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# **Making Meanings:**

## **Introducing the Teach311.org Interview Collection<sup>1</sup>**

**By Grace Teo and Lisa Onaga**

Waves of stories, postures, and interpretations are generated in the temporal wake following disasters. One scholarly and educational approach to accessing and making sense of otherwise ephemeral accounts of the cascading disasters following the Tōhoku earthquake of 2011 is through oral history documentation. However, the experience of disaster means more than recognizing a layer of trauma across the oral histories collected in its wake. Disasters are multiple and as they unfold over time and space, meaning both sharpens and is obscured. A recollection of an unrecorded oral history interview conducted by Indira Chowdhury on the morning of April 25, 2015 in Nepal illustrates this well. In an essay she penned and republished on Teach311.org, Chowdhury recalls interviewing cultural historian Satya Mohan Joshi and hearing him recount memories of the 1934 earthquake in Nepal. Hours after this interview, Chowdhury's own understanding of that past event and place gained new meaning as the Gorkha earthquake disrupted the oral history workshop she was teaching.<sup>2</sup> We glean two things from Chowdhury's account: that not all oral histories can or need to be recorded, and that the processes of recollection, reflection, and remembrance are integral if one wishes to convey the significance of what was

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experienced. The work of an oral history interview, in short, does not end with a recording. It begins there.

In the spring of 2018, the "Teach311.org"<sup>3</sup> project launched an online Interview Collection featuring earthquake and tsunami survivors in northeast Japan and scientific and medical professionals working in Fukushima. In this Interface essay, we introduce the Interview Collection as part of an ongoing process of scrutinizing how meanings of disaster are produced, dealt with, and remembered. We first provide an overview of the development of Teach311.org and its commitment to explicating histories of disaster in Japan and the collaborations that have subsequently extended the project's geographical focus. We comment upon the merit of a broad geographical and multilingual approach for encouraging collegiality and inclusion in the exploration of disasters in the historical and social studies of science and technology in Asia, and discuss how this project illustrates the production of new insights connected to various topics that might at first glance seem unrelated to science studies. After considering the methodologies of oral history and documentary for understanding how science, medicine, and technology matter to the production of disaster knowledge, we discuss the digital exportability of this project to facilitate the deepening and exchange of scholarly knowledge connected to different disasters across Asia.

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## **Overview of Teach311.org: Collaboration Across Geographies, Languages, and Cultures**

When it launched originally as a simple WordPress site on April 14, 2011, the Teach311.org project allowed a diverse community of early career science studies scholars and historians conducting research on East Asia to channel their intellectual energies into something meaningful as precarity became glaringly normalized.<sup>4</sup> The project responded to the need to make a “teaching moment” out of the March 11, 2011 cascade of disasters in Japan. It helped lower the barrier to awareness about key scholarship in the history and sociology of science and technology.<sup>5</sup> Instead of mobilizing scientific information to explain disasters, Teach311.org sought to cultivate academic exploration into various literatures surrounding different categories of disaster.

The satisfaction of building this project is balanced by the sobering circumstances behind its existence. We conceptualize blog posts as “annotations” and in addition to commemorating the time that the earthquake struck, each post works with or across a language to introduce a scholarly book, article, or multimedia with a comment on its potential function in classrooms. The flexibility of the blog enables publishing in English, Japanese, and Chinese, with tagged metadata from posted contributions and translations allowing visitors to browse according to topic, beginning with earthquakes, tsunamis and nuclear power. Inspired by an invitation

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to present the project at the "Teaching 3.11: Issues, Materials, Pedagogy and Research" workshop organized by anthropologist David Slater in June 2012, we added more "teaching modules" that cluster annotations around classroom activities.<sup>6</sup>

We rethought the function of the blog format for those who were not already steeped in the literature of disaster studies or Asian studies. Digital projects on historical resources for educational and public access, coordinated through the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, provided compelling examples of possible directions and designs for teaching and collaboration. These include the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank (<http://hurricanearchive.org/>) established in 2005 and the World History Matters (<http://worldhistorymatters.org/>) project established in 1996. Dealing with an event that was still unfolding as survivors focused on recovery, it seemed truer to the reflexive intellectual approaches of History of Science and Science & Technology Studies (STS) for Teach311.org to curate content that would help foster sociological and historical contemplation about the "unprecedentedness" of a nuclear disaster, or about the recurrence of "safety," rather than commemorate material as part of a memory bank.

