

**Prison Radio International visits Japan**  
**(and learns the potent potential of saying it like it is)**

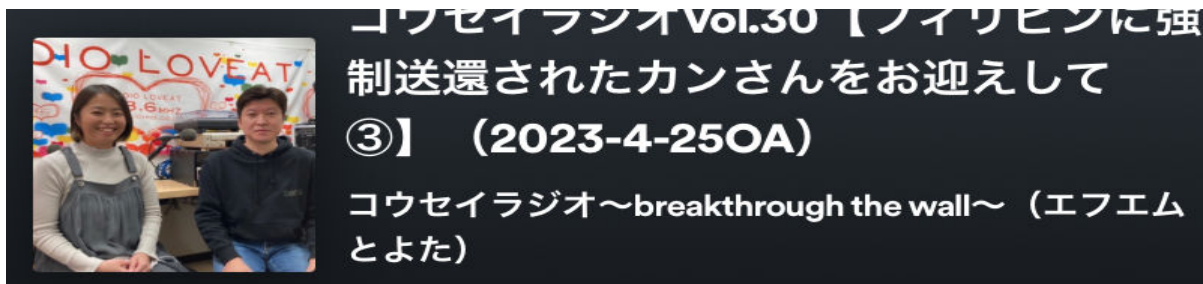


Miyuki Haga is a local journalist and graduate student at Nagoya University, and Akiko Ogawa is her academic supervisor. During her studies, Miyuki has worked in partnership with a local community radio station Aichi to begin a [podcast called Kosei Radio](#) (Rehabilitation Radio). The radio show tells the stories of people who have been to prison and their families and friends. It is broadcast on loud speakers to boys in a local juvenile training school, and is also [available to the general public on spotify](#).

Prison Radio International has recently launched a global prison radio survey, and this prison radio project in Japan is one of over 50% of prison radio projects whose content is publicly accessible.

*Professor Akiko Ogawa introducing the symposium*

Our Network encompasses any project that uses audio for good in criminal justice settings, and we have been surprised to find that, like Miyuki's project, over 40% of the prison radio projects in our network are recorded in the community, outside of prison walls.



*Miyuki Haga and Asato Takasaka in the studios of the Community Radio station where they record Kosei Radio*

Kosei Radio aims to enable the voices and stories of people in the criminal justice system to be heard, to educate the public about life in prison in ways that build knowledge and empathy, and to connect people in prison with the community in new ways. Through broadcasting within prisons as well as to the public, it aims to get its content to the ears of people in prison, the general public and those who work within or alongside the criminal justice system. The way the symposium was envisioned and enacted really brought this focus to life.

# 刑務所ラジオ, はじめます

# 1

覚醒剤を買おうとしたら、いきなり7つの罪で起訴された人  
～転落からの再生、社会復帰まで～

ON AIR

4.11月 PM10:00-

ラジオフューズ FM 87.4 MHz

The symposium included my lecture on behalf of Prison Radio International, a presentation from Professor Nakajima Manabu (a former prison governor and now academic), a talk by Kuma-San, who previously spent time in prison and now runs his own podcast as part

of his work for the organisation [Prisoners Rights](#), and finally we heard from Miyuki Haga, who explained the history of prison radio in Japan and her own work in Kosei Radio. The event took place on Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> February at Nagoya University and was attended by over 140 people, many of whom attended on-line from across Japan. Participants included representatives from media, academia and some from the prison service.

Prison Radio International works with prison radio projects across the globe that seek to use audio for good in criminal justice contexts. Across jurisdictions projects often have different aims, but we know from our global survey that protecting communication rights, educating the public and supporting better outcomes for people in prison are the three most prevalent aims. Together, with the support of our Advisory Board, we are working to develop best practice frameworks that prison radio projects around the globe can use to meet their individual goals in their specific cultural realities, while ensuring the highest professional and ethical standards are upheld.

