

60 Minutes: “The Air We Breathe”—damage control for the criminal official response to the COVID pandemic

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The recent segment of the CBS news magazine *60 Minutes*, titled “The Air We Breathe,” was broadcast Sunday.

It is notable as one of the first major presentations to a mass audience that uses the terms airborne and aerosol to explain how the virus that causes COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2, is transmitted between people, particularly in indoor settings.

But the question that needs to be examined is why this admission comes nearly four years after the emergence of COVID-19, after 25 million or more worldwide have lost their lives. On this issue, and the related question of who was responsible, particularly in government and in the related health authorities, the *60 Minutes* program maintains a discreet silence.

Let us not upset the Biden administration, the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, and the former officials of the Trump administration by assessing their responsibility! Or the legion of public health “experts” who turned their backs on the findings of principled scientists, and instead delivered “science” tailored to the profit interests of big business.

That seems to be the message of the program, which ends up being less an outraged investigation of the causes of mass death, and more of a tame infomercial for new techniques of engineering HVAC systems in construction or retrofitting of buildings.

Andrew Wolff, the host of the segment, notes in opening his report that the piece was produced to remind viewers that new variants of Omicron were still evolving and the flu season was getting underway as winter approached.

A public health announcement is much appreciated at a time when even the national public health agency, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the White House, have taken great pains to ensure the pandemic is all but forgotten, even as the virus continues to surge across communities. On the day the segment was aired on CBS, an estimated 500,000 people became infected or reinfected with COVID. Worse, wastewater data indicates these infections are on the rise again.

Still, nearly four years has passed, and more than 1.3 million excess deaths have been documented in the United States. So why is *60 Minutes* choosing this moment to produce a program on airborne COVID when every national and international public health entity is insisting the pandemic has entered an endemic phase, essentially moving on from any real effort to fight the pandemic?

Wolff offers up the answer out of the gate, “From the start of the pandemic it [the government] should have focused on improving the air we breathe indoors. And some companies are doing just that, for

the health of their workers and their bottom line.”

What follows in the just over 13-minute segment, although scientifically correct, simply amounts to a public relations campaign that attempts to launder the image of the corporations and omits any discussion on the criminal policies that insisted the cure couldn’t be worse than the disease and forced the working class back to work and their children back into overcrowded schools.

A depiction of the Skagit Chorale superspreader events in Washington state seemed like a brief interlude to providing a human face to the topic while introducing the physics of airborne respiratory illnesses. In March 2020, during a more than two-hour indoor rehearsal, 53 people out of 61 became infected and two died. As the four witnesses told Wolff, they had done everything they were told to do by public health experts at the time—wash their hands, stand apart, and avoid physical contact. They said they knew that something else was going on, but there was no further discussion on the topic of how the pandemic impacted the lives of hundreds of millions of people across the country.

The viewer is then introduced to Professor Linsey Marr of Virginia Tech University, an aerosol physics expert, who provided convincing imagery of what talking and singing looks like from an infectious context by using mannequins with fog bellowing out of their mouths and swirling around in the room, spreading quickly to every corner of the confined space, causing a thick haze of particulates to linger suspended in the air.

She was one of the authors of the first major important papers written during the pandemic that performed a case analysis of the Skagit Chorale outbreak. She and her co-workers found that the most likely mechanism for such a large number of participants to become infected meant the virus was airborne. Marr explained, “I thought, ‘Wow, this is even worse than I thought. This has to be airborne. There really is no other explanation for it.’”

However, the *60 Minutes* report ends any meaningful investigation into the crimes committed by authorities right then and there. There are no follow-up questions: “Didn’t we know that SARS1, the precursor of SARS-CoV-2 was also spread through aerosol? Isn’t there evidence for flu viruses being airborne? Didn’t scientific experts then call for studying transmission of these viruses in indoor spaces to improve ventilation and HVAC systems? Why didn’t public health authorities, from local officials up to the CDC and WHO not heed the repeated warnings by multiple experts warning about these dangers? Who knew, what did they know, and when did they know it?”

The answers would be damaging to the very corporate interests that

produce and underwrite the popular news magazine program: These public health measures were not implemented because the entire focus during the pandemic was to protect the interests of corporate America and Wall Street speculators.

A cursory review of the literature would have materialized multiple such studies published over the last two decades including in the early months of the pandemic that showed mechanical ventilation systems employed in Italian schools in the Marche region decreased infection rates among students by about 80 percent. Leaving these political and social questions untouched, the segment begins in earnest to cover up these crimes and deliver an “uplifting” pro-corporate conclusion.