The Teach311.org project settled in Singapore in 2012 with a global mindfulness toward collaboration. With several project members located at two of the local universities, the project began to feature scholarship relevant to South and

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Southeast Asia. The Library at Nanyang Technological University- Singapore led a front-end redesign as we explored digital bibliographic tools and created an image gallery of Minamisōma and the town of Namie with Ryuma Shineha , a STS scholar at Seijo University.<sup>7</sup> A workshop about innovating earthquake awareness and risk reduction, co-organised by social scientists Megan Finn and Scott Miles at the University of Washington, brought together Teach311.org editors and scholars of the Pacific Rim in September 2017.<sup>8</sup> The workshop report and a storymap of a design event, in which scholars, artists, and the public worked together to shift Seattle’s seismic cultures, are slated to be published on Teach311.org in March 2019. In addition to holding a workshop and film screening in 2014 (Onaga and Wu 2018), Teach311.org has also spun off other publication projects<sup>9</sup> and modeled a way for scholars to communicate the social and technological intricacies of other disasters, such as the 2014 Sewol ferry sinking. “Teach Sewol” (<http://teachsewol.org/>) is a notable sister project organized by Korean Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST) anthropologist Yoon Jung Lee and historian of technology Chihyung Jeon (also the Korea editor of Teach311.org).

A deliberate approach to translation has helped Teach311.org critically resist the immediate gratification of machine or professional translation by prioritizing a dwelling space for the challenge of practicing multilingualism. Teach311.org’s translations by volunteers have expanded over the years to include Korean and

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Bahasa Indonesian. Recently, new efforts by professors Anto Mohsin of Northwestern University in Qatar and Ghada Salama of Texas A&M University at Qatar have produced Arabic translations. Teach311.org's open invitation to scholars, students, and educators to contribute annotations and translations of existing posts and oral history transcripts stems from the project's commitment to facilitating the co-production of educational resources through international collaboration (Onaga and Shell 2016). We hope that this stance encourages deeper consideration of the distinctions among information, knowledge, and wisdom, and how translation can mediate various epistemic processes in the study of disasters.

### **Teach311.org Interview Collection**

Shifting technologies inform how histories of disaster have been recorded around the world. In Japan, disaster documentation practices have facilitated the formation of various private and public collections, especially for prominent events such as the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake and the atomic bombings of World War II. What role do past documentation technologies play in understanding the disasters of March 11, 2011, and how do technologies of the present re-present the past? Gregory Smit's (2013) examination of the 1855 Ansei Edo Earthquake in Japan's seismic history is instructive, for he considers how the documentation of certain

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disasters themselves function as their “continuing legacy” in the present. Various online archives on the 1923 earthquake and the Nagasaki and Hiroshima bombings provide a fascinating context for considering how digital interventions inform our sense of disasters that occurred in Japan before and after 2011. A visual companion to his research and teaching, historian J. Charles Schencking’s web archive serves as a repository of vivid source material related to the Great Kantō Earthquake, categorizing maps, diagrams, and photographs corresponding to stages of the earthquake’s aftermath, commemoration, and reconstruction phases.<sup>10</sup> The Nagasaki and Hiroshima Archives created in 2010 and 2011, respectively, are Japanese language crowdsourcing exercises in mapping atomic bombing survivor testimonies with georeferenced videos, photographs, texts, and building models. Led by Hidenori Watanave, professor of information studies at the University of Tokyo, this student-teacher collaboration presents a panoramic view of a digitally mapped topography of both cities.<sup>11</sup> The collection of March 11-related digital ephemera by the Japan Disaster Archive creates another public space of geo-tagged information exchange.<sup>12</sup> The Teach311.org Interview Collection complements such endeavors while encouraging site visitors to take part in a reflexive examination of the production of scientific uncertainty, the discourse of risk, public trust in science, and the role of different languages, whether linguistic or disciplinary, that mediate the comprehension of this period.

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Oral history interviews highlighting the technoscientific aspects of the 2011 disasters figure into how Teach311.org uniquely contributes to the historical record. Collaborative efforts to secure and to maintain online accessibility to video resources ensures the usability of valuable source material for teaching the recent past. As with other projects documenting the changes wrought by calamity, like the Nagasaki and Hiroshima Archives and Densho.org's documentation of Japanese American incarceration, our Interview Collection contributes to the wider study of disasters in Asia by facilitating access to living voices from Japan. Unlike older tape-recorded oral histories and institutionally managed recordings, our digital collection presents new collaborative opportunities for students, educators, and scholars to create or improve transcriptions and translations, further increasing linguistic availability.

