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CNN Doubles Down on Pro-Nuclear Bias – Answers Petitions, Critics, with More Slanted Commentary

By FAIR
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NRDC's Dale Bryk provides the only voice of skepticism on CNN's nuclear roundtable following the network's airing of pro-nuke documentary Pandora's Promise.

CNN aired the pro-nuclear power film*Pandora's Promise* on November 7. The film was little more than propaganda (FAIR Action Alert, 10/25/13), brooking virtually no dissent from the views of the film's seven principal "stars"–one-time anti-nuclear environmentalists who now say the planet can only be saved from the ravages of fossil fuels by a rapid, large-scale investment in new, supposedly fail-safe "fast reactors."

In advance of the airing, FAIR and RootsAction presented **CNN** with a petition signed by over 27,000 activists, demanding the news network present a more balanced discussion of the issue. How did **CNN** respond? By compounding the bias with a post-show roundtable,*Nuclear Power: The Fallout From Fear*, that featured a panel just as slanted as its title.

Moderated by **CNN**'s Anderson Cooper, the panel was stacked three to one in favor of the film's premise. Dale Bryk of the Natural Resources Defense Council, the lone anti-nuclear voice, was outnumbered by the film's director, Robert Stone, climate scientist James Hansen and former nuclear plant operator Michael Friedlander. During the panel, Bryk had her remarks ridiculed as "silly" by Hansen and "delusional" by Stone, with no objection from Cooper, who seemed at times to play the role of a fourth pro-nuclear panelist. At one point he confronted Bryk on the role of renewables by parroting the film's line that "alternative solutions like solar, wind…will never be a real solution."

At another point, Cooper asked the filmmaker a leading question that suggested nuclear power has been remarkably safe: "Can you point to how many people have died from–I mean, Three Mile Island, nobody died. Emergency procedures there worked, correct?"

Cooper's language could have come straight from any number of past corporate media whitewashings of nuclear power dangers. For instance, **NBC**'s 1993 broadcast *What Happened?* (3/16/93) concluded that "the system worked" at Three Mile Island–that aside from some "communications" issues, people near the Pennsylvania plant were happily living their lives years after the 1979 partial meltdown there (**Extra!**, 7/1/93).

Three Mile Island had resulted in only a “a minor release” of radiation, agreed Stone, adding that, in the US, “not a single death has occurred from commercial nuclear power in the entire 50-year history.”

Later, Stone said of the Fukushima accident: “Nobody has died, nobody has gotten sick, and according to the best science in the World Health Organization, nobody ever will.” What WHO (2/28/13) actually says is that “the estimated risk for specific cancers in certain subsets of the population in Fukushima Prefecture has increased,” and that one-third of the emergency workers at the plant have an increased cancer risk.

When FAIR asked epidemiologist Steven Wing of the University of North Carolina’s School of Public Health to comment on Stone’s claims, he acknowledged that no deaths had resulted immediately from acute radiation poisoning at Three Mile Island or Fukushima, but that longer-term cancers caused by radiation were a different story:

The cancers from the TMI accident were measured through a survey of hospital records which showed that leukemia incidence was 6.9 times higher during 1981-85 in the area most affected by radioactive plumes compared to the least affected areas. In Fukushima, the cancers will occur in the future and can be estimated based on people’s radiation doses and the knowledge that there is no threshold below which radiation doesn’t cause cancer. This is the same way we estimate cancers from smoking, asbestos or other carcinogens.

Wing added that even nuclear power plants running under normal conditions are not necessarily safe:

For routinely operating reactors, excess childhood cancer has been demonstrated in several European studies, although no comparable study has been conducted in the USA.

The role of renewables in planning a cleaner and safer energy future was disparaged by everyone on the panel except NRDC’s Bryk. The same was true of virtually everyone who appeared in the film for more than a few moments. (The few dissenting voices heard in the film–e.g., Helen Caldicott, Ralph Nader–were little more than props, providing brief soundbites stating supposed myths, which were then ridiculed at length by the film’s principal players.)

Such a position can only be sustained by excluding leading authorities on renewables, like electrical and nuclear engineer Arjun Makhijani, the president of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research, who says:

A zero-CO2 US economy can be achieved within the next 30 to 50 years without the use of nuclear power. The US renewable energy resource base is vast and practically untapped. Available wind energy resources in 12 Midwestern and Rocky Mountain states equal about

2.5 times the entire electricity production of the United States. Given that we can satisfy our electricity needs by harnessing only 40 percent of the wind energy resources in these 12 states, it is extremely likely that we will be able to do away with CO2.

Edwin Lyman, a physicist and senior scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists, says that the kind of reactor touted in *Pandora's Promise* isn't the fail-safe technology flogged in the film, and isn't fully designed or ready for commercial use. No one like Lyman appears in the film, and **CNN** didn't include him in the panel either; they did permit him a column on **CNN.com** (11/7/13), where he charges Stone with promoting "numerous half-truths and less-than-half-truths":

Like the story of Pandora itself, the tale of the integral fast reactor (IFR)–or at least the version presented in the movie–is more myth than reality. In the final assessment, the concept's drawbacks greatly outweighed its advantages. The government had sound reasons to stanch the flow of taxpayer dollars to a costly, flawed project that also was undermining US efforts to reduce the risks of nuclear terrorism and proliferation around the world.

Lyman pointed out that the fast reactor, even when fully developed, would produce more nuclear waste, not less, as claimed in the film. "Stone did not include anyone in the film who could have provided a more balanced and realistic assessment" of the fast reactor, Lyman said–which could be said of **CNN**'s discussion of nuclear power in general.

Considering the bias of **CNN**'s documentary, it's unsurprising to find that two of its chief funders are billionaire boosters of nuclear energy. Virgin's Richard Branson, who with US nuclear industry officials proposed a meeting with President Obama and then-Energy Secretary Steven Chu to lobby for IFR nuclear technology, is listed as the film's executive producer. Branson claimed at the time not to have any direct financial interest in nuclear power.

The film's other billionaire funder, Microsoft founder Paul Allen, is an investor in "advanced nuclear technologies," according to the website of his venture capital firm, Vulcan Inc.

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