticism. It showed a big, angry black man wearing a tank top “speaking in a rough and vulgar tone” (*Japan Times* 2020) who said:

The reason why we are so angry is the gap in wealth between blacks and whites! Yes, whites, by average, have seven times more wealth than blacks! Ha, here comes the spread of the new coronavirus! Oh, I ask you a question: how many blacks were laid off or had their work hours cut [due to the coronavirus]?

Among those who criticized the graphic was Joseph M. Young, the Chargé d’Affaires ad interim of the US embassy in Tokyo.¹ “While we understand @NHK’s intent to address complex racial issues in the United States, it’s unfortunate that more thought and care didn’t go into this video,” Young [tweeted](#). “The caricatures used are offensive and insensitive.” On Tuesday, June 9, NHK erased the computer graphic in question, both from its Twitter account and the program’s homepage. And in its 7 p.m. news program the same day, an announcer, after reporting the demonstrations in the US of the previous day, read an apology for the computer graphic. This “retraction” was reported widely in Japanese and English-

language media ([Guardian 2020](#); [Huffington Post Japan 2020](#); [Japan Times 2020](#); [Washington Post 2020](#)).



NHK’s computer graphic, as retweeted on the internet. The Japanese characters above say “the difference of wealth between black and white people.”

Within a few days of the program being aired, a group called “Concerned Scholars of American Studies” formed spontaneously on Facebook. The thirteen scholars, including myself, are based in Japan and the US and specialize mainly in history, sociology, and political science. Many of them approach American Studies through interdisciplinary angles.

The scholars thought the content of the entire program was problematic in the way it dealt with racial issues and sent a statement in [Japanese](#) and [English](#) to NHK on June 12. The letter was sent to four different sections and individuals by express registered mail to ensure it would arrive before the airing of the “Sekai-no-ima” program on the following Sunday (the program is broadcast live).² The submission of the letter was reported in *Mainichi Shimbun* ([2020a](#); [2020b](#)) online the same day. By June 19, a simultaneous petition campaign had received 857 signatures.

I’d like to explain the problems with the computer graphic and the program, and NHK’s

apology, as well as the broadcaster’s reactions to the scholars’ letter and wider criticism. Above all, why did NHK air the program and what does it say about attitudes toward race in Japan?

The Computer Graphic and NHK’s Apology

When NHK retracted its computer graphic, it posted an apology on the program website in [both Japanese \(in page 1\)](#) and [English \(in page 2\)](#). The English version said:

We at NHK would like to sincerely apologize for a computer animation clip posted on our Twitter account. The clip was part of a segment in the program “Kore-de-wakatta Sekai-no-ima” broadcast on Sunday, June 7th.

The 26-minute segment reported that the protests in the U.S. were triggered by the death of George Floyd after he was pinned to the ground by a white police officer. It also reported the background on how many people are angered by the case, handling of the matter by the Trump administration and criticism against it, as well as division in American society.

The one-minute-21-second clip aimed to show the hardships, such as economic disparity, that many African Americans in the U.S. suffer.

However, we have decided to take the clip offline after receiving criticism from viewers that it did not correctly express the realities of the problem.

We regret lacking proper consideration in carrying the clip, and apologize to everyone who was offended. ([NHK 2020b](#)).

The scholars found this apology insufficient for two reasons.³ First, NHK did not make explicit which parts of the computer graphic were offensive. Without that specification and analysis, it is simply a generic *mea culpa* of the type often issued by government or corporate public relations departments in Japan.

Second, while the English version of the apology mentioned George Floyd, the Japanese version merely cited “a black man (who) was physically restrained and died.” In other words, Floyd was nameless in the Japanese version, which many more people would have read. Sometimes, Japanese media do not report the names of black people killed by the police.⁴ In fact, neither Floyd, nor anyone else killed by the police, such as Michael Brown, Eric Garner or Breonna Taylor, are mentioned in the computer graphic, or throughout the entire segment.

The computer graphic, and the program, emphasized the gap in wealth between black and white people but did not explain why the gap was seven times larger. There was no mention of slavery as background. And citing the coronavirus rather than the suffocation of Floyd as the reason for the anger gave the impression that black people were venting their frustrations by shouting and rioting. Most protestors, including many white people, instead peacefully held placards saying, for example, “I can’t breathe” (among the last words Floyd uttered before he died), “Black Lives Matter,” and “No Justice, No Peace.”

