

## It's important to bust the pro-nuclear spin

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I am writing about the nuclear industry. It looks like a less important topic than those other massive preoccupations - climate change and the pandemic. Climate change is near to irreversible. The coronavirus is heading - who knows where? And - what other, possibly worse, viruses, are lurking threats to our species? It looks, on the face of it, that nuclear threats are less important - should take a back seat, could be solved later? But I think that the nuclear industry has a very special role in the dangerous cultural environment of human society at present.

As the human species struggles to understand and to cope with these global hazards, we are handicapped by a media, political, and social climate of so much spin and jargon. The spin and jargon work in the service of our prevailing culture, our belief in the necessity for endless growth and consumerism.

The pandemic has given us a taste of the possibilities, as the growth culture is now stalled. Not that this is a good thing, as it brings such suffering, and increased poverty to so many. Still, in some ways, it's good for the planet. And, it gives us time - to reflect, and even to contemplate that our human culture might head in a different direction, towards a *conservator* society.

Will we do this? National leaders, with some rare exceptions (New Zealand, Bhutan) sure do not show any hint of changing direction.

To get off this suicidal endless growth trolley requires a lot of facing facts, looking for what is true, rather than what is convenient. And this is a hard call for leaders in every field, and for everyone else. I would single out the media as the most important agency for this. It is perilous for us all, that we now have so few journalists who cut through the foggy releases of governments and vested interests, to unearth and to communicate the facts. Today, we have an example of what can happen to a journalist who reveals inconvenient facts, as the long saga of Julian Assange's extradition goes on. A similar saga happened decades ago, in the case of Wilfred Burchett, who was persecuted for reporting on the effects of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

We need the Burchetts and the Assanges, and many, many, less dramatic narrators, to investigate, explain, clarify, the ways in which we are committing ecological suicide, and what we can do to reverse this.

So, cutting through the spin, where do we start? The reason that I start with the nuclear industry is that it is utterly symbolic of the lies, the deceptions, that prop up the polluting industries that are ruining the natural world on which we depend.

It is the most dangerous arena of industry lying because its proponents have very successfully put across the idea that only the "experts" those with technical knowledge of nuclear physics, can have a valid opinion. I think that's why journalists world-wide are content to simply regurgitate industry handouts as "news" - often as an excited recitation of a sequence of technical procedures, with detailed technical illustrations. The only bit that is easily understood is the bit where they'll say that nuclear power is "zero-carbon" "essential to combat climate change". But is that bit true?

Any doubt about nuclear power fixing climate change is not explored, because, after all, the society at large, including the journalists, do not understand nuclear physics. They might know a bit about history, ecology, biology, radiation effects, sociology, economics, indigenous rights, conflict resolution, - but hey, that's all *soft* stuff and doesn't matter.

The lying began with the very conception of the nuclear monster. First, the idea that it's OK for war attacks to focus on massacring civilians - this reached its greatest acceptance with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Then came that first big factual lie, that this bombing was necessary to end the war. This comfortable belief has been refuted by many

recent studies that indicate that the real motive was to intimidate the Russians and that Japan was already set to surrender, anyway. The persecution of Wilfred Burchett, and the suppression of his reporting, set off the deception that the effects of ionizing radiation are not all that bad, really.

The next lie, again a very comforting belief, is that this new horror could be turned into something really good - nuclear reactors, safe, cheap, electricity - a peaceful purpose.

It was never safe. You just ignore the cancers among the uranium mining communities, and nuclear workers. You ignore the many radiological and nuclear accidents and messes, even the big ones - Chalk River, Rocky Flats, Windscale, Soviet ice-breaker Lenin, Mayak, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, Tomsk, Hanford, Fukushima. The risk of terrorism, using nuclear materials, is ever-present.

It was never cheap. You just ignore the costs of the health and environmental damage due to uranium mining, and to the many accidents. The insurance industry understands this, which is why laws like the Price Anderson Act are there, to make sure that the tax-payer cops the costs of nuclear accidents. You just don't count the costs of disposing of the virtually eternal radioactive wastes, including dead reactors, and the necessary security involved

It was never peaceful. The prime purpose of nuclear reactors was to produce that novel element - plutonium, for nuclear weapons. Every country that now has nuclear weapons began that process by getting "peaceful" nuclear power. We must wonder why Gulf states like Saudi Arabia, with abundant oil and sunshine resources, are so keen to get nuclear power. Today, the nuclear industry no longer makes the pretense that there is no connection between commercial and military reactors. and indeed, calls for government subsidy because of its role in national security. It is particularly worrying that the media enthuses over space research, while the USA and other nuclear nations are planning for nuclear-powered weapons in space.

When it comes to global heating, it's a terrible shame that the media keeps on buying the nuclear deception about this. Even if nuclear power were "zero-carbon" - there would have to be thousands of reactors, (millions of small ones) operating very quickly, to have any effect. But global heating is happening too fast for that. "Zero carbon" is also nonsense when you consider the whole nuclear fuel chain - those many operations that go on from uranium mining through to the building and operation of nuclear waste dumps.

Nuclear medicine is becoming somewhat of a fig leaf on the industry. It still has its role. But, non-nuclear technologies - cyclotrons are coming into operation, and produce the medical radioisotopes far more conveniently, and near hospitals, close to the point of use.

The nuclear lobby's most questionable deception, which was shown in its glossy propaganda film "Pandora's Promise", is that the world needs endless energy use, for the world's expanding human population. Indeed, we learn that nuclear is needed to set up colonies on Mars when we've mucked up this planet. Not that the nuclear lobby is the only one advocating endless energy use. Some renewable energy advocates have this same idea. It's an idea tied to our mistaken culture of growth.

During this period of pandemic economic paralysis, and despite all the suffering, many people have the chance to reflect on the world's rather perilous situation. Many citizen scientists, citizen journalists, are asking the necessary questions. We need to be aware, to bust through, the vested interests, the jargon, the lies, that keep us hooked to the growth paradigm. There is no better spin bubble to bust than the nuclear one.

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*The [MAHB Blog](#) is a venture of the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to [joan@mahbonline.org](mailto:joan@mahbonline.org)*