The Interview Collection categorizes digital video clips as Documentary Film Interviews or Oral History Interviews. Sociologist and filmmaker Sulfikar Amir contributed our first suite of clips from his documentary *Healing Fukushima* (2016), which features the reflections of medical staff who lived and worked in Fukushima Prefecture in 2011.<sup>13</sup> The second collection of seven oral history interviews consist of personal testimony of students living in Sendai and professional reflections of a civil engineer and a thyroid specialist.<sup>14</sup> The interview project crystallized when John Morris, a historian at Miyagi Gakuin Women's University (MGU), conveyed his students' interest in communicating with people from different countries and



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language environments to historian of premodern Japan Philip C. Brown.<sup>15</sup> This development joined a conversation already underway on Teach311.org's online communication tool, Slack, between historian John Schneiderwind (2017) and Onaga which utilized video for digitally-mediated discussions held between students of Japanese history located at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and the University of Central Arkansas.

Both documentary film clips and interviews problematize disasters, from immediate occurrence to the emergency response, and the slower reflexive processes of societal recovery and revitalization. The documentary interviews are open-access on Teach311.org, whereas the registration process to access the Oral History Collection content fosters an additional regard for methodology, the interviewees, and the value of recorded content intended for primarily classroom use – a modest counter to the waning of historical memory in Japan after disasters (Smits 2011). Oral histories provide two windows through which to view a person's temporal experiences with disaster. First is the immediate experience, and second is a longer-term process of persistence, whether through policy-making, recovery and rebuilding, or ongoing public and scientific inquiry. The videos in the collection allow for insights into the rupture of historical time catalyzed by the three-fold crisis, and how that has altered the meanings of quotidian life in the post-Fukushima era

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for interviewed professionals and young adults as they rethink the meaning of the everyday.<sup>16</sup>

Our interviewees are not poets but full of thought, and are perhaps unusual for their generous willingness to speak when others would rather not. The Teach311.org Interview Collection facilitates an appreciation for the evolution of technoscientific information. Issues such as the causes of thyroid cancer or measuring radiation risk come to mind. Brown's careful oral history interview with thyroid specialist Suzuki Shinichi, who has received much attention from the media and among Japan scholars, allows unusual access for teachers and students to someone in this field of expertise. At the time of this writing, the interview remains in Japanese, a suggestive opportunity for those in Japanese studies to recognize the importance of preparing next generations of students to confidently follow medical terminology, especially when understandings of scientific processes inform environmental and public health. Tensions about communication and cooperation also come alive through the interviews with Nihon University civil engineering professor Nakamura Susumu and MGU students. Through a dialogic framework, the interviewer facilitates for us an understanding of Nakamura's concept of consensus and the value of societal dialogue between local governments, industry, engineers and citizen representatives for determining the safety of nuclear power plants.<sup>17</sup> The interview with outspoken MGU fourth-year student Otomo Mai

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emphasizes the importance of community-level dialogue and engagement for productive disaster-rebuilding.<sup>18</sup>

Individual documentary and oral history interviews differ from scientific studies and are thus useful for explicating the establishment of facts or trustworthy knowledge. Teach311.org and the Interview Collection encourage a multi-perspective study of cost-benefit discussions about initiative, accountability, responsibility, and answerability. Technical literature rehashed by the media often overlooks attention to processes of knowledge production and interpretation during the course of a “technonatural” disaster (Drake 2017). Scholarship on citizen radiation-measuring organizations (Kimura 2016) and the struggles of women in post-Fukushima Japan (Slater, Morioka and Danzuka 2014) together illustrate the difficulties of evaluating risk when couched in unfamiliar scientific languages. The Teach311.org project does not arbitrate at the granular level of decision-making, but through the Interview Collection, it does provide a path for students and teachers to discuss difficult topics that involve weighing knowledge, including at the basic level of discerning among different ways to quantify and qualify radiation.<sup>19</sup> In addition to students like Otomo, interviews with physicians and medical staff provide insights into individual thought processes concerning the risks of living in the vicinity of nuclear power plants or in earthquake or tsunami-prone areas.<sup>20</sup> For instance, medical specialist Kumagai Atsushi shared his belief that ordinary people

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and medical personnel living in Fukushima are individually accountable for choosing to resettle in Fukushima or near nuclear power plants.<sup>21</sup> Elaborating on personal responsibility, emergency physician Okubo Reiko framed her decision to give birth to her child in Fukushima based on her own judgement of publicly available radiation information and risk.<sup>22</sup> The Interview Collection film clips ultimately provide a biographical glimpse into contemporary medical and scientific lives lodged in the construction of recent science (Söderqvist 1997), and a didactic complement to scholarship on information ecology after or during a disaster.