Problems with the Entire NHK Program

Three people appeared on the program: NHK announcer Nagai Shin’ichi, former NHK Los Angeles bureau reporter Hanazawa Yūichiro, and actress Sakashita Chiriko. Arguably, the program is set up (like many in Japan) as if two men are instructing a woman who is largely

ignorant of world affairs.

The program began with nighttime footage in which black people set fire to automobiles and broke shop windows in an unidentified city. Nagai began by saying, “In America, in many places, things are out of control because of such riots.” By beginning the program with this footage and narration, the program gave the impression that what was happening in America was “rioting” caused by violent black people.⁵

A map of the US was displayed, on which seven big red stickers read “bōto-ka” (became mobs). Hanazawa said, “demonstrations became more violent than ever seen before,” surely reinforcing the message that black people are violent.

“Why did the demonstration become so big?” asked Nagai. “Because of anger.” A graphic showing fierce flames and cartoon images of two black men standing in front of fires, appeared. Hanazawa explained that black people were angry because of continuing white police violence. The footage of the beating of “a black man” in 1991 was shown (he was Rodney King, but his name was not mentioned). The footage switched to the 1992 Los Angeles “riot.”

Actress Sakashita asked, “why don’t these incidents [of white police killing black people] disappear?” Hanazawa answered, “there are many theories, but one is that white police have ‘vague anxiety’ toward black people.” Hanazawa continued: when he accompanied a Los Angeles police patrol entering a dangerous neighborhood where blacks and Hispanics lived, the police officers were very nervous. Guns abounded. One of the officers said to Hanazawa, “when I go to these areas, I don’t feel I can come back alive.” Hanazawa’s “explanation” can be criticized at least on two points. First, by referring to a “dangerous neighborhood where blacks and Hispanics lived,” he might have reinforced the

stereotypical image that black and Hispanic neighborhoods are poor. Second, he generalized one police officer's comment as if it applied to all police officers.

The computer graphic began. To reinforce the numbers shown in the graphic, a graph of the mean family wealth of black people and white people from 1963 through 2016 was shown (the data for black people were 1983-2016).

Hanazawa explained why the conflicts between black and white people had deepened in recent years. He said that when Barack Obama became president, black people had hope, but from the other side, he heard during his tenure in NHK's Los Angeles bureau the voices of young white people saying that they could not tolerate having a black president as a representative of their country. Hanazawa said President Donald Trump had acted on this dissatisfaction. The three panelists in the studio concluded that the deepening of the racial division began before Trump—that is, during the Obama administration. Again, Hanazawa was careless in his explanation. He implied that the deepening division between black people and white people began during the Obama administration, but it began well before that, at least by the era of the Civil Rights movement.

A few minutes later, Nagai and Sakashita agreed that the division between black people and white people was very deep. A blackboard behind them, showing the two aforementioned black men's cartoons on one side, and a white police officer's cartoon on the other side, broke up, conveying the impression that the gap between them did indeed exist.

Furthermore, Hanazawa explained: the reason why each side was becoming increasingly violent was not only racial but the division of American society into two groups: between the left, which wanted a more egalitarian society, and the right, which wanted to protect the "interests and culture" of America (what those "interests" were was not explained). And this

division increased during the Obama administration. Obama's policies aimed to protect socially vulnerable people. But people on the right thought that free competition represented the American spirit, and that a society that protected vulnerable people was un-American.⁶ Another blackboard showed left- and right-wing, leaving a deep divide in the middle.

The "Concerned Scholars'" Open Statement

In [the English version](#) of the statement, the scholars' group cite these problems. (Concerned Scholars of American Studies 2020b; see also 2020a for the [Japanese text](#)).

It begins by noting that NHK's apology made "absolutely no reference to what it meant by 'lacking proper consideration' and what was offensive about the show's content." The group also pointed out that "[the] problems manifest in the show and the animation clip [were] symptomatic of the many issues often seen in the Japanese coverage of 'race,' especially 'blacks' and 'African Americans.'" (I return to this point later)

The statement then made four points. First, the group was concerned that "the program explain[ed] that police violence against African Americans stem[ed] from their 'fear of blacks.'" It says "[t]his explanation fail[ed] to adequately address the history of slavery and its long aftermath leading up to the contemporary prison industrial complex." The group emphasized "slavery" and "prison industrial complex" because they were two major symbols of racism against black people that were not mentioned in the program.

Second, the statement pointed out that "by June 7, when the program aired, most of the demonstrations were peaceful marches by not only African Americans but also many whites

and other minorities holding signs.” The group was concerned that by beginning the program with a scene of the violent protest, NHK might have forgotten that the police also extensively used tear gas and other means of violence.

