# (Un)Clear Futures: The Media's Influence on Public Perception of Nuclear Energy

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### Abstract

This research investigates the role of media in shaping public opinion on nuclear energy and its implications for societal perceptions. Mainstream cinema has long associated the nuclear field with danger and tragedy, failing to showcase a balanced perspective. Furthermore, the media discourse has often neglected to highlight the peaceful applications of nuclear energy in various sectors such as health, agriculture, food, environment, and water resources, which directly contribute to Sustainable Development Goals. Nuclear energy, with its low greenhouse gas emissions and reliable power generation, can play a role in mitigating climate change. However, challenges such as radioactive waste management and the risk of accidents must be addressed to ensure its environmental impact is minimized.

This research argues that media discourse has created a catastrophic framework involving nuclear energy that overlooks the dualism of its effects. Movies like The Day After (1983) and Threads (1984) have amplified the narrative of nuclear disasters as uncontrollable and catastrophic events, contributing to a predominantly negative public outlook. In contrast, productions such as Atomic Attack (1954) and Chernobyl 1986 (2021) have attempted to present similar occurrences in a more practical and informative manner. Oliver Stone's new movie, Nuclear Now (2022), presents a case for the beneficial potential of nuclear energy in addressing climate change and challenges the fear-based narrative surrounding it. By exploring the media's impact on public perception, this research aims to shed light on the need for a more balanced and informed discourse on nuclear energy, emphasizing its potential for sustainable development. Understanding the media's influence is crucial in fostering a more nuanced understanding of nuclear power and facilitating a shift in public perception towards its peaceful and sustainable applications.

**Keywords**: Media discourse, public perception, nuclear energy, sustainable development, cinema and popular culture

In the transition from nuclear (adjective) to *nuke* (verb), the world has accepted the presence of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) as it slowly seeps into our consciousness through politics, media, pop culture, etc. However, nuclear power

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#### JOURNAL OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH Vidyasagar University, Midnapore-721102, WB Volume 18, 2025 DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.62424/JDE.2025.18.00.07

has always been torn apart in representation between the dichotomy of energy and weaponry which has remained consistent since its discovery, utility, and propagation. But where do the average taxpaver, educated citizenry, and the youth position themselves on this matter? This dichotomy has always been bent on the adverse effects and the annihilating use to induce fear and panic among the citizens contemplating an imaginary situation in the future. Not denying its power to cause destruction and wiping the entire human race, the population has been diverted from its capacity for growth, progress, and sustainability in diverse fields. The public discourse remains uninformed on nuclear energy generating electricity, removing salination, and reducing CO<sup>2</sup> emissions. Russia is an exporter of civilianused nuclear energy as a part of its economic policy and India is its largest customer. The Indo-Russian Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant in Tamil Nadu is an intergovernmental nuclear power plant project implemented in 1998. According to recent reports, two units of the powerplant have been able to deliver 100 billion (kilowatt-hour) units of power making it possible to save emissions of about 16 million tons of carbon dioxide annually, and in 10 years it has improved the quality of life, providing electricity to about 50 million Indian families in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The Russian Nuclear Power Agency, Rosatom, plans to expand the project to six units based on the successful operation of the first two units for ten years ("Indo-Russian Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant"). The Russian state-owned nuclear power company has offered India technology for building and operating floating "low power" nuclear power generation projects. Russia operates the world's only floating nuclear power plant, onboard the ship Akademic Lomonosov, stationed at the Arctic port of Pevek. Floating Nuclear Power Projects are different since they will produce low-carbon power and heat for different applications including, district heating, desalination, and hydrogen production (Ramesh). Russia and China's joint venture to launch a nuclear power plant on the moon is a progressive step in space exploration. Aimed at establishing a robotic lunar base capable of remote operation, harnessing nuclear technology can eventually open doors to greater scientific advancements and technology ("Russia Begins Developing Nuclear Power Plant"). Nuclear propulsion and power sources could make long-distance space travel and deep-space exploration more feasible, opening up new frontiers for human knowledge and discovery when advanced countries capitalize on nuclear energy that could benefit humanity. While these developments are public and reinforced into public consciousness from time to time through various reports and channels, less has been addressed about the imminent threat that looms over nuclear sites and power plants. The cyber-attack on the same Kudankulam Plant in 2019 through computer malware raised concerns about the vulnerability of nuclear information in cyberspace. A large amount of data was hacked from the plant's administrative network putting the power plant at a higher risk of serious damage if another attack were to occur because the threat actors would know where the critical systems of the power plant were located (Wall). Prioritizing Information Security is crucial and similar to safeguarding

