

**Article: “Cartooning and Nuclear Power: From Industry Advertising to Activist Uprising and Beyond”**  
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# Cartooning and Nuclear Power: From Industry Advertising to Activist Uprising and Beyond

For more than three decades no commercial nuclear project in the U.S. was ordered that was not later canceled. Recently, the groundbreaking for the National Enrichment Facility in New Mexico in August, 2006, the issuance of the first “Early Site Permit” for a nuclear power plant in March, 2007, and a massive lobbying campaign in Washington, D.C. have been signs that the nuclear power industry still dreams of a renaissance. Nuclear power’s momentum was broken in the late 1970s by several factors, including a grassroots anti-nuclear movement that won tightened regulations, thus raising the costs of nuclear power plant construction and operation. Editorial cartoons in the daily press of that time are only one of a number of fields of cartooning that document this nuclear power controversy, and not the one that affords the closest look. Both the nuclear industry and participants in the anti-nuclear movement published entire comic books to explain their views of nuclear power. Besides these special-purpose comic books, editorial

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cartoonists in the weekly press and representations of nuclear power in mass entertainment provide further bodies of visual evidence for understanding

the steps by which nuclear power won and lost the “public acceptance” that it now tries to win back.

In the contest between the comic books for and against nuclear power, the pro-nuclear forces had many advantages, including a long head start. In 1948, at a time when comic books were a popular mass medium and frequently used for promotional purposes, General Electric sponsored *Adventures Inside the Atom*. General Electric was working, then and later, on both military and civilian applications of nuclear energy. That year, *Popular Science* magazine published a comics-format explanation of nuclear fission titled *Dagwood Splits the Atom*, which was expanded into a complete comic book in 1949. Utility companies and comics publishers continued to distribute comic books extolling nuclear power for the next several decades.

Utility-sponsored comic books reinforced the messages of the atomic energy exhibits where they were typically distributed. The story of GE’s *Adventures Inside the Atom* (1948) consists of a guided tour of an “Atomic Energy Exhibit,” and promises that atomic energy will

“serve us all in the future as a source of almost unlimited power.” Redrawn and slightly re-edited as *Inside the Atom* (1955; for cover image see Figure 1), this comic concluded its exhibit tour with talk of “a wonderful future ahead!—with atomic energy.” The comic book *The Atom, Electricity and You!* (1968) also uses the plot of a neck-tied spokesman narrating a tour through an exhibit on nuclear energy. *The Atom, Electricity and You!* assures readers that nuclear power plants pose no radiation hazard because:

Most radiation from a nuclear plant is shipped in shielded containers to permanent disposal facilities. The small amount remaining is released carefully into the plant’s cooling water and the air. This radiation is insignificant and dilutes within a relatively short distance so that monitoring equipment cannot distinguish it from the natural background in the environment.

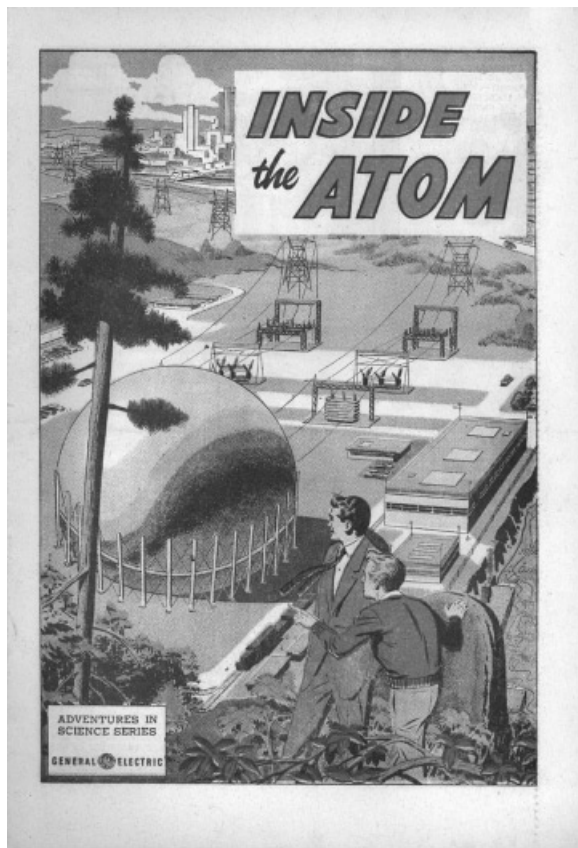
The comic book *The Story of Electricity* (1977) again includes a guided tour of atomic energy exhibits as part of its plot. These pro-nuclear comics projects hired cartoonists who used a “realistic,” as opposed to a “cartooney,” art style that conveyed conventional respectability.