### **Ways of Knowing Disasters**

Teach311.org's focus on science and technology does not replace the voices of those who have experienced the traumas of disaster but complements the representational emphases of artistic responses to disaster. Rachel DiNitto's literary analysis of the post-Fukushima motif of debris and Barbara Geilhorn and Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt's edited volume, *Fukushima and the Arts: Negotiating Nuclear Disaster*, explore the cultural dimension of the Fukushima calamity as represented in poetry, novels, theatre productions, and film. As DiNitto (2014) points out, scientific data and hard numbers manifested as body counts, radiation levels, and damage costs inadequately capture the magnitude of suffering and trauma. Teach311.org

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content offers an empathetic strategy for channeling anxiety that the social media environment may amplify as publics seek to know disasters. Indeed, social media networks in the wake of disasters in the Japanese archipelago have played instrumental roles in brokering the flow of information when governments stall (Slater, Kindstrand and Nishimura 2016). Yet, Teach311.org does not function as a clearing house for authoritative explanations of how the triple disasters happened. By contributing steadily to the site, and by exploring science and technology in the context of disaster from an historical perspective, an alternative politics of protest gains formation. By holding up for study how communities discuss “safety” with regards to seismicity, radiation, and medicine, we encourage the value of recognizing the many facets of complicated disasters.

The expressions and testimony in written sources, oral history videos, and literary production are constantly subject to our interpretation and analysis (Drake 2017, 113). The open-endedness of disaster especially makes room for the continued interpretative production of meaning across various types of sources and viewpoints.<sup>23</sup> Teach311.org thus emphasizes interpreting how various mediums shape the “truth” of the historical past, as opposed to single-minded disclosure from official documents, an approach that ostracizes the veracity of personal memory (Thomas 2008, 65).

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In contrast to oral history projects that may collectivize a wide number of voices, our small collection of curated voices offers an alternative approach that should be seen as part of a new crest of humanistic activity offering what Cheung Ching-Yuen has discussed as a philosophy of recovery that exercises an awareness of normalcy bias. In his review of literature and philosophical writings about disasters, he wrote, "Facing the crisis of humanity in Japan, Japanese philosophy can no longer remain a mere theory but is becoming a practice or even a social engagement" (2017, 145). For Cheung, the act of visiting a place becomes a pilgrimage; it is an "act to rescue and preserve memories from oblivion" and a "way of doing philosophy" (Ibid., 146). By encouraging collective contemplation and analyses of disaster-related oral history interviews in classrooms, Teach311.org offers a way for those who do not live in Japan or speak Japanese to come close to a semblance of a pilgrimage to resist the erosion of memory.

### **Notes For The Future**

Seven years after the blog's inception, we reflect upon how this project can be generalized to address disaster histories in more areas within Asia. The virtual space explored by Teach311.org to collectively pursue deeper historical meaning about disasters provides a model for bridging people located in dispersed places to

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together identify, share, and evaluate multiple histories of science, technology, medicine, and environment. Teach311.org is not exhaustive, but different aspects can be studied in order to make meaning of the growing number of disasters in Asia prompted especially by climate change. Recent events, such as the Nepal Earthquake in April 2015 or the 2018 Kerala floods, for example, can be studied from different vantages connected to histories and stories that run deeper than the conversations that flow on Facebook, Twitter, or messaging apps.

Going forward, we hope that Teach311.org inspires colleagues wishing to build new tools that can engage scholars and students virtually to better deal with and understand worlds of disaster. All it takes is a small group of curious and concerned individuals wielding freely available web development tools to begin a new sister project. Before executing the front-end design, exercising an open approach that incorporates social, scientific, and historical perspectives can help create a strong foundation that would make the activities demonstrated on Teach311.org even more exportable. Identification of the ideal audience and the purpose of bridging languages in places of linguistic diversity can effectively identify critical literature or teaching materials necessary for contextualizing the galvanizing disaster. Those who decide to commit to making their sites relevant to teachers might consider working explicitly with a school or at least deciding if the material is for teacher background or for collegiate or more junior level readers.