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critical infrastructure from physical harm which requires awareness and intelligence for developing nations with access to nuclear power.

The utility of atomic power remains questionable but its *representation* should be unbiased and sincere aiming to present the true form of this growing phenomenon. An evidence-based assessment is essential in enabling citizens to develop a nuanced understanding of this emerging energy source as it continues to evolve and impact mass consciousness. Media has the advantage of reaching and influencing a layman's perception of such complex issues, but its dissemination requires *transparency, accountability*, and *clarity* in the delineation of news and opinion. In 1953 US President, Mr. Dwight D. Eisenhower delivered his famous speech to the assembly on "Atoms for Peace" which became a turning point in history when he addressed his averseness to this new language– "the language of atomic warfare". Eisenhower negates the idea of monopoly over such power when it is shared by "friends and allies" and has the possibility of "surprise aggression" in the future. He further proposed the formation of the International Atomic Energy Agency under the guidance of the UN which shall adapt it to the arts of peace.

The more important responsibility of this atomic energy agency would be to devise methods whereby this fissionable material would be allocated to serve the peaceful pursuits of mankind. Experts would be mobilized to apply atomic energy to the needs of agriculture, medicine and other peaceful activities. A special purpose would be to provide abundant electrical energy in the power-starved areas of the world. Thus, the contributing Powers would be dedicating some of their strength to serve the needs rather than the fears of mankind. ("Atoms for Peace Speech")

His primary agenda was to diminish the destructive power and encourage human aspirations negating using atomic energy for war and resolving the "fearful atomic dilemma" through the "miraculous inventiveness of man" carving hope and progress. His speech unfolds three key facets of managing the Atoms of War: governance, public domain, and most importantly, *transformative* strategies. Reinforcing these values and ideals should be a criterion for presenting nuclear technology on the world stage that induces peace and development rather than fear and insecurity.

The media-focused nuclear discourse has created a catastrophic framework of language, images, and schemes that fails to promote the dualism of its effects. Cinema and television shows have portrayed nuclear capacity with a superficial blend of fiction and gothic elements. The emergence of pre-historic creatures in popular culture such as *Godzilla/Gojira* revived by nuclear radiation adds to the phenomenon of nuclear energy occupying a noteworthy position in cinematic discourse. While cinema has long associated the nuclear field with danger and tragedy, there is a lack of depiction of the positive effects of nuclear energy in mainstream cinema. This biased portrayal has contributed to an apocalyptic and ominous aura surrounding nuclear disasters presenting a post-nuclear society as

