

As the World Heats Up, the Climate for News Is Changing, Too

By **Marc Tracy**

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As Europe heats up, Greenland melts and the Midwest floods, many news organizations are devoting more resources to climate change as they cover the topic with more urgency.

In Florida, six newsrooms with different owners have taken the unusual step of pooling their resources and sharing their reporting on the issue. They plan to examine how climate change will affect the state's enormous agriculture sector as well as "the future of coastal towns and cities — which ones survive, which ones go under," according to a statement released when the initiative was announced last month.

Florida's record-breaking heat waves, devastating storms like Hurricane Michael and increased flooding at high tide have not been lost on Mindy Marques, the publisher and executive editor of The Miami Herald, one of the six organizations taking part in the effort.

"It's undeniable that we are living with the impact of changes in our climate every day," Ms. Marques said.

The other five outlets that have joined the initiative are The Palm Beach Post, The South Florida Sun Sentinel, The Tampa Bay Times, The Orlando Sentinel and WLRN Public Media. Ms. Marques said the partnership was not politically motivated.

“We’re not launching a campaign,” she said. “We’re launching information, knowledge.”



Mindy Marques, the publisher and executive editor of The Miami Herald, one of the six organizations taking part in an effort to cover climate change. Mike Cohen for The New York Times

The Guardian, the left-wing British daily, recently updated its house style to prefer the phrase “climate emergency” over “climate change.” It also recommends “climate science denier” in place of “climate skeptic.” The publication has also started listing the global carbon dioxide level on its daily weather page.

The New York Times established a desk dedicated to climate change in 2017, with editors and reporters in Washington and New York who collaborate with bureaus around the world.

But even among journalists who want to convey that climate change is a crisis, there is not unanimity about how to play it.

Matthew C. Nisbet, a communications professor at Northeastern University and the editor of the journal *Environmental Communication*, has argued for more nuance.

“We have good research that in amping up the threat without actually providing people with things they can do, you end up with fatalism, despair, depression, a sense of paralysis, or a sense of dismissiveness and denial,” he said.

Mr. Nisbet, who recently published an article headlined “The Trouble With Climate Emergency Journalism” in the journal *Issues in Science and Technology*, warned that fever-pitch coverage could make climate science go the way of dietary science, a discipline that has suffered, in his view, from credulous reports of new studies that regularly upend conventional wisdom — fat is bad; no, carbs are bad; no, eat like a cave man.

“People don’t know what to believe,” Mr. Nisbet said. “They lose trust in the science and in the journalism about the science, and the complexity of the issue is lost.”

David Wallace-Wells, the deputy editor of *New York* magazine whose work has appeared in *The Times*, argued the contrary, saying that a dash of alarmism suits alarming developments.



David Wallace-Wells, the deputy editor of New York magazine, said that a dash of alarmism suited alarming developments. Michael Loccisano/Getty Images

Mr. Wallace-Wells's 2017 cover story for New York magazine — a precursor to his recently published book, “The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming” — drew criticism from scientists who said he had painted worst-case scenarios based on exaggerations of the data's implications. Mr. Wallace-Wells said he had written the article “consciously outside the boundaries that had been established of what was considered responsible storytelling about climate, because I felt that was not serving the story all that well.”

Barely a year after the kerfuffle around that article, a panel of scientists convened by the United Nations issued a dire report, which forecast severe climate change as soon as 2040.

To describe it, some news organizations pressed the panic button, à la The Guardian: “We Have 12 Years to Limit Climate Change Catastrophe, Warns U.N.” (Mr. Wallace-Wells’s contribution was headlined: “U.N. Says Climate Genocide Is Coming. It’s Actually Worse Than That.”) But even those that played it straight could not help but convey urgency. “U.N. Report: ‘Unprecedented Changes’ Needed to Protect Earth From Global Warming,” went the USA Today headline.

Other outlets held off, however, with 28 of the top 50 American newspapers by Sunday circulation publishing nothing on the report the day after it was issued, according to the liberal watchdog Media Matters for America.

The Columbia Journalism Review bashed the nonchalant response to the United Nations report in an April 22 essay headlined “The media are complacent while the world burns.” Written by the longtime environmental reporter Mark Hertsgaard and the magazine’s top editor, Kyle Pope, the piece, which was also published in The Nation and The Guardian, took issue with the “climate silence” of major news organizations and singled out the paucity of time given to the issue on television news, “where the brutal demands of ratings and money work against adequate coverage of the biggest story of our time.”

An illustration of the extremes in how climate change has been covered was evident on a recent edition of the nightly Fox News program “The Story With Martha MacCallum.” The segment began with a clip from John Oliver’s HBO show in which Bill Nye the Science Guy, a winner of multiple Emmys who specializes in explaining scientific concepts in simple terms, lit a globe on fire and ordered his viewers, in unprintable language, to grow up and face the crisis. After the clip played, Ms. MacCallum’s guest, the Fox News personality Jesse Watters, weighed in.



Bill Nye's video about climate change, produced for HBO's "Last Week With John Oliver" was shown on Fox's "The Story With Martha MacCallum" and derided by Ms. MacCallum's guest, the Fox News personality Jesse Watters.

Fox News

"The planet renews itself," Mr. Watters said. "And I just am doubtful that man is causing the warming, because these experts have been saying this for years. The experts said there was going to be a Y2K meltdown. Didn't happen."

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~~The experts said there was Russian collusion. Didn't happen. The experts said~~
~~there was going to be President Hillary Clinton. Didn't happen."~~

Mr. Watters's view lines up with the roughly one-third of Americans who believe that climate change is mostly due to natural trends, according to a new study from the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication. It is also in keeping with the opinion of Mr. Watters's onetime dining partner President Trump, who pulled the United States out of the Paris climate accord and has called the idea that climate change results from human activity a "hoax" and "fake science."

At the other end of the spectrum, the activists of Extinction Rebellion, a group founded in Britain last year, argue that most journalists have not met the crisis with sufficient urgency. In addition to recent protests in London and Paris (where some participants were tear-gassed), the group has aimed at the news media, with demonstrations last month outside the offices of The New York Times, The Washington Post and Fox News.

"You're still not talking about it like it's an emergency," said a group spokeswoman, Alanna Byrne, referring to large media outlets, "and that's what we have to do now: Be honest to the public about the full-scale changes we have to make."

On April 30, The Columbia Journalism Review and The Nation sponsored a town hall on how to cover climate change as part of an initiative called Covering Climate Now. It has brought together Asahi Shimbun, a Japanese newspaper; Maclean's magazine of Canada; The Philadelphia Inquirer; and other outlets that have pledged to step up coverage of the issue before a United Nations climate summit scheduled for September.

"It's outdated to say that covering the effects of climate change is advocacy," said Mr. Pope, the Columbia Journalism Review editor. "It's an enormous story. The effects of this are completely nonpartisan."

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