In 1959, Reddy Kilowatt, an electric utility mascot since 1926, starred in the film and comic book *The Mighty Atom*, subtitled “The Story of Electricity from Amber to Atoms,” which despite its title and subtitle and the comic book’s cover illustration of a nuclear power plant, made only a brief mention of nuclear power. (The section on nuclear power was expanded slightly in a 1976 edition.)

Children learned to regard nuclear energy as a source of strength and power, not just from industry-sponsored, special-purpose comic books, but also from nuclear-themed entertainment comic books, including *Atomic Mouse* (1953–1963), *Atomic Rabbit* (1955–1958), and *Atom the Cat* (1957–1959). The title character in the entertainment comic book series *Doctor Solar*, *Man of the Atom* (1962–1969) was not a solar energy enthusiast, but a physicist working in a nuclear power plant who recharges his superpowers by exposing himself to radiation.

Beginning in 1976, a new generation of small-circulation comic books directly challenged the industry’s arguments in favor of nuclear power. This asymmetrical response to

Figure 1



Cover image of General Electric's 1955 *Inside the Atom*.

the nuclear industry's public relations efforts did not come from hired hands with a clear, assigned mission, but from artists and writers who used comics to express their own concerns and work out their own thoughts on paper.

The Reddy Kilowatt mascot became the inspiration for a much-different talking light-bulb character, "Greedy Killer-watt," introduced in *All-Atomic Comics*, a comic book I wrote, drew, and self-published in 1976 (see Figure 2). Rather than running the show as Reddy Kilowatt had done, Greedy Killer-watt appeared toward the end of a story about the problems and hazards of nuclear power. Greedy delivers the nuclear industry's familiar lines about clean, cheap, and safe nuclear energy, but this time a three-legged, mutant talking frog is there to provide counterarguments. The industry-sponsored comics had featured professional-class, White, male authorities disseminating wonderful facts to uncritical boys and easily convinced women, but in *All-Atomic Comics* the uninformed boy has become the central player in the story, faced with deciding who to believe.

In the introduction to the first edition of *All-Atomic Comics*, I explain that I had originally conceived this comic as a "'balanced' discussion of nuclear power presenting both sides," but decided against this because "the arguments in favor of nuclear power are well-known and cleverly promoted in multi-million dollar advertising campaigns" while "the arguments against nuclear power are not as well-known and are unable to afford expensive promotion." Anticipating criticism that casting doubt on nuclear power "in comic book form" is irresponsible, I argued, "The pro-atomic power comic books which the nuclear industry has sponsored have often been outrageously irresponsible in

their simplistic advocacy of a new and highly questionable technology."

*All-Atomic Comics* takes another dig at slanted educational materials in its illustration of a classroom that had been built in Colorado on radioactive uranium mill tailings. The picture shows the children watching a film "Our Friend, Mr. Atom" that is "produced with the cooperation of the vested interests." This refers to Walt Disney's pro-nuclear animated film "Our Friend, the Atom" (1957), produced with the cooperation of the U.S. Navy and General Dynamics, whose story of a fisherman and a nuclear genie was shown on the Disneyland television show and in classrooms and adapted as a popular children's book.

*All-Atomic Comics* was not sponsored by any organization and not part of any larger series or political project. It came out in 1976 with an initial press run of 10,000 copies, and in revised editions in 1977, 1978, 1979, and 1980, for a total of 47,500 copies. I distributed these comic books primarily through underground comix channels (to "head shops") where they competed as entertainment on the same racks as *Zap Comix*, *the Freak Brothers*, and other adult titles of that type, and through anti-nuclear organizations, which sold them as educational material when tabling.

As the movement questioning nuclear power picked up steam from 1976 to 1980, independently-produced comics presenting arguments against uranium mining and nuclear energy were published in North America, Europe, and Australia. In addition, three translations of *All-Atomic Comics* were published in Germany.