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dystopic and catastrophic. However, modern-day cinema has reduced the seriousness of nuclear calamities to mere gimmicks of saving the world scenarios. Based on the book A Bright Future by Joshua S. Goldstein and Staffan A. Qvist, Oliver Stone's documentary Nuclear Now claims to make a passionate case that this energy landscape is a necessary and obvious solution to climate change. Stone asserts that the beneficial potential of atomic energy has not been reached because the conflation of societal apprehension towards nuclear bombs with nuclear energy has been perpetuated by the long-standing anti-nuclear agenda advocated by environmentalists over generations. The documentary makes a detailed analysis by focusing on the trajectory of nuclear history through its projection in films, controversial environmental protests, and a debate on why it is the ideal substitute for coal and oil. The documentary explores market competition in the energy sector and the perceived threat of nuclear energy to oil companies. Filmmaker Oliver Stone interviews Rod Adams, a former U.S. nuclear submarine engineer officer and the founder of Adams Atomic Engines, Inc. as well as the Atomic Insights platform on nuclear-related conspiracies. The interview probes into giant oil companies known as the Seven Sisters which refused to accept the nuclear alternative as it posed a mortal threat to their business. Substituting fossil fuels with clean sustainable energy seemed like an end for these industries and from here began the tussle for dominance in the energy market. John D. Rockefeller, the wealthiest business tycoon in the oil industry and the founding father of The Rockefeller Foundation established in 1913, a philanthropic organization dedicated to medical research declared that "low-level radiation is harmful to human health". They set up a committee to study the Biological Effects of Atomic Radiation with Warren Weaver the head of the genetics committee and one of the directors of the foundation. On June 12th, 1956, the report from the Genetics Committee declared that "radiation all the way down to a single gamma ray was hazardous to your health". The foundation published this decisive point in the newspapers without any evidence to justify the conclusion, as the documentary claims, challenging the growing optimism of this new industry ("Nuclear Now" 00:28:03-00:28:51). Interestingly, John D. Rockefeller's company, Standard Oil was subjected to severe contempt and scrutiny for "unlawful monopoly". Political dialogue of that era labelled the company policies as *ruthless* illustrating it as a "horrible monster". In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt's administration took legal action against Standard Oil alleging that the company was conspiring to restrain trade. In 1911, after several years of litigation, the Supreme Court ordered the company to break up ("Political Cartoons and Standard Oil"). Ironically, the 107-year-old company in 2020 announced its divestment of \$5 billion endowment from fossil fuels and refrained from any future investments in the sector. Recognized as a philanthropic organization, the foundation plans to invest in cleaner energy like solar power ensuring an equitable and sustainable future to uplift humanity. "The biggest project in that commitment strives to bring solar energy to rural families in India cut off from the electric grid" (Egan).

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Stone, through interviews, in the documentary sheds light on market stratagems that contributed to fabricating the reputation of nuclear power for civilian use. Apart from the Rockefeller Foundation, another organization, the Sierra Club has changed its stance on nuclear energy over the decades. Founded in 1892 and based in the United States, the organization is dedicated to protecting the earth's wild places promoting the responsible use of the earth's ecosystems and resources; and restoring the quality of the natural and human environment ("About the Sierra Club"). The Club remains "unequivocally opposed to nuclear energy" emphasizing that it is not the "solution to Climate Change and every dollar spent on nuclear is one less dollar spent on truly safe, affordable and renewable energy sources" ("Nuclear Free Future"). It vouches for solar, wind, geothermal, and electrical storage energy as the proponents of a clean energy economy voicing consciousness and awareness against environmental injustice. Though the Club's activism is commendable, its criticisms of nuclear energy are confined solely to nuclear disasters and accidents on its website propagating adverse media to develop a partial and discriminatory prospect influencing the public mindset. Embodying a holistic perspective on the web can help netizens form a fair point of view on the matter. In 2022 Germany decided to move from nuclear energy to a more reliable and renewable resource by investing in solar and wind power. It installed 456 thousand solar panels on 500 acres and has invested \$200 billion in renewables but remains the highest contributor to CO<sup>2</sup> emissions in Europe ("Nuclear Now" 00:57:01-01:01:03). There have been progressions like the Kudankulam Power Plant and deep-space explorations, as previously noted, which have contributed positively in different areas of development. Online-based environmental organizations should adopt an objective approach to inform and guide their readers and not decide what is ideal for them. When the main priority is environmental preservation, why do obstacles arise in creating mutual understanding and reciprocal actions? The absence of sunlight will render solar panels ineffective; wind energy is weather and location-dependent and requires enough space compared to nuclear reactors which can operate even from underwater submarines. Their availability, cost, transportation, and utility are selfexplanatory factors underlining their relevance despite being non-renewable. This tug-of-war between industries and organizations to find the cleanest renewable energy resource will only hinder the attempts to find a *stable* source of sustenance. The documentary asserts the indisputable truth that coal causes half a million premature deaths every year from cancer, emphysema, and lung diseases. Fossil fuels are the main source of air pollution and greenhouse gases causing more deaths yearly.

