Book Review:

Rodwell, Elizabeth. *Push the Button: Interactive Television and Collaborative Journalism in Japan.* (Duke University Press, 2024)

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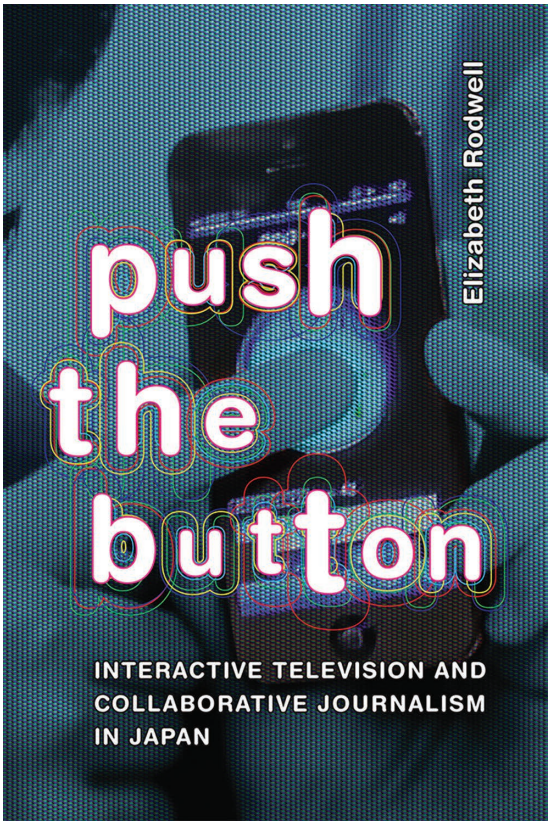

"Second screening" is the slang term for using a mobile device while watching television. This audience behavior represents a problem for television producers who are constantly vying for viewers' attention. Of course, media companies are attempting various solutions to combat second-screening. Programs on platforms like Netflix feature characters engaging in dialogue that explicitly describes the onscreen action, likely for the benefit of second screeners who may not be paying full attention. A more interesting solution is occurring on Japanese television screens: interactivity. In *Push the Button*, Elizabeth Rodwell presents an intimate and fascinating exploration of the Japanese television industry and its forays into interactivity.

Why Japan? Rodwell states her reasons clearly. Since 2011, when Japan experienced both a devastating earthquake and a nuclear disaster, Japanese television and journalism have undergone critical, industry-shaping changes. Japan is also unique because of its political culture's reliance

on five major broadcast networks. According to Rodwell, this political reliance has led to changes in both journalism and TV. The political right, which controls mass media, and the left, whose presence is mostly online, both want television to change formats.

Rodwell's methodology is indicative of the expertise that runs throughout the text. She spent 18 months doing fieldwork in both independent and corporate workplaces and gathering spots for media industry professionals. In some cases, she even held internships with relevant companies. Her combination of interviews and theoretical concepts (most of which are Frankfurt school based) also signify well-rounded and thought-out observations of an industry in flux.

Rodwell devotes each chapter to exploring the outcomes of various interactive television experiments that have occurred in Japan. She states, "The experiments addressed here account for the ways that participation is negotiated by audiences and producers of mass media – as creators alike." Each case study is an example of the way interactivity facilitates this relationship. Rodwell's chapters balance practical observations of specific instances with theoretical discourse to interrogate what interactivity means for the relationship between media producers and consumers. While each case study yields a different answer, it is clear that interactive technology means substantive change in the historied relationship.

In chapter one, Rodwell details the experimental *60 Ban Shobu* (60 Year Battle), which asked viewers to press a button on their smartphones to indicate how much they liked what the hosts said on the show. She also observed meetings in which developers demonstrated technology that would allow users to purchase items seen on screen in real time. Both these examples demonstrate the ways that interactivity can (and does) work in commerce and audience data-gathering. Rodwell speaks of these activities as more of a frustration than an asset, concluding that media producers intend to use interactivity for things that benefit them, like ratings information or marketability, even though these experiments have largely been unsuccessful on those terms.

Chapter two discusses a show called *The Compass*, in which users could add their thoughts via social media to discussion-based television in real time. Before the show was canceled, most of the discussions were politically focused, allowing average citizens to give their opinion on what was happening in the country. This audience participation feature meant that producers had to relinquish some control of the show's coverage of political topics, because part of the appeal of the show was that audience members could sway the host's discussion. Rodwell identifies this instance as one in which audiences must accept that their interests are at odds with the media industry's interests. Television, she states, "always keeps viewers at arm's length."

Chapter three follows independent journalism in which "media activists" use interactivity to promote a more equitable form of obtaining news. According to Rodwell, Japanese newspapers do not print corrections or retractions if incorrect information is reported. These media activists created fact-checking organizations and platform, in which news-reading audiences provided the information and labor. This move is especially important in Japan, as major news companies tend to feature views that skew to the political right. Independent news start-ups often intend to use or teach citizen journalism. Many of these news sources, she writes, face

practical challenges (obtaining funds, website views) and philosophical challenges (questioning and/or blurring the line between member of the press and regular citizen).

Chapter four focuses on popular interactive game shows. Many of these shows function as a sort of live video game in which audience members collectively press buttons on their mobile devices to achieve a specific goal. Producers of these shows hoped that the working-together aspect of the programming would foster a "sense-of national belonging" and build community among audience members. Although these shows offered interactive opportunities, Rodwell argues that their attempts failed to community-build in a meaningful way, leaving viewers isolated in a fashion similar to traditional television.

Chapter five concludes with observations about Our Planet TV, an independent media collective whose goal is teaching citizen journalism. After observing a discussion in which members aspire to make Japan a better place through documentary media, Rodwell ends the book on an optimistic note. She writes, "In the dialectic between media maker and audience embodied by the practices of citizen journalism, liberator and liberated are not separate, but one." The relationships between technology, media, users, and audiences are not fully fleshed out, but, Rodwell believes, there is potential for connection and resistance. By invoking the act of button pushing in the book's title, Rodwell presents a hopeful vision, as audiences push buttons in response to the media they are consuming.

Push the Button's biggest asset is Rodwell's ability to connect media industry studies to a broader context. Japanese television is unique, and Rodwell expertly demonstrates how media professionals work and ideate in a field that is inextricably tied to Japan's equally unique political landscape. The ways in which Japanese media professionals communicate with audiences (and, in many cases, audience members themselves) provide a useful framework for understanding the ways that media industries, technology, and politics impact each other. Thus, this book offers a helpful model for scholars working on similar issues in other countries or locations.

Though readers may find some difficulty in the variety and number of objects Rodwell explores, the book is still extremely useful in a comprehensive sense, especially as the field of media industry studies expands. She situates herself nicely between scholarship on media industry studies (John Caldwell, for example), Japanese cultural studies (like Anne Chen-Cooper), and audience studies (like Stuart Hall). By examining the principle of interactivity and television through a geographically specific scope, Rodwell's study of Japanese television and its foray into interactivity present a well-rounded examination of the ways that producers and audiences communicate. Her work lays a foundation for future study both in Japan and outside of it.