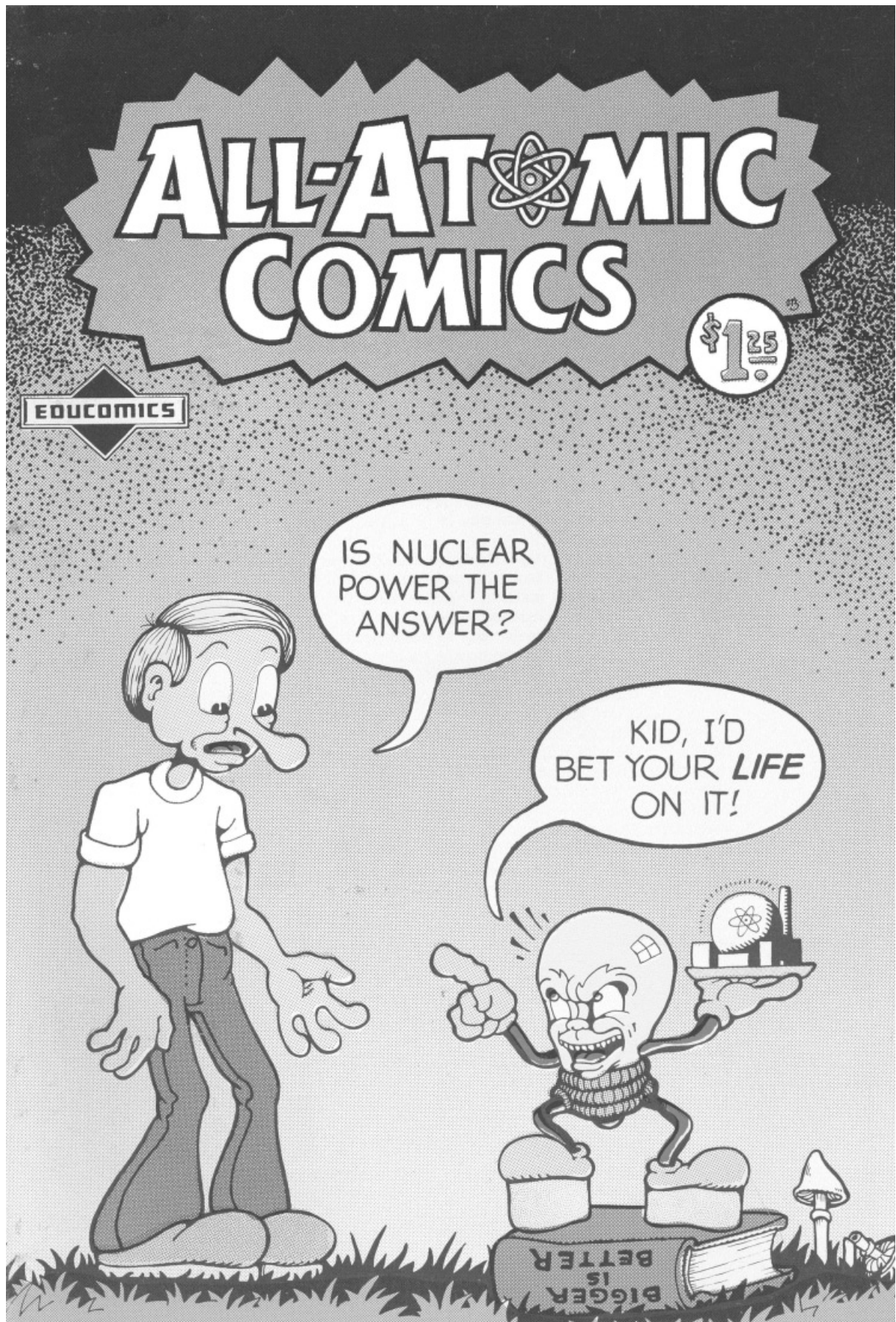
*Atomic Horror Comic* (1977) was created in the context of Australian struggles over uranium mining, feminism, and aboriginal land rights. The comic got its start when three art students, looking for a way to express themselves while putting their artistic abilities to practical use, won a grant from their university's Student Representative Council. This was the first and only comic book that Nicky Gray and Bob Clutterbuck did (although Moll, a third collaborator, had cartooning experience as a contributor to Australian underground comix). Their *ad hoc* distribution system was to give away copies at universities and art colleges around Melbourne.

*Atomic Horror Comic's* politicized tone asserts itself from the first panel, which pictures the Australian Uranium Producers Forum demanding their yes-men Australian politicians to "really kick the unions, divide the labor movement & make the conservationists look like nuts." They are defeated when the militant "people of the world" win an imagined success in the last panel, which shows a newspaper from the distant future date of September 5, 2005, announcing the victories of the popular struggles for solar energy and aboriginal land rights.