Death rates per unit of electricity production are measured based on deaths from accidents and air pollution per terawatt-hour of electricity, and according to the IAEA report published in 2022 on average, coal leads to 32.7 deaths per unit of electricity production, indicating that human health impact associated with coalgenerated electricity. Nuclear energy remains at the bottom with an average of 0.03 and solar energy retains the safest with 0.02 deaths per unit of electricity production

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("Infographic"). Such data provides a factual and graphical representation of the safety and utilization of energy resources where nuclear energy occupies a safe space however its permanency shouldn't be awarded the benefit of the doubt. The Chernobyl disaster in Ukraine in 1986, and Fukushima in Japan in 2011 are the largest nuclear accidents in history; and the only disasters to receive a level 7 (the maximum classification) on the International Nuclear Event Scale. A death toll of 433 from Chernobyl and 2,314 from Fukushima is estimated by sources but reaching a consensus remains debatable (Ritchie and Roser). The plausible deaths cannot be confirmed because of the radiation exposure that would follow eventually. Nuclear Now acknowledges the severity of nuclear incidents yet seeks to mitigate the repercussions of nuclear disasters by juxtaposing them with other catastrophic occurrences. This comparative framing with *deadly* industrial tragedies like the Bhopal Gas Tragedy of 1984 of India and the collapse of the Banqiao hydroelectric dam in China in 1975 along with deaths from outdoor air pollution suggests an effort to relativize and potentially minimize the significant impacts of nuclear accidents in question, implying that their consequences were not as severe as these other major catastrophes (00:38:30-00:40:03). Comparing nuclear fatalities with deaths caused by fossil fuels just to deliberately conclude that nuclear energy is safer because it has resulted in lesser death tolls is insensible and illogical.

Mainstream popular cinema representing nuclear warfare is categorized under various sections namely: nuclear holocaust, nuclear apocalypse, disasterhorror, scientific action, and atomic bomb movies. Cinema has tried to narrate and present a post-nuclear scenario to the audience in an attempt to capture the interest and attention of the devastating use of nuclear warheads but has become repetitive in the process. Directors try to capitalize on factors like chaos, anxiety, and pain to induce fear and revulsion persuading that such a situation must be averted at any cost. Why cannot modern films inspire or inform people about the positive consequences of using nuclear energy? Documentaries lack popularity among the population and are confined to a class and intelligentsia. The film *The Day After*, released in 1983 is considered one of the landmarks in this genre that led to a public dialogue on nuclear weapons.

President Ronald Reagan wrote in his diary of being "greatly depressed" by the film. After signing a nuclear-non-proliferation treaty a few years later, he sent a telegram to the director saying: "Don't think your movie didn't have any part of this, because it did." (Mondello)

*The Day After* directed by Oscar nominee Nicholas Meyer and released in 1983 postulates a fictional nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. The film portrays Kansas engulfed in a nuclear winter and unfolds the changes in the environment and human lives to the brink of insanity and hopelessness. The Cold War, in cinema, gave rise to the backdrop of East vs West maintaining a state of political tension and unrest that might culminate into a possible nuclear war. Such films present the world before the attack as peaceful and ecstatic to contradict

