



# Effective Communication: Key to Public Acceptance of Nuclear Energy

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In June 2019, HBO in association with Sky UK came out with a five part mini-series on one of the deadliest accidents in history: the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986. In a couple of days the series topped IMDB's rank, achieving 9.6 rating out of 10 by viewers, surpassing all time famous shows like "The Game of Thrones".<sup>1</sup> The popularity of the series, also triggered more public discussions about nuclear energy. As history has evinced, popular culture goes a long way in influencing people. This series similarly has rekindled concerns about nuclear safety among netizens. The creator of the series, Craig Maizin, has asserted that the show was not critical of nuclear power but that of misadministration and perverse corruption in Soviet Ukraine. Responding to the misjudgement of the intent of the message of the show, he tweeted: "...The lesson of Chernobyl isn't that modern nuclear power is dangerous. The lesson is that lying, arrogance and suppression of criticism is dangerous. The flaws that led to

*Chernobyl are the same flaws shown by climate change deniers today".<sup>2</sup>*

However, regardless of the intent, anti-nuclear lobbyists and activists have been citing the series to demonstrate the dangers posed by nuclear energy. This is not the first time movies have influenced the course of nuclear power. In the case of South Korea, which has an advanced nuclear energy programme, public paranoia was witnessed after the Fukushima nuclear disaster and due to the revelation of corruption in South Korea's nuclear industry. In addition, a fictional movie called "Pandora" revolving around a nuclear accident exacerbated the public mood further.<sup>3</sup> In 2011 President Moon Jae-in won the election with his promise of gradually phasing out nuclear energy. Within a couple of months of taking power he started developing policies to further these promises.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, an American movie called "The China Syndrome", released in 1979 led to a sense of fear around nuclear energy. Based in the United States, the movie has

nothing to do with China. The term “China Syndrome”, in fact, refers to a nuclear meltdown that would melt “all the way to China”. This movie too increased public concerns with regard to nuclear energy and anti-nuclear protests were strengthened.

Clearly one of the biggest challenges to nuclear industry is public confidence. Unfortunately, the key images linked to the word “nuclear” are those of Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings and the Chernobyl and Fukushima accidents. This burden of history challenges the creation of credible narratives for safe and effective nuclear power projects. Among the 32 countries that have nuclear power plants, seven of them have decided to phase out nuclear energy. Among other reasons, the most common one for these countries to do away with nuclear energy has been due to public disapproval of nuclear power projects. In this regard, gaining public trust and support is of paramount importance. This would not only require a comprehensive strategy to communicate the necessity behind promoting nuclear power projects, but also assuring safety to the public.

In the case of India which is looking for cleaner and sustainable sources of electricity to feed its growing economy, nuclear energy is an important component of its energy basket. Furthermore, the low carbon footprint of nuclear power adds to its appeal as a clean and environmentally friendly source of energy. The accident at Fukushima obviously had its impact

on Indian public minds also, even though the nuclear accident caused no casualties whereas the earthquake and tsunami led to the unfortunate death of over 18,000 people.<sup>5</sup> To address all concerns, India thoroughly reviewed the operation of all its nuclear power plants and took measures to enhance the safety aspect. However, recognising the importance of nuclear energy, the government remained committed to its civil nuclear programme.

Earlier this year, at the International Atom Expo in Russia, Mr. KN Vyas, the Secretary, Department of Atomic Energy and Chairman, Atomic Energy Commission, said that India will be getting 12 more nuclear power stations soon.<sup>6</sup> While government support for nuclear energy is strong, public acceptance remains a challenge. Resistance movements have taken place because of the development of the Jaitapur nuclear power project and the Kundankulam nuclear power project for various reasons including land acquisition issues, safety concerns, contamination of marine life and resulting loss of jobs among the others. Even the state government of West Bengal has denied approval to complete nuclear reactors. In addition, a Public Interest litigation (PIB) has also been filed against the Indian governments civil nuclear programme. Clashes between the protestors and the police and paramilitary forces have turned violent in many occasions too.<sup>7</sup>

In this context, communication to the public and careful and peaceful management of

protests needs to be a priority for the government. Nuclear issues tend to be dealt with an exclusive and restricted manner and are usually shrouded in secrecy. This adds to the public fear because of ignorance and lack of proper understanding. There is a need for more public debates, since the only way to gain public support would be through education, awareness and discussions. The state needs to ensure more transparency to pacify safety apprehensions. Better management of legit concerns regarding land acquisition and environmental issues also needs to be dealt with responsibly to gain credibility and garner support. Towards this end, this year on June 19, 2019 the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited conducted an exhibition to educate children about the benefits and safety aspects of nuclear power. They spoke about the mounting energy demands, the cost benefits of nuclear energy and the safety precautions undertaken. Many more such efforts is needed across the country. The public awareness division of DAE could join hands with think tanks, academics institutions and other like-minded organisations.

Considering that, nuclear energy is the answer for more reliable electricity and to protect our planet from a hotter and more dangerous world, an effective perception management and communication strategy could go a long way in clarifying the concerns that people have and help in promoting the development of nuclear energy. This proves the

importance of public diplomacy for a country with its own people to develop sustainable policies.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Todd Spangler, "HBO's 'Chernobyl' Is Now the Top-Rated TV Show on IMDb", *Variety*, June 05, 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/digital/news/chernobyl-top-rated-tv-show-all-time-1203233833/>, accessed on July 3, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel McLaughlin, "Chernobyl: The lies, the heroes, the horrors", *The Irish Times*, May 4, 2019, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio-web/chernobyl-the-lies-the-heroes-the-horrors-1.3878468>, accessed on July 3, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Park Jin-hai, "Disaster movie 'Pandora' rings true more than ever", *The Korea Times*, December 4, 2016, [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/culture/2016/12/141\\_219461.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/culture/2016/12/141_219461.html), accessed on July 3, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Viet Phuong Nguyen, "An Analysis of Moon Jae-in's Nuclear Phase-out Policy." *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs*, (Winter 2019): pp. 66-72.

<sup>5</sup> James Conca, "The Fukushima Disaster Wasn't Disastrous Because Of The Radiation", *Forbes*, March 16, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamesconca/2015/03/16/the-fukushima-disaster-wasnt-very-disastrous/#1b57ff866b2d>, accessed on July 3, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Chethan Kumar, "India to have 12 more nuclear power plants soon: DAE Chief", *Times of India*, April 22, 2019, [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/68994453.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/68994453.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)

<sup>7</sup> "Anti-Kudankulam protests turn violent, one killed in police firing", *The Times of India*, September 12, 2010, [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/16338483.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/16338483.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst), accessed on July 2, 2019.