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Attending to the vocabulary of those who talk about disaster can lead to a new consciousness about the unpacking that must be done in order to understand what tensions and contradictions in disaster discourse actually mean. As much as the science or solid ground is unsettled, the interviews in the Teach311.org collection remain open to translation and re-translation, which suggests that the conceptual stability of the present is unsettled (Lianeri 2014). The Teach311.org Interview Collection demarcates a productive ground that allows for a focused analysis of indeterminacy. Debates about the ownership of a disaster and its narratives appear not only in Japan but in all stages of disasters regardless of location (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002, 11). Clearly, more narrative and documentary accounts can benefit these debates. The constants running across accounts of the cascade of disasters and the coexistence of different perspectives in northeast Japan exemplified by the Teach311.org Interview Collection emphasize an understanding that has begun with but is by no means limited to Japan. We invite readers of *Verge* to contribute not only to this project but also to create new ventures to guide further inquiries and, in turn, to show how narrative construction matters in the formation of various worldviews connected to disasters in Asia.



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<sup>2</sup> The "Oral History & Digital Archiving" workshop was disrupted as the Ghorka

earthquake hit at 11.56am. Chowdhury recounted this experience in a *Economic and*

*Political Weekly* essay, republished on Teach311.org. See Chowdhury (2015a &

2015b).

<sup>3</sup> The project name is synonymous with the site name "Teach311.org".

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<sup>4</sup> Teach311.org started as an educational project of the Forum for the History of Science in Asia, and is also now a joint project of the Society for the History of Technology's Asia Network.

<sup>5</sup> Examples from this scholarship include but are not limited to Perrow (1999); Clancey (2006); Yoshioka (2011).

<sup>6</sup> *Sophia University Institute of Comparative Culture (ICC)*. 2012. "Teaching 3.11: Issues, Materials, Pedagogy and Research." [http://icc fla.sophia.ac.jp/html/events/2012-2013/Teaching\\_3.11.html](http://icc fla.sophia.ac.jp/html/events/2012-2013/Teaching_3.11.html).

<sup>7</sup> All Japanese names follow the format of family name followed by given name, excepting academics' names.

<sup>8</sup> This collaborative workshop was entitled "Seismic Cultures of the Pacific Rim".

<sup>9</sup> See "Terms of Disaster" *Arcadia* essay collection.

<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/arcadia/collection/16245>.

<sup>10</sup> The archive also contains English translations of postcards, photograph captions, and map descriptions provided by Schencking. *The Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923*. 2013. <http://www.greatkantoeearthquake.com>.

<sup>11</sup> For the Nagasaki and Hiroshima Archives in English, see *Nagasaki Archive*.

<http://e.nagasaki.mapping.jp/p/nagasaki-archive.html>; *Hiroshima Archive*.

[http://hiroshima.mapping.jp/concept\\_en.html](http://hiroshima.mapping.jp/concept_en.html).

<sup>12</sup> For details, see Dinmore (2015).

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<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.5.issue-1>.

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<sup>13</sup> Onaga served as co-associate producer of this film.

<sup>14</sup> Yamashita Shunichi of Nagasaki University, a leading specialist of radiation-induced disease assessment after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant meltdown introduced Brown to thyroid specialist Suzuki Shinichi. Personal communication with Philip C. Brown, July 15, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Personal communication with Philip C. Brown, July, 11 2018 and John Morris, July 25, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> For discussion of the quotidian in post-Fukushima poetry, see Odagiri (2015).

<sup>17</sup> Nakamura, Susumu. "Nakamura Susumu (Clip 4)." 03:12.

<https://vimeo.com/232940890>.

<sup>18</sup> Otomo, Mai. "Reflections on U.S. Visit (Clip 3)." <https://vimeo.com/226177760>.

<sup>19</sup> Hasegawa, Arifumi. "Healing Fukushima: Hasegawa Arifumi and students on Radiation and Radioactivity." <https://vimeo.com/222313642>.

<sup>20</sup> Decisions about resettlement of previously radiation contaminated and tsunami-prone areas figured in interviews with the MGU students as well as the physicians interviewed in *Healing Fukushima*.

<sup>21</sup> Kumagai, Atsushi. "Healing Fukushima: Kumagai Atsushi on Risk." 01:22.

<https://vimeo.com/222019642>.

<sup>22</sup> Okubo, Reiko. "Healing Fukushima: Okubo Reiko on Staying in Fukushima."

<https://vimeo.com/222313008>.

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<sup>23</sup> On the indeterminacy of disaster narratives, see Samuels (2013, 78).