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it later with images of death and suffering. This shift in narrative portrayal is necessary to create a transition in the perception of the audience, moving from the initially depicted amiability towards the subsequent extremity. The Day After brings to light one eminent scenario that has become a cult area for many postapocalyptic movies-nuclear fallout. Fallout denotes explosion and radioactive contamination of the environment that leads to dust and smoke blocking the sunlight, temperature fall, etc. The success of such cinema depends mainly on the visual impact and the sound effects employed to simulate realistic scenarios. Sirens, human screams, and exploding sound effects in the background accompanied visually by ash-laden fields, bodies buried in rubble, disfigured faces, and human figures with boils, sores, and hair loss are common images projected in the storytelling. The film signals an EMP (Electro Magnetic Impulse), an electrical disruption created by an outburst of a nuclear device which renders all machines ineffective. Followed by images of stranded cars, and empty highways, all characters are exposed to 50 rads (radiation) per hour with some finding shelter in underground bunkers losing sense of time. The fallout remains a crucial aspect in cinema to highlight the horrifying experiences and consequences of nuclear war. Subsequently, it has become a popular action genre with recent movies and television series like Mad Max (1979) and Fallout (2024). The Day After demonstrates "post-traumatic stress disorder", another significant critical aspect of nuclear warfare that continues to exist in society. The film tackles the idea of evacuation and displacement that escalates the trauma of the disaster exemplifying not just loss of home but also loss of land and livelihood. The effects of radiation on livestock and agriculture with the futile prospect of harvest are some important issues the film underscores. The stress and anxiety experienced by survivors lead to the disintegration of social institutions and human values where humanity is challenged in a post-apocalyptic world. Threads (1984), produced by BBC and written by Barry Hines, is a contemporary counterpart to The Day After in portraying nuclear devastation. Positioned in Sheffield, England, the dystopian drama was a *reality shock* for its viewers with gruesome graphic details. Projecting the same sequence of events in order, the movie scripts the journey of a motherdaughter relationship through the nuclear winter keeping intact the sentimental quotient and amplifying the brutality and violence that succeed after such an attack. The film projects tyranny of the government resorting to violence to control the civil unrest. Made during the Cold War paranoia, it is considered by many to be a realistic portrayal in case of a nuclear impact. The film embraces a step-by-step display of screen captions mentioning a chain of events that followed sequentially. The film shows the worst-case scenario where humans are eating meat from dead animal carcasses, rape and looting. Characters in such movies are unable to recover from the grief and damage caused both at personal and social levels and can be seen questioning the purpose of religion in particular scenes. The absence of unity, order, and resources to feed the survivors ultimately results in violence among the survivors causing more unrest. Fictional in form and approach, films dedicated to this genre use trauma to exhibit changes in human nature on-screen

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and provoke sentiments in the audience off-screen. The primary motive of antinuclear movies is ethical and humanitarian without a doubt but sentimentalizing the issue is not as effective as educating the masses.

