

PRINCIPLES OF OBJECTIVITY AND IMPARTIALITY IN NHK'S NEWS POLICY**Karimova Farangiz Sarvar qizi**Master's Student, Faculty of Journalism,
University of Journalism and Mass Communications of Uzbekistan

Abstract: This article examines the structural, legal, and operational frameworks that define the principles of objectivity and impartiality within the news policy of Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK), Japan's public broadcaster. As one of the world's largest public media organizations, NHK operates under a distinct regulatory mandate established by the Broadcast Act of 1950. This legislation requires political neutrality, factual accuracy, and the presentation of multiple perspectives on controversial issues. This study utilizes document analysis of NHK's internal corporate guidelines, broadcast law, and empirical audience reception data to analyze how these principles are maintained in contemporary journalism. The analysis highlights the structural mechanisms—such as the Board of Governors and the Broadcast Compliance Committee—designed to insulate the network from political interference while evaluating the ongoing tensions between regulatory mandates and journalistic autonomy. The findings demonstrate that while NHK maintains high levels of institutional trust through rigorous adherence to cross-checking and neutral language, it faces systemic challenges in balancing state expectations with public accountability in an increasingly polarized media ecosystem.

Keywords: Public Service Broadcasting, NHK, Broadcast Act of 1950, Objectivity, Impartiality, Journalism Ethics, Media Regulation, Japan.

Introduction

The global landscape of public service broadcasting (PSB) is built upon the fundamental pillars of objectivity, accuracy, and impartiality. Among the world's major public media institutions, Japan's Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK) occupies a unique position. Established as a public broadcaster modeled partly on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), NHK is funded almost entirely by receiving fees (reishukin) paid by Japanese households [1, p. 45]. This financial structure is legally designed to ensure independence from both commercial interests and direct state control.

However, the operational execution of "impartiality" (fu 偏 fushō) and "objectivity" (kyakkanshisei) within Japanese journalism is governed by rigid statutory frameworks. Article 4 of Japan's Broadcast Act of 1950 explicitly dictates the standards for domestic broadcasting, mandating that programs must not harm public morals, must be politically impartial, must report facts without distortion, and must clarify conflicting viewpoints on controversial subjects [2, p. 12].

As the media landscape undergoes rapid digitization and political polarization increases, the practical application of these principles faces significant scrutiny. Scholars and media critics frequently debate whether NHK's strict adherence to neutrality manifests as objective truth-seeking or as a conservative strategy to avoid confrontation with the governing authorities [3, p. 88]. This article provides a comprehensive academic analysis of NHK's news policy, examining how institutional frameworks, legal mandates, and professional journalistic cultures shape the production of objective and impartial news in Japan.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative institutional and document analysis methodology, supplemented by secondary empirical data on audience trust and content distribution. The primary source material consists of three interconnected layers:

- **Statutory Frameworks:** A systematic review of the Broadcast Act of 1950 (specifically Articles 4, 5, and 65) to establish the legal boundaries of impartiality in Japanese media [4, p. 104].

- **Institutional Codes:** An analysis of internal policy documents, primarily the NHK Broadcast Guidelines (NHK Hōsō Kijun), which serve as the operational manual for journalists and producers [5, p. 14-22].

- **Governance Reports:** Documentation from the NHK Board of Governors (Keiei Iinkai) and the Broadcasting Ethics & Program Improvement Organization (BPO) from recent years to assess institutional compliance and external critiques [6, p. 34].

To evaluate the efficacy of these policies, the paper incorporates quantitative metadata derived from longitudinal media trust surveys conducted by the NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute and the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism [7, p. 112]. This approach allows for a balanced triangulation between legal intent, corporate policy, and actual journalistic output.

Results

The investigation into NHK's operational architecture reveals a highly formalized system designed to enforce neutrality through multi-layered oversight. The structural enforcement of objectivity operates through distinct legal, corporate, and external mechanisms.

The legal baseline established by Article 4 of the Broadcast Act sets a strict standard for content. Unlike commercial broadcasters that rely on market segmentation, NHK is legally bound to cater to the entire nation, meaning that any perceived bias can result in public backlash or legislative questioning during annual budget reviews in the Diet [8, p. 73].

