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The *Times* v. Moyers

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On March 26, PBS carried something that has become increasingly rare in our media-besotted land: genuine journalism. The program was an explosive investigation by Bill Moyers and his staff of a decades-long program by the chemical industry to hide the life-threatening dangers associated with the use and production of their products. People were dying who did not have to die; they were living with debilitating illnesses and receiving no compensation from the companies.

The industry did everything it could to discredit Moyers. It set up a website, wrote angry letters to PBS and accused Moyers of a biased presentation--before having seen the program.

One would think that a story of this magnitude would interest others in the mainstream media. One would be wrong. In the *Washington Post*, media columnist Howard Kurtz focused on the controversy between Moyers and the companies. The *New York Times*, however, reviewed the program as if taking orders directly from the chemical industry. "Have we perhaps grown up in a perverse sort of way and now accept that spectacular progress like that of the last half-century cannot be achieved without tradeoffs?" wrote Neil Genzlinger. "Nothing good, be it democracy or more durable house paint, comes without a price."

No one on the program argued against tradeoffs or democracy. The issue Moyers presented was quite simple: Do companies have the right to lie and mislead their workers and the public about the potentially harmful effects of their products? If tradeoffs or democracy were the issue, then the victims of these companies would at least have been given the relevant information about the likelihood that they might contract cancer or other life-threatening diseases as a result of their exposure to toxic chemicals. Yet, as Moyers reported, that information was deliberately withheld or covered up by the companies.

People died or were permanently disfigured as a result of the coverups Bill Moyers exposed. Yet the *Times* likened acceptance of (slow) murder by corporations for profits to growing up. It's hard to know which is more offensive: the actions of the corporations or the willingness of journalists to act as apologists for them.

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