Understanding radiation becomes difficult when executed as an emotional factor rather than a scientific one. Atomic Attack is a classic example of how a movie encapsulating a nuclear agenda need not be pro or anti-nuclear but can be an attempt to extend knowledge on the subject in case of a breakout. Directed by Ralph Nelson and released in 1954, the film presents morality, anxiety, and fear realistically without overdramatization and dictates how to comprehend and overcome such a situation through cinema. The events of the film take place inside a household, akin to kitchen sink drama, in the Westchester suburb and demonstrate the confusion and anxiousness within a family setup when an atomic bomb hits New York. A plot that centers around ten days from the bombing, identifying radiation and radiation sickness remains the primary target of the film. But the severity and capability of understanding its effects is well projected with the help of child actors, Barabara and Ginny, the young siblings in the film. The constant fear of being infected by the two girls and their knowledge about the symptoms and consequences is informative and encouraging at the same time. In The Day After, Joleene, the middle daughter of the Dahlbergs asks her father, "What is radiation?" The responsibility to instruct and be aware is equally important in such films for the knowledge of young minds who consume them with curiosity and interest. Her question remains unanswered much in contrast to the young girls of the Mitchell family in the Atomic Attack. "You can't see it; you can't feel it and you can't taste it but it's here right now all around us. It's going through you like an X-ray right into your cells" (01:22:50-01:23:03). This dialogue in The Day After is capable of creating a dramatic effect but incapable of any explanation, a common trend in such mainstream cinemas. In Atomic Attack, Dr. Spinelli (Walter Matthau) informs Gladys Mitchell (Phyllis Thaxter), the mother of the two siblings, that the radiation shall "destroy the bone marrow and stop the production of blood cells", the cause being exposure to radioactive rain. The Geiger counter is used early in the film to identify radiation in the characters indicating the Mitchell family to be radiation-free. The film's approach to educating and informing the audience about Geiger's reading, nuclear radiation, and radioactive rain is the progressive take that modern or commercial cinema lacks. As the plot continues Ginny, the younger daughter displays signs of radiation syndrome with symptoms of hair loss and decreased appetite despite being safe from the radioactive rain. This highlights the significance of exposure to radioactive substances and their lethality as Ginny becomes contaminated through her toy horse which absorbs radioactive particles from the radioactive rain. "They're the same as any other boil", Dr. Spinelli utters these words as he refuses to distinguish Ginny's wounds as fatal. The film presents skin disfigurements such as sores, scars, and boils as typical symptoms without sensationalizing their appearance thus normalizing them. The Day After and Threads presents the atomic aftermath differently, adopting imaginative futures with unanswered questions devoid of hope and humanity. In contrast, Atomic

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*Attack* presents a future that can be refigured with the help of medical science, knowledge, and nurture.

Distinct differences between documentaries and films set the tone of authenticity and actuality of events delineating the seriousness and perception of the audience. While most movies on nuclear disasters exaggerate the outcome, very few would dive deep and unravel certain incidents that remain in the dark from the public discourse. One such movie belonging to the genre is Chernobyl: Abyss a Russian film released in 2021 translated in English as Chernobyl 1986 on virtual streaming platforms. Rather than focusing on the failure of the Soviet Union to contain the damage which had become a common theme, the film focuses on the liquidators, the civil and military personnel who assisted in evacuation and preventing the fire from spreading to nearby areas. Danila Kozlovsky, director and actor in the film is one of the three liquidators who had to return to the radiationcontaminated sight to drain water from the bottom of the damaged reactor before the nuclear fuel reaches it and causes another radiated steam explosion in the air. Men during that disaster were trained to dive underwater to find the sluice gates, with water boiling at 130 degrees, but after passing again through contaminated zones. Protected only by diving gear, flashlights, and respirators the Soviet government promised them significant social and professional benefits. Such films can provide another perspective of courage and valor in such times and must be addressed to unveil the entirety of the disaster and how it was curbed. Reimagining the Chernobyl disaster on screen is a reminder of what had happened but overlooking the efforts and sacrifices made by the liquidators manipulates the full discourse of the event. Movies like The Atomic Attack and Chernobyl 1986 focus on human lives entangled in disasters but also instruct how to perceive and intercept such crises without intensifying adversity beyond measure and control. A balanced outlook should integrate scientific evidence, economic factors, environmental impacts, and social implications to guide public discourse and decision-making processes in understanding the multifaceted nature of this energy source. The only possible solution to overcome this confusion and tension is through collaboration between the government and academic institutions aiming at communication and awareness associated with this topic. Utilizing a digital archive of films, documentaries, and videos on "historical nuclear energy" that showcase the constructive use of nuclear power for innovative purposes in diverse fields may contribute to a more nuanced public understanding. Such films are designed for students in schools and colleges to educate them about radiation, nuclear power in space, and the creation of new materials through the peaceful application of nuclear energy (Touran). Implementing creative educational initiatives to raise awareness among young audiences can help educate an entire nation about its potential implications. This educational strategy can address the prevailing stigma around nuclear technology enabling its fair consideration as part of the evolving energy ecosystem.

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