To support the Japanese vision of making excellent prison radio in Japan, my contribution to the symposium shared some of our journey as an organisation. Prison Radio in England and Wales has grown from one voluntary project started back in 1994 by Mark Robinson and Roma Hooper in Her Majesty's Prison and Young Offender Institute Feltham, a prison for boys, to be the first prison radio project made by prisoners and for prisoners to be broadcast to prisons nationally 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Our National Prison Radio content is mainly produced in our two studios based in a women's prison near Manchester and a men's prison in London. I

explained how we now also produce several award-winning podcasts and we are regularly commissioned to make shows for the BBC.



*Dr Ruth Armstrong enjoys a moment of language barrier breaking laughter with the audience.*

We have a third studio in the community, and there we work with people who have been in prison to tell the public the more complex stories that bring our justice system to life in real terms, while helping to inform public opinion around crime and justice.

I outlined the logics that underpin the ways we work, prioritising including the voices of people who live in our criminal justice system engaging with the voices of those who work in and around our criminal justice system. I drew on criminological evidence to emphasise the contribution prison radio can make to the individual, institutional and broader

social outcomes we all care about in criminal justice. I highlighted evidence about the role of voice, identity, companionship and links to supportive others from desistance theory that describes how people move away from crime. I explored evidence about the role of more complex information in shaping less punitive public attitudes to crime and punishment, and in reducing experiences and perceptions of stigma. And I explained the role of legitimacy theory - how dialogue between power-holders and those on whom power is exercised is a key part of power being used in ways that feel rightful and are more likely to be effective. I described how three strands of our approach have been important to building an authentic radio presence that is in dialogue with the criminal justice powers, but not simply a voice piece for their messages:

- 1) insisting on journalistic standards of independence and integrity,
- 2) practising solutions focussed journalism, and
- 3) prioritising the voice of people living in the criminal justice system.

And finally, I shared what we are learning about prison radio projects across the world, drawing on data from our [global prison radio survey](#), highlighting the different aims and approaches of global projects, while also reflecting on the research discussed to suggest areas where we can work together to strengthen and grow.





*Kuma-San speaks while Nakajima Manabu listens on the panel at the end of the symposium*

But as always, my take-homes from our time in Japan are not about what I contributed, but about what I learned. I have travelled extensively to work in prisons across the globe. I spent two days in Japan before arriving in Nagoya to meet our kind hosts, and one thing struck me. Never-before have I visited a country where, when someone asks you what you are doing there, and you explain that you work with people in prison, the conversation stops dead. It ends. It goes no further. Even if you try to probe a little, to ask their opinions, the door closes. It felt like in Japan there are just some things you don't say, some truths you don't speak. It felt like prisons don't just lock away people, they lock away social pain alongside human imperfection and press mute on any dialogue about this pain and the social problems that feed it.

I wondered how our contribution to the symposium would be received, and I was intrigued to hear from the other contributors, with their different experiences of prison radio from a systemic, experiential, rights based and media standpoint. What I experienced was somewhat of an epiphany. It isn't easy to either speak or to listen when working through an interpreter (although Mari Yamada was exceptional in her interpretation and I am hugely grateful), but the spirit of people authentically reaching towards each other needs no translation. It cuts across imposed hierarchies, cultural boundaries, situational separation, and it breathes in life. This is what I felt as I spoke, and what I felt as I listened.



*Miyuki Haga answers questions on the panel at the end of the symposium while Dr Ruth Armstrong listens to the interpreter and takes notes.*

After the event I had the joy of a conversation with [Nanako Ota](#), an academic from Tokyo whose research has focussed on the history of radio in Japan, introduced by the Americans following their occupation after the second world war. In a powerfully entitled article 'The Voiceful Voiceless' [her writing describes](#) how, in its very earliest form, radio in Japan sought out the voices of the marginalised, including those in prisons, but her work also challenges how these narratives were shaped by occupying powers and not really 'properly heard'. Nanako described to me the impact of seeing the words 'Prison Radio' on the flyer for the symposium in a media magazine, and said that without even reading more, she knew she had to attend because she was immediately impacted by this bold and unflinching statement: Prison Radio.