*Nuclear Dragons Attack* (1978), another anti-uranium mining comic, came out in Saskatchewan, the only comic book project by two activists, art student Shelley Sopher and commercial fisherman/journalist John Piper. They created it without sponsorship or any organization's imprimatur. Piper printed the few hundred copies himself on a borrowed press. Sopher remembers getting the inspiration to use comic books as a way to communicate with a broader audience from a collection of Communist Chinese comic books republished in New York as *The People's Comic Book*, the only "alternative comic" that she had seen. Sopher and Piper distributed *Nuclear Dragons Attack* locally through environmental, anti-nuclear, labor, and church groups.

*Nuclear Dragons Attack* was rich in specific, local detail about the debate over nuclear development, presenting arguments from both sides, but leaving its own position unmistakable through the device of dramatically picturing nuclear technology as dragons: "Dragons were winged, scaly, fire-breathing creatures—symbols of evil and destruction—who lived hundreds of years ago in Europe. We thought dragons were dead! But now

Figure 2



A nameless "kid" discusses nuclear power with Greedy Killerwatt on the cover of *All Atomic Comics* (5th printing, 1980).

a new kind of dragon has come to life right here in Saskatchewan—the Nuclear dragon!!” Almost half of this comic book’s pages are devoted to non-comics-format material, presented as hand-lettered text with photographs, maps, a graph, a diagram, and quotations. Like *Atomic Horror Comic*, the story emphasized the interests of the local native people.

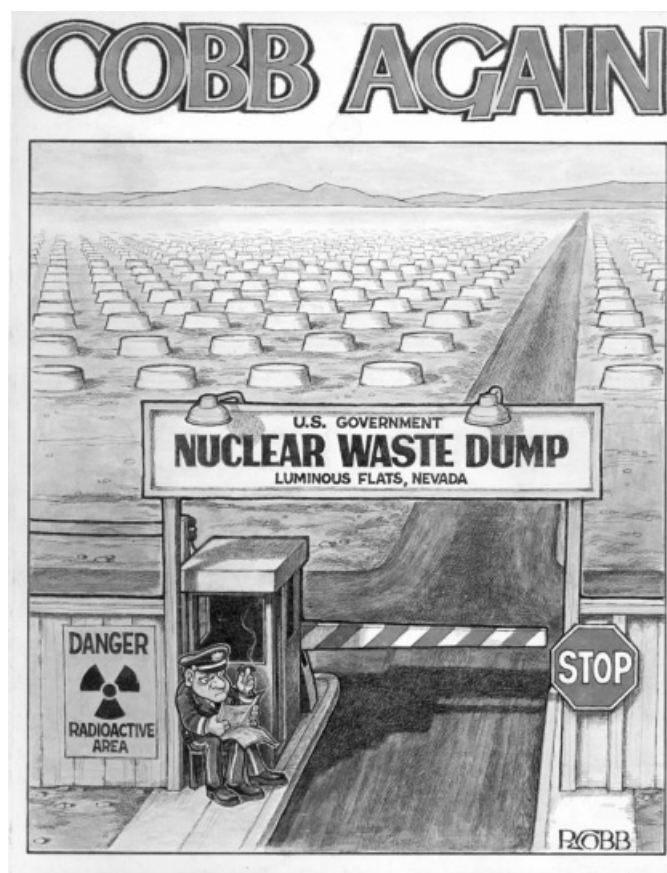
Comic books questioning nuclear power also appeared as parts of series. *Slow Death Comics*, a pioneering underground comic book devoted to ecological themes, made “atomic power” the theme of its ninth issue in 1978. Underground comix emphasized the freedom of each individual cartoonist, and the contributors took a variety of approaches. Greg Irons did the cover and a lead story titled “Our Friend Mr. Atom.” His story focuses primarily on nuclear weapons but culminates in a vision of a nuclear-powered future, followed by an impossible earthquake that drops California into the ocean, a warning about the half-life of the plutonium released in that imagined disaster, a recommendation of *All-Atomic Comics*, and a short list of acknowledgements. The middle two stories represent the kind of apocalyptic science fiction that the *Slow Death* series had come to specialize in. The last two stories in *Slow Death #9* seem to take opposing views. Errol McCarthy’s “Lights Out!” satirizes both sides of the nuclear debate, but lopsidedly portrays the contest as one between “the positive and job creating forces of unlimited growth—and—the malevolent, negative & defeatist forces of want and darkness!!” Tim Boxell’s concluding story, “Close Encounters With a Blurred Mind,” as heavy as McCarthy’s story had been light, depicts a man’s deep regret when an earthquake ruptures the California’s Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, and he remembers that he had never participated in the “organization, lobbying, boycotts & civil disobedience” that would have been required to prevent its construction.