Internally, the NHK Broadcast Guidelines translate these legal mandates into concrete newsroom practices. The guidelines dictate explicit procedures for reporting controversial topics, which are summarized in the table below:

Dimension of News Policy	Operational Requirement according to NHK Guidelines
Fact-Checking	Mandatory verification by at least two independent sources prior to broadcast [5, p. 31].
Language Neutrality	Prohibition of emotionally charged adjectives; use of standardized legal titles for political actors [5, p. 35].
Balancing Viewpoints	Allocation of proportional time to competing political factions during election cycles [9, p. 55].
Correction Mechanism	Obligation to issue immediate, visible corrections of equal prominence if an error occurs [2, p. 19].

Furthermore, the governance of NHK is concentrated in the Board of Governors, a 12-member body appointed by the Prime Minister with the consent of both houses of the Diet [1, p. 52]. This board approves management policies and the annual budget, creating a structural linkage to the state that directly influences the network's risk-averse approach to investigative journalism.

Quantitatively, data from the Reuters Institute Digital News Report consistently shows that NHK retains one of the highest trust scores among Japanese media brands, hovering between 60% and 65% approval ratings [7, p. 115]. This indicates that the public generally perceives the broadcaster's highly standardized, neutral tone as a marker of reliability.

Analysis and Discussion

The core tension within NHK's news policy lies in the operational interpretation of "impartiality." In Western journalistic traditions, impartiality often involves adversarial investigative reporting that holds power accountable, frequently presenting alternative perspectives that challenge the official state narrative. In contrast, NHK's journalistic culture defines impartiality primarily as "structural balance" and "factual literalism" [10, p. 142].

This literalist approach means that NHK news anchors routinely report official government statements verbatim alongside official opposition counter-statements, without actively adjudicating the truth value of either claim within the broadcast text. Critics argue that this leads to "announcement journalism" (*happō* journalism), where the broadcaster functions primarily as a bulletin board for state institutions rather than an independent watchdog [3, p. 94].

The structural vulnerability of NHK stems directly from its budget approval process. According to Article 65 of the Broadcast Act, NHK's operating budget must be submitted to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications and subsequently approved by the National Diet [4, p. 108]. Because the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has maintained near-continuous governance over Japan for decades, NHK's leadership is structurally incentivized to avoid structural biases that could jeopardize its funding mechanism or invite regulatory interventions under the guise of enforcing Article 4 [11, p. 203].

This dynamic became highly visible during historical shifts in leadership, where executive appointments openly challenged traditional boundaries of neutrality. For instance, statements by former NHK executives asserting that the broadcaster could not say "left" when the government said "right" triggered intense academic debate regarding the autonomy of the institution [12, p. 17].

Despite these structural constraints, NHK's commitment to objectivity remains robust in specific operational areas, most notably in disaster broadcasting and international reporting. During natural disasters (earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons), NHK's absolute adherence to factual accuracy, verified telemetry data, and non-sensationalist reporting serves as the definitive gold standard for public safety communications across East Asia [6, p. 41]. In these scenarios, the institutional aversion to speculation functions as a critical asset, eliminating rumor and stabilizing public panic through verified, objective data streams.

Conclusion

NHK's news policy regarding objectivity and impartiality represents a sophisticated, highly regulated model of public service broadcasting tailored to the political and cultural realities of Japan. The broadcaster successfully achieves a high degree of factual reliability and public trust by maintaining rigid internal cross-checking mechanisms, utilizing hyper-neutral language, and adhering strictly to the legal boundaries set by the Broadcast Act of 1950.

However, the systemic dependence on parliamentary approval for its budget and the political appointment process of its Board of Governors introduce an unavoidable structural vulnerability. This configuration often pushes NHK's interpretation of impartiality toward a conservative, passive balance—prioritizing official narratives and equal-time allocations over critical, adversarial investigation.

Ultimately, NHK proves that institutional neutrality can effectively secure broad public trust and deliver essential, accurate information during crises. Nevertheless, the challenge for the future lies in evolving this impartiality from a passive shield against political pressure into an active tool for robust, independent civic discourse within a rapidly transforming democratic media environment.

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