Brought in to guide this narrative was Harvard’s Dr. Joseph G Allen, professor at the T. H. Chan School of Public Health, and founder of Harvard’s Healthy Buildings program, which helps large corporations diagnose and solve indoor air systems issues at their corporate offices. His clients include CBS’s parent company, Paramount, and commercial real estate companies like Beacon Capital Partners. In 2022, he advised Amazon when they opened their new buildings in Arlington, Virginia, with a \$2.5 million state-of-the-art completely automated HVAC system that protects “not just against COVID, but other respiratory airborne viruses like flu and RSV.”

It is worth reminding the reader that Allen gave the keynote speech at the White House Indoor Air Quality Summit in October 2022. He also wrote an opinion piece in September 2021 decrying mask usage indoors given the high rates of vaccination in the population, claiming, “having a fully vaccinated population is the best control, because the risk of vaccinated-to-vaccinated transmission has been widely overstated.”

As one of his colleagues who chose to remain anonymous said, paraphrasing him, “Allen sees everything through the prism of HVAC.” One must add it has been a lucrative endeavor for him.

In his opening statement, Allen notes, “The original sin of the pandemic was the failure to recognize airborne transmission.” This abstract biblical formulation intentionally misses the mark. In fact, even former President Trump had mentioned to journalist Bob Woodward that he knew the virus was airborne in early February 2020 when the world was awaking to the events in Wuhan, China.

As Evan Blake, a writer for the *World Socialist Web Site*, noted in a social media post that has gone viral, “[This was a] deliberate cover-up of airborne transmission by the WHO, CDC, and the corporate media and not a ‘biblical sin’ committed by society in the abstract. It was a mass social crime, committed by the capitalist class against the international working class, with malice aforethought.”

This is glossed over with a nod of Wolff’s head in response to Allen’s original sin comment. He didn’t even bother to ask him what this really meant. If this is a news program where the truth is of any consequence, then why not take an accurate assessment of the incredible devastation caused to the global population? The next question should be to put the interviewee on the spot: “You had scientists saying this thing was in the air. Why didn’t you listen to them?”

Wolff is given a grand tour of Amazon’s latest building project in Arlington, Virginia, where massive and highly technical systems built by the same workers who have faced a far higher mortality from COVID than their richer white-collar counterparts, that service a massive skyscraper providing an example of the best money can buy.

Not once does Wolff engage Allen on why such efficient systems haven’t been reproduced across the country or how can the pandemic be stopped if a few select buildings can protect their employs but the

virus is still lurking in every community across the globe. Even before COVID, a 2018 report underscored the fact that in the US 893 million days were lost due to illness and 527 million workdays lost due to impaired performance. This amounted to more than a half-trillion dollars in healthcare costs.

Perhaps even more compelling, how do you protect people once they step outside of these reconfigured “healthy” buildings. Such measures, as important as they are, are not a substitute for a sound public health policy that addresses every aspect of community-based communicable diseases.

Rather than making inquiries along these lines about the state of infrastructure upgrades in much needed working class and rural regions, Wolff turns to Amazon’s Director of Health and Safety Katie Hughs, and asks, “Are you finding that Amazon is making a business decision—partially—by saying, ‘Look, it’s okay for you to come back to work because we are telling you the air inside this building is safe?’” She looks on approvingly, then explains how effectively the building kept the indoor environment safe while the massive summer Canadian forest fires caused dangerous conditions for populations of the Eastern seaboard for several weeks.

What of the tens of millions who went to work without such HVAC systems? *60 Minutes* does not bother to ask.

In the concluding sequences, Allen notes, “A well operating HVAC system is not only good for the health of employees, but it can also be good for the health of companies, too, especially with many people working remotely leaving many commercial building owners looking for tenants.” In other words, the installation of advanced HVAC systems can itself boost profits.

Understandably, many in the scientific field have praised the *60 Minutes* report because it acknowledged the airborne nature of respiratory viruses. However, what is lacking is a thorough investigation into why the pandemic was allowed to rage and why so many had to die.

Only the International Committee of the Fourth International has launched a public inquest into the socioeconomic and political roots of this debacle for which the working class has paid with its life and well-being. We have collected testimony both from principled scientists and from those who went through the experience of COVID and Long COVID. In comparison, the CBS program glosses over these pressing questions and sanitizes the entire criminal proceedings to place the perpetrators in a more favorable light.



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