Third, it said that if one wanted to understand why demonstrations had become so widespread at this time, one needed to look at the wider social structure, beyond superficial divisions between black and white people. Racism is not simply a result of “discriminatory sentiments by individuals,” it argued, urging NHK to examine institutional and systematic racism, which, by having deep roots in society, led to discriminatory treatment for blacks in the areas of law enforcement and other aspects of their daily lives.

Fourth, it asked why such a questionable computer graphic had been aired and distributed on NHK’s official Twitter account, without being checked “through the process of the program’s production, broadcast, and dissemination.” NHK was asked to:

1. Publicly share what NHK considers were the problems with the content of “Sekai-no-ima” via its programs, website, and other platforms.
2. Conduct a thorough review of the program’s production process and investigate how such factually and ethically problematic content came to be broadcast and disseminated through the show, website, and social media.
3. Implement and publicly share concrete remedial steps to prevent the recurrence of similar issues in NHK’s news coverage and its reporting of race and human rights.”

Reaction to the Letter

On Sunday, June 14, the first episode after the controversy over the previous week’s program of “Sekai-no-ima” aired live. The first four minutes of the program were devoted to an apology. It is unclear to what extent this apology was the response to the letter from the “Concerned Scholars,” or to the wider criticism, as there is no knowing whether the production staff had read the letter beforehand.

Announcer Nagai Shin’ichi began by saying that the computer graphic used in the previous week was inappropriate. Captions appeared saying, “on the June 7 program we reported that a black man was deprived of air by the police and died later and we explained for 26 minutes the backgrounds for various people’s anger and the divisions within American society.” Nagai cited the criticism “from many people, within and outside Japan,” to the “biased” depiction of black people in the segment and explained that the graphic had been removed and NHK had apologized.

Tabata Yūichi, International News Bureau Chief appeared and introduced himself as the person in charge of the program. He began his statement by saying, “we deeply regret and apologize from the bottom of our heart that this time, we hurt many people who are suffering from discrimination and prejudice, and offended many people.” He bowed deeply for five seconds.

The screen changed to clipboards, which Tabata narrated: “In the animation in question a masculine black man and others were portrayed to have become violent because of their dissatisfaction with the economy and [this] gave a wrong impression of black people.” He accepted that on the day the program was aired, “most demonstrations were peaceful, and people of many races participated, but the animation did not reflect such a situation.” (footage of a demonstration that took place in Washington DC on Saturday, June 6 was briefly inserted.) “We received

many criticisms that the animation and its accompanying comments ‘augmented discrimination and prejudice toward black people.’”

The screen briefly returned to Tabata, who said, “what challenges us now is whether we produce a program with consciousness toward human rights and diversity in reporting racial discrimination.” The screen switched back to a clipboard, which said, “the animation was made by the editor in charge and the desk editor who, with checks added, wanted to make the economic disparity data easy to understand. “But we don’t think we showed respect for human rights and diversity in our portrayal of black people.” “As a result, we hurt the dignity [of black people].”

Tabata went on: “In response, NHK will conduct further training of reporters and producers, and increase awareness of human rights. And whatever the topic is, we will report and produce programs with careful discussion and checks from various angles.” He said, “this program began five years ago so that children could understand the situations in which various peoples in the world were placed, how they lived their lives and in what direction the world was going. No discrimination and prejudice can be tolerated. We sincerely accept the critical opinions we received, and so that a problem like this will never happen again, we will go back to the original point of respecting human rights and engage in reporting and production.” He bowed deeply again for another five seconds. The apology segment ended and the program went on to the main topic of the day: the growing problem of locusts around the world.

Tabata’s apology was posted on NHK’s website on the same night (NHK 2020c) (in Japanese only, unlike the first apology on June 9), and a link was posted from NHK’s main website.



NHK’s main homepage as of 10:50 p.m. on Sunday, June 14, 2020.

The reaction by the “Concerned Scholars” to this apology was mixed. Many of the measures Tabata pledged addressed the group’s concerns, although they could have been more concrete. Some commended NHK for devoting four minutes to the apology at the beginning of the program. Yet, the apology was mostly confined to the computer graphic, and other issues in the 26-minute segment were not directly addressed. And neither police brutality nor George Floyd were mentioned this time, either.

