

Tuning In to Foreign Satellite Broadcasts

By Ekusa Ato

To see which of Japan's companies are the most information-sensitive, just go to the observation platform on the thirty-sixth floor of the Kasumigaseki Building in Toranomon in central Tokyo and take a look at the surrounding rooftops. Like other countries, Japan makes use of artificial satellites—five communication satellites and two broadcasting satellites, to be precise, kept in a geostationary orbit 36,000 kilometers above the equator. As you will be able to see from the Kasumigaseki Building, the main companies in central Tokyo have installed antennas on their roofs to pick up the signals from these satellites. The dish-shaped parabola antennas measuring about two meters across are for the communication satellites, while the similarly shaped antennas with a diameter of about 50 centimeters are for the broadcasting satellites.

There is also another kind of parabola antenna which measures 2.5 meters in diameter, making it slightly larger than that for communication satellites, and whose dish is made of mesh rather than steel plating. These special antennas, which have become extremely popular in Japan recently, are used for catching television broadcasts relayed by the communication satellites of other countries. Hammers, an antenna sales and installation firm situated near JR Ishikawacho Station in Yokohama, began handling these antennas, developed in the United States, about five years ago.

At present there are 21 artificial satellites, including Japan's, floating in geostationary orbit above the equator, serving as relay stations for a total of 87 channels that transmit not only voice (telephone) but also moving images (television). Telstar and other satellites of the United States transmit movies to the cable television stations dotted around the country; Indonesia uses the Palapa satellite to relay the programs of its state-owned television station to Borneo and other outlying regions; and Russia and

the Arab countries use their Gorizont and Arabsat satellites, respectively, for similar purposes.

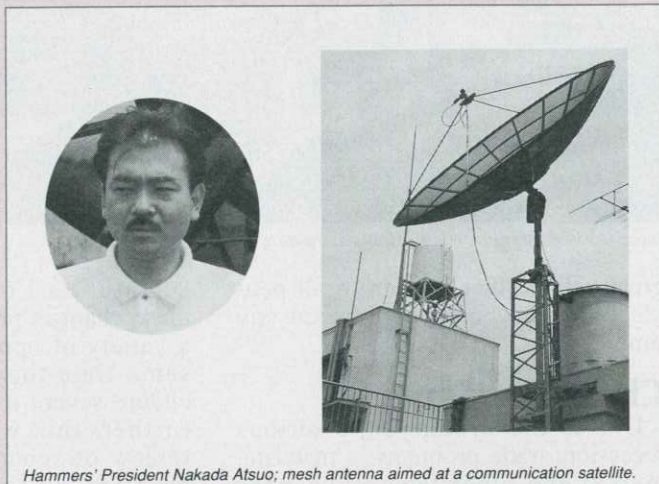
Three years ago China, in cooperation with Hong Kong and the British firm Cable and Wireless, launched the Asiasat broadcasting satellite, which covers an extensive area in Asia and Eurasia from Arabia to Siberia. In addition, television stations around the world use the Intelsat communications satellite to send news reports gathered in Asia to their headquarters in other regions.

According to Nakada Atsuo, the president of Hammers, it is possible to purchase the full set of antenna and tuner from the United States and other necessary equipment for about ¥500,000. About five years ago the same kind of satellite television receiving equipment, developed by a group of experts who previously were in charge of radio tapping for the Self-Defense Forces, cost ¥7 million.

With trading firms and other large enterprises wanting to know about coups d'état and the outbreak of war as soon as possible, universities wanting to incorporate programs in their foreign-language studies, and media organizations hoping to pinch scoops from others, the number of companies requesting Hammers for the antennas soon exceeded 50.

Previously, the law in Japan permitted people to watch foreign satellite television as long as they did so for their own benefit, but it was prohibited, for example, to rebroadcast these programs via cable television and charge reception fees, since this would amount to a copyright violation.

The newly formed coalition govern-



Hammers' President Nakada Atsuo; mesh antenna aimed at a communication satellite.

ment of Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro, however, has adopted a bold approach to deregulation. And as part of these efforts, Japan's Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications has altered its guidance policy to enable local cable television stations in Japan to pickup programs from foreign satellite television and transmit them to subscribing households.

Meanwhile, in another notable development, while Japan continues to use crackly shortwave radio, which is very difficult to catch, for its foreign broadcasts, China has started using television to transmit broadcasts about itself to other countries. The Posts and Telecommunications Ministry and others related to broadcasting in Japan previously looked down on China as a backward country in this field, so for China to have turned to television for its foreign broadcasts before Japan represents a real loss of face for the ministry. Jumping on the bandwagon of deregulation, the ministry at last has switched its policy to allow foreign broadcasts by television from next spring. It is probably true to say, therefore, that the U.S.-made antennas imported by Hammers have brought some administrative changes to Japan as well.

Ekusa Ato is a free-lance reporter based in Tokyo.