The *New Internationalist* magazine in London published a special comics-format 20-page section in its August, 1981, issue summarizing “The Case against Nuclear Energy.” They divided the presentation of the case among eight cartoonists, including notably skilled artists, such as S. B. Whitehead and Ted Richards. After the invention of the Internet, the *New Internationalist* was able to keep these arguments in circulation by posting this cartoon issue (and others) on its web site ([www.newint.org/issue102/contents.htm](http://www.newint.org/issue102/contents.htm)).

Old editorial cartoons are more easily found in libraries than comic books, but some of the strongest editorial cartoons supporting the anti-nuclear movement did not appear in daily newspapers or major serials. In the 1976 collection of counterculture editorial cartoonist Ron Cobb’s work, *Cobb Again*, the cover (Figure 3) and first five cartoons focused on nuclear power. They show a mutant guarding a nuclear waste dump, a nuclear power plant accident that devastates a surrounding neighborhood, and other images associating nuclear power with genetic damage, danger, and death. These powerfully drawn polemical images forcefully present Cobb’s opinions, but lack enough room to make complete arguments about the likelihood of the outcomes they portray.

Another anti-nuclear power editorial cartoonist, R. Diggs, lived and worked in San Francisco like me, and sometimes contributed to my comic book projects. Like Cobb’s collection, Diggs’ *Great Diggs of 77: The Year in Cartoons* includes only a handful of cartoons about nuclear power since, as the Rip Off Press’s syndicated editorial cartoonist, he needed to cover a full range of topics. His cartoons about nuclear power attacked President Jimmy Carter’s support for conventional nuclear reactors, pictured people ignoring nuclear waste, commented on a court ruling regarding nuclear insurance, and showed divers discovering the giant sponges that were growing on leaking nuclear waste barrels that rest on the ocean floor 30 miles from San

**Figure 3**



Counterculture editorial cartoonist Ron Cobb’s 1976 collection *Cobb Again* led off with five cartoons against nuclear power.

Francisco. (The *San Francisco Chronicle* also published an editorial cartoon depicting these mutant sponges, drawn by Robert Graysmith, their own cartoonist.) More than the comic books, these political cartoons had journalistic hooks connecting them to the news of the day.

Stephen Croall and Kaianders Sempler pioneered the use of book-format cartooning as a medium for collaging texts and cartoon images, with their book explaining the arguments against nuclear power. Their book first appeared in Sweden, and was translated into English as *The Anti-Nuclear Handbook* (1978), and then republished as *Nuclear Power for Beginners* (1983). This, and the added inspiration of ruis’s cartooning in Mexico, launched a long series of “*For Beginners*” and “*Documentary Comic Book*” volumes.

Those in the nuclear industry who sponsored comic books might have also sponsored some occasional proprietary research to determine whether their comics were making their intended impact. Those who published the comic books calling nuclear power and uranium mining into question lacked the resources to assess formally whether these publications made any changes in their readers’ knowledge, thoughts, feelings, or behavior. Since comics that criticized nuclear power arose as a way for their creators to express personal concerns and communicate with their readers as peers, rather than as tools to manipulate target audiences, testing their “effectiveness” seemed irrelevant. Anti-nuclear comics probably had no measurable impact distinguishable from the impacts of the “no nukes” movement that circulated them.

Although communications scholars have long been interested in the characteristics that make messages persuasive, the greater role of media has been to sustain existing arrangements rather than to challenge or change them. Still, influenced by the anti-nuclear movement and other developments, American media went from celebrating the wonders of nuclear power to publicizing its dangers.