The June 14 apology was widely reported, for example in *Mainichi Shimbun* (2020c) and the right-wing *Sankei Shimbun* (2020), which often takes a conservative view on racial and sexual minority issues. It was even reported in an online sports tabloid (*Sponichi Annex* 2020), which was copied to many portal sites on the internet.^{7 8}

On June 18, the “Concerned Scholars” received a letter from Tabata and NHK’s Reporting Bureau Chief Nemoto Takuya. Their letter consists of three paragraphs. To summarize:

1. On the recognition and announcement of problems: we [NHK] made an apology in the program and also posted it on our website.

2. On the production and review process: we operated with inadequate understanding of the issues of human rights and diversity and insufficient internal discussion on how to represent and report the issues [on black people].
3. On preventing future misreporting: When we report on issues of race, ethnicity, national origin, religion and gender, we will conduct multiple reviews relying on human resources both inside and outside the station.

Many of the “Concerned Scholars” found the response inadequate, as the group expected NHK to address its requests more directly and in concrete terms than the June 14th apology. Most of the letter simply repeated the apology and contained no substantive reflections on the issues raised, again reducing the problem to the representations in the computer graphic. Nonetheless, some of the scholars seemed to find comfort in the fact that high-level NHK officials had replied to the letter rather than ignoring it.

Analyses

Why did NHK air such a problematic program? I suggest four reasons.

First, as noted in the introduction, the program has a “variety show” flavor, meaning that it aims to go beyond mere fact finding or documentary. As such, the production side may have thought that it was permissible to oversimplify complex matters and add contents that were intended to be entertaining. The use of cartoons of fires, black men, and police officers and the cracking blackboards all dramatized the “divisions” between black and white people.

I suspect that such a stance led to the omission

of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the program. The BLM movement seeks not just the survival of black people, but improvements in their quality of life and the right to feel safe, without being harassed by police. BLM aims to eradicate not just the prejudices of individuals, but systematic racism (Yaguchi 2020). Explaining such a “hard issue” may be difficult in a short television program, but it is not impossible. The BBC (2020) made a four-and-a-half-minute video on the history of police violence in the US, from the era of runaway slave patrols to the contemporary era, with Japanese subtitles. It should have been possible for NHK to mention BLM or police brutality in its 26-minute segment.

Second, some scholars in Japan argue that Japanese people have internalized systematic racism against black people, and that a program like “Sekai-no-Ima” reflected such discriminatory views. On June 21, the Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University and the American Studies Association, Keio University (2020) held an emergency webinar on the BLM movement. John Russell, a cultural anthropologist at Gifu University who had studied images of foreign people in Japan, showed examples of discriminatory views of Japanese toward black people. For example, a former Japanese Consul-General of Atlanta commented on a TV program that mothers in the city gave birth to “shiseiji” (illegitimate children) and lived on welfare; men became drug dealers; and there were no role models for black people. As another example, when tennis player Naomi Ōsaka, who has a Haitian father and Japanese mother, won the US open tournament in 2018, many described her as a “gorilla” on an internet bulletin board. Russell said the myth that racial prejudice does not exist in Japan conceals discriminatory views toward black people.

This was not the first controversy over depictions of race in the Japanese media. In February 2015, the five members of girls band

Momoiro Clover and the four male members of the group Rats & Star painted their faces black and posed for a picture before a TV show (Vox 2015). The picture was spotted by a reporter from the *New York Times*, who tweeted it to the world.⁹ It was obvious that the band members were ignorant of “Minstrel shows” and the history of blackface in the US. In December 2017, comedian Hamada Masatoshi appeared with his face painted black and wearing a Detroit Lions jacket, as if attempting to imitate actor Eddie Murphy. This incident was also widely reported by the foreign media (BBC 2018; *New York Times* 2018).

Biracial Japanese have also been the targets of discrimination. In 2015, when Ariana Miyamoto, who has an African-American father and a Japanese mother, was selected as Miss Universe Japan, some Japanese people questioned whether a “hāfu” was suitable as a representative of Japanese young women (BBC 2015). In January 2019, when Naomi Ōsaka was playing in the Australian open tennis tournament, Nisshin noodle, one of her sponsors, was accused of “whitening” her skin when it used an anime, portraying her alongside Nishikori Kei, an ethnically Japanese male tennis player, using the same skin tone. (BBC 2019).

Third, the Japanese media tend to portray the death of George Floyd and the subsequent demonstrations as an equal conflict between oppressor and oppressed. This renders the causes of racism obscure. For example, the “Sekai-no-Ima” program gave parity to the voices of black people and white police officers, without taking sides. It is not possible to identify the deep roots of racism without taking a stand that racism is intolerable. But somehow, when it comes to the issue of police brutality in the US, the Japanese media tend to report as if both sides have equal claim to convey to viewers.