In the UK, and many other parts of the world, we might think of this as merely descriptive, helping people to understand the focus of the symposium. But this was more. Nanako explained that in Japan, it is very unusual to be so direct on this topic. One might expect a title that focuses on rehabilitation, reform or community reintegration, but not a direct statement that takes you straight into an excluded and prohibited place and suggests the potential of connection through radio. This was bold. This was refusing to keep realities hidden. This was stating things as they are. And this made her sure she needed to buy a bullet train ticket and make the four-hour round trip to attend. She described what unfolded for her throughout the



symposium as life changing. She is just one of the young, brave, new generation of Japanese scholars, media and criminal justice professionals and citizens that are starting to wonder what it looks like to make space for the true voice of a more diverse public to be spoken and heard, including the voices of people who are or have been in prisons, and their friends and family.



*Dr Ruth Armstrong with the Prison Radio team in Nagoya, (from left to right, Miyuki Haga, Kuma-San, Nakajima Manabu and Asato Takasaka)*

It's hard to unpick the impact of these short days in Japan on me personally and on our work in Prison Radio International professionally. They have been a process of finding myself unseated, opening myself up to new realities and logics, feelings and truths. I've loved the chance to reconnect with ideas I've long known, about the power of honouring interpersonal connections, even those damaged and harmed by actions over the life course. I've been reminded of the humility needed to fully embrace and lean into the complexities of each other's stories, to share with vulnerability and listen with empathy and courage, and the power of not judging or seeking solutions in the face of harm but instead working for connections that counteract isolation. I've learned anew the power of leaning into our own stories and those of others.

As I sat around the dinner table at the meal after the symposium, surrounded by everyone you would want to be involved at the start of a prison radio project: a media savvy lead in Miyuki, a fearless academic in Akiko, a wise, kind and well connected

former prison governor in Nakajima Manabu and a passionate presenter in Kuma-San, who has spent time in prison and is recovering - I was struck by the importance of holding different perspectives in authentic dialogue. We need the skills of all these actors to build something legitimate in this space.



I feel humbled to have been invited to play a small role in growing this brilliant network of people using audio for good in criminal justice settings. I was so nervous of taking this trip to Japan. I felt conflicted about flying half-way around the world in the current environmental crisis when as an organisation we have been deliberately doing far more events online and less in person. I felt nervous about being actually and ideologically lost in a culture and country I didn't understand and would struggle to communicate with. I felt sure I'd cause offence and hoped I could be forgiven.

Now, on the other side of my visit, I'm beyond grateful for my time in Japan. It taught me that sometimes you have to take time out of your own reality, go to places that make you feel nervous, risk being unseated, listen wholeheartedly, reflect and challenge your own logics if you want to build the kind of connections that will help to refine frameworks with global currency that can support us all to grow in this work together.

I've learned anew the power of connection, of what happens when we meet together and speak and listen across our differences fuelled by a desire to connect and grow.

I feel enriched by the spirit of collaboration that emerges when we wholeheartedly feed our part into a bigger whole, without being able to control its destiny, by simply leaning into our mutual desire to play our small part in a broader good that requires contributions from each of us.

I'm returning to the UK to continue to work with the Prison Radio International Advisory Board over the coming year as we develop our international frameworks of best practice. I am enlivened by this idea that stating your truth, as it is, even in ways some people may find shocking, can plant the seeds of change, and make space for the kinds of responses that challenge accepted ways of being and build new ways forwards.

I send a heartfelt thank you to our friends in Japan for the gift of this time together, and to this beautiful global prison radio community for the joy of doing this work. I knew we would do great work together, but I didn't expect the visit to be so personally enlarging. Thank you to each and every person whose conversations have sustained and enlivened me over the short six days I spent in Japan. I won't forget what you have taught me about building towards new futures, simply by revealing things that may otherwise stay hidden and having the courage to state things just as they are.