In 1980, Marvel Comics borrowed the “Greedy Killerwatt” character (with permission and acknowledgements) from *All-Atomic Comics*, re-imagining his origin and personality for an issue of *Howard the Duck*. In Marvel’s version, Greedy Killerwatt originated when overexposure to radiation at the Three Mile Island nuclear facility mutated a worker “into a living light bulb.” After being shunned and taunted for his freakish appearance, the former worker becomes evil enough to plan a world-destroying meltdown of the North Pole nuclear power plant. By this point, after *The China Syndrome* film and the Three Mile Island accident, harsh anti-nuclear sentiment had become mainstream entertainment. Anti-nuclear mass entertainment would find its highest expression when *The Simpsons* animated cartoon series began in 1989, with Homer Simpson as a worker at the fictional and poorly-run Springfield Nuclear Power Plant. In a recent issue of the comic book based on that series, Homer causes a nuclear power plant meltdown.

Problems that comic books questioning nuclear power warned against in the 1970s remain as lively concerns, including the danger that nations will use their nuclear power facilities to acquire nuclear weapons, that terrorists might attack nuclear power plants, that no facility to permanently store high-level nuclear waste exists, and that nuclear power still relies on government-provided disaster insurance. *All-Atomic Comics* had also warned that nuclear power plants were producing a lot less electricity than they had been designed to, but since then nuclear power plants have greatly improved their reliability and now account for one fifth of the U.S. supply of electricity, up from just a few percent in the early 1970s.

By 1980, the anti-nuclear movement realized that the utilities were ordering no new nuclear power plants and began to fall apart. That year I published *Energy Comics* (Figure 4) to provide a continuing forum for cartoonists to discuss in comic book format the dangers and opportunities of alternative energy strategies. Predictably, that undercapitalized, offbeat commercial publishing venture failed immediately. *Energy Comics* did not seek or receive subsidies or sponsorship from any organization. Distribution channels were drying up, not only through the collapsing anti-nuclear network but also through the “underground comix” channels that had supported independent-minded experiments in comic book format. One of the stories intended in 1980 for the never-to-appear second issue of *Energy Comics* concerned the idea of “global warming” caused by burning fossil fuels.

Like *All-Atomic Comics*, *Energy Comics* directly criticized pro-nuclear comic books. *Energy Comics* included a summary of *Nuklear Komiks*, a comic book published in the Philippines to assure Filipinos that nuclear power is cheap, safe, abundant, reliable, and a source of jobs, prosperity, and progress. On the facing page, an essay by Lyuba Zarsky described the “dangerous absurdity of siting a nuclear power plant [the first in the Philippine Islands] on an active volcano, near five earthquake faults, in an area hit by tidal waves!” (The Bataan nuclear reactor was mothballed before producing any electricity, and stands today as a useless, hugely expensive reminder of corruption under the Marcos martial law regime.)

Nonfiction comic books continue to appear. Nevertheless, comic books explaining global climate change, peak oil, strategies for transitioning to hydrogen fuel, or household energy conservation advice apparently do not yet exist.

Figure 4



The quick demise of *Energy Comics* (1980) showed the difficulty of publishing activist comics without organizational sponsorship.

If nuclear power revives, comics may appear that will boost or challenge it in many formats. The Internet may be the most likely place for any new comic-book-length or animated works that would pick up the debate over nuclear power from where cartoonists left it a generation ago. The graphic novel has established shelf space for serious book-length works in comics format. Since the 1970s, both editorial cartoons and comic strips increasingly have used multi-panel narratives to first inform the reader of something and then make a comment on it, raising their value as educational media. In addition, some magazines have experimented with running multi-page information-conveying comics-format features. Through such various channels—Internet, book, multi-panel editorial cartoon and comic strip, and magazines—the informative, opinionated, comics feature remains full of lively possibilities.

Professional editorial cartoonists make quick comments on the top news of the day, thereby providing lightning flashes of insight (of varying intensities), but not a reading lamp for sustained investigations of complicated issues. A more detailed comics-format examination of new developments in nuclear technology will probably require either organizational sponsorship or the volunteer efforts of people who discover in cartooning a practical means for sharing both their passionately held opinions and their best-reasoned arguments.

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I have listed the references using an ad hoc style, different from that recommended in "Comic Art in Scholarly Writing: A Citation Guide" by Allen Ellis, posted at <http://comicsresearch.org/CAC/cite.html>. In the case of "nuclear comics," the writers have been anonymous or obscure more often than not, so listing primarily by writer makes little sense. Also, the publishers have included so many little-known and widely scattered groups that it becomes important to specify the place of publication. I do, however, use Ellis's recommended parenthetical codes to indicate writer (w), artist (a), penciller (p), and inker (i).

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