Fourth, the Japanese media tends to ignore the

inequalities between the majority and minorities. The vast literature on “whiteness studies” show that even though whites are generally good people individually, as a group they have historically gained privilege from the oppression of blacks and other racialized groups (for example, McIntosh 1989; Roediger 2008). Similarly, the Japanese media seldom take note of the comparative advantages that ethnic Japanese people in Japan enjoy over ethnic Koreans, Ainu, burakumin, Japanese-Brazilians and other minorities.

Conclusion

In the short term, it is welcome that NHK has promised to take measures to ensure future programs respect human rights and diversity. The broadcaster is the most powerful and influential in Japan, which is the reason why “the Concerned Scholars” toiled over the letter at such short notice. NHK should have higher standards of ethics in reporting, particularly on racial issues, than commercial stations. NHK’s program may have reflected structural racism, in which some Japanese people feel psychologically superior to black people (although they would never admit that in public). This incident was offensive to black people, but at the same time it offered a learning opportunity for careful thought about racial discrimination in Japan, not just in the US.^{10 11}

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All websites were accessed on July 9, 2020.

Readers of this article may also find [John Russell's piece on Black Lives Matter in Japan](#) in our previous issue a great interest and we hope that the two articles will reinforce the message.

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news sources in the references section into English, with some English grammatical and stylistic corrections to the extent the original meanings were not changed. Finally, the author thanks the editors of *The Asia-Pacific Journal* for valuable comments and the students in his junior and senior seminar on “contemporary American politics and society” at Aoyama Gakuin University for sharing valuable news sources and critical views.

Notes

¹ Ambassador William Hagerty left his position in July 2019 to run for the US Senate from Tennessee, and the position remains vacant.

² The addressees were: the NHK president, the Reporting Bureau Chief, the International News Bureau Chief, and the program production staff.

³ Here and throughout the article, the ultimate actor who can judge whether NHK’s actions were appropriate is black people, not the “Concerned Scholars.” While acknowledging this shortcoming, I mention the points which the scholars found inadequate in NHK’s program and apologies.

⁴ Why Japanese media often do not report the names of black people killed by the police is uncertain. One possibility is that the reporters assume Japanese audiences do not remember the names of those killed. Another possibility is that reporters do not treat those killed fully as individuals who had names.

⁵ As the “Concerned Scholars” (2020a; 2020b) mentioned in endnote 6 of its statement, the term “riot”(bōdō) itself is not appropriate.

⁶ Whether the Obama administration “protected vulnerable people” is debatable, but that was Hanazawa’s explanation.

⁷ I wonder whether the amount of reporting would have been even larger on a usual Sunday, because the following morning, Monday, June 15 was a newspaper production holiday to give a recess to home delivery personnel of all newspapers.

⁸ Meanwhile, members of the “Concerned Scholars” began to receive interview requests from various media, and invitations to contribute editorials to online magazines (for example, Yaguchi 2020; Yoshihara 2020).

⁹ I looked for her Twitter feed on the internet but could not locate it.

¹⁰ For a good education source, see a [video relay talk](#) (in Japanese) by the Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University, and American Studies Association, Keio University (2020).

¹¹ On July 23, during the editing stage of this article, NHK E-tele (NHK’s educational channel) aired a program focusing on Black Lives Matter and Japan (NHK 2020e). Baye McNeil, African-American writer John Russell (who appeared in the emergency relay talk), and two mixed African-Japanese young people discussed their experiences living as blacks in Japan. Interestingly, the 30-minute program began with a statement: “when George Floyd was killed by the police . . . ,” making his name explicit. And there was a segment entitled “the history of African Americans you can understand in five minutes.” The segment began in 1619, when the first slaves were “imported” to Virginia and reminded Japanese viewers that the period in which slavery officially continued was roughly the same length as the Tokugawa era

(1603-1867). The segment spotlighted campaigner Frederick Douglas, saying that celebrating President Abraham Lincoln as the sole liberator of blacks was a perspective of whites. It covered the Jim Crow laws, “The Birth of a Nation,” and the signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, and concluded with “systematic racism.” Later, John Russell criticized the “Sekai-no-ima” program, questioning the explanation of the conflict from the white police officers’ point of view. This example nevertheless shows that NHK can indeed make a program that is sensitive to racial issues and invite appropriate panelists to the studio. The production team for this program, “Baribara,” has been sensitive to various kinds of discrimination because it is a variety show that seeks to “remove barriers for all minorities,” not just the physically challenged but also the LGBTQ community and the burakumin ([NHK 2020f](#)).