What are we “trading” in carbon trading?

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Public debate of climate change has been colored by political ideology. Same as other controversial social issues, ideological standpoints – in a very simply dichotomy, whether liberal or conservative – matters on understanding climate change; and in some occasion ideological difference may cause a political divide. For example, the American views on climate change are ideologically polarized and the gap between political parties are widening (e.g. Dunlap and McCright 2008). Early studies of media representation of climate change demonstrated media discourses are constructed on the ideological cultures (e.g. Carvalho 2007) while some argues such ideologically-driven media framing of climate change might be an phenomenon only in Angro-Saxon societies (the US, UK) and the role of ideology is somehow over-emphasized (e.g. Dirikx and Gelders 2010). However, since addressing climate change challenges the premises of modern capitalist society based on fossil fuel economy and requires the fundamental change of social, political and economic systems, ideologies are essentially embedded into public discourses (Hulme 2009). Therefore, the question to be asked is not whether ideology is the indicator of political divide or not, rather we should ask how ideologies incorporate with a certain cultural values and societal norms to constitute the social meanings of climate change.

This paper explores the relationship and interaction of the ideologies of newspapers and discourses of climate change, particularly focuses on the discourses around cap-and-trade. Cap-and-trade or carbon trading is a unique and novel policy tool for mitigation, based on the ideas of neoliberalism and ecological modernization (e.g. Bailey et al. 2011); therefore, it has gained political salience as well as controversy. We conducted critical discourse analysis of the editorial columns of five Japanese newspapers (Asahi, Yomiuri, Mainichi, Nikkei and Sankei) from 1997 to 2011, analyzed how the ideas of carbon trading have developed over time as well as comparison of discourses among newspapers. The results of this study show, in early stage of policy development (1997-2001), there are the overarching critical discourses on international carbon trading – that is, it is a mere political rhetoric of obscuring domestic greenhouse
gas emissions reduction. However, in the period of policy diffusion (2002-2006), carbon trading was broadly advocated as a policy measure reconciling economic growth and climate mitigation. In the later period (2007-2011), where controversy became the fore on the debate of carbon trading in Japan, critical and advocacy discourses intermingled and negotiated the idea of “trading permits” and “limiting emissions” in carbon trading – e.g. Conservative papers criticized “limiting emissions” as dirigiste economy whereas liberal papers advocated its effectiveness of GHG emissions cut. Media discourses of carbon trading were largely incorporated with perceptions of international climate politics, i.e. how to interpret international negotiation at UNFCCC process, though there were (a few) fundamental criticism on carbon trading in the basis of an antipathy toward “greedy” free-market capitalism. In sum, we can argue that media discourses of carbon trading are interwoven and socially constructed by negotiation between ideologies of newspapers, societal views on capitalism and perceptions of climate negotiations.

References