



COVER CLIMATE

May 31, 2018

NOTE TO REPORTERS AND EDITORIAL BOARDS

As Hurricane Season Begins, Connect the Dots to Climate Change

We Urge You to Explain to Your Audience the Connection Between More Intense Hurricanes and Climate Change

The 2018 hurricane season starts June 1. Forecasters predict this season will be slightly [worse than average](#), with a greater than 60 percent chance of a major hurricane hitting the U.S.

Climate-related disasters cost the U.S. [\\$309.5 billion](#) in 2017. That's equivalent to [25 percent](#) of federal discretionary spending. It's [more than half of](#) annual spending on national defense. It's enough to give each of the roughly 50,000 remaining U.S. coal miners [\\$6 million per year to retire](#). The vast majority of that damage, [\\$267 billion](#), was caused by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria. Hurricane Maria also killed an estimated [4,645](#) people.

More intense and damaging hurricanes are a symptom of climate change, caused by extraordinary greenhouse gas pollution that has altered the composition of the atmosphere far beyond anything in [human history](#). Climate change intensifies the harm from hurricanes in at least [three ways](#):

- Warmer air holds more moisture, ultimately leading to heavier rainfall;
- Higher sea levels lead to higher – and more disastrous – storm surges; and
- Warmer water leads to stronger winds, and possibly also causes hurricanes to [intensify more rapidly](#).

U.S. Media Fall Short on Connecting Hurricanes to Climate Change

It's critical that media draw the connection between extreme weather like hurricanes and climate change. Climate change already is killing thousands of Americans and causing hundreds of billions worth of damage every year. It could pose an existential threat to the U.S. as soon as the second half of this century. In 2017, the media fell far short on connecting hurricanes to climate change, the gravest and most urgent threat facing the nation and the world.

A Public Citizen survey of the top 50 U.S. newspapers by circulation* and ABC, CBS, Fox News Network, MSNBC and NBC found that of 21,177 pieces mentioning Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Maria or Nate in 2017, less than 5 percent mentioned climate change or global warming.**

Among newspapers in Florida, Louisiana and Texas,*** the three states most at risk of hurricane damage, the percentages were 4.0, 2.1 and 2.8 respectively. Papers in states where hurricanes hit generated large numbers of stories designed to provide basic information to local readers, such as where they can take shelter and what post-storm roofing scams to watch out for – articles in which one would not expect a discussion of the reasons for the intensity of the storm. But it is not unreasonable to expect that in the weeks and months after the storm passed, the balance of coverage would weigh more toward discussing the role of climate change in causing intense storms and how we can mitigate and adapt to the problem.

Outlets nationwide were modestly better at connecting hurricanes to climate change when they discussed “hurricane season” (12.2 percent of 764 pieces), unprecedented hurricanes (14.8 percent of 256), historic hurricanes (9.3 percent of 313), or rapidly intensifying hurricanes (11 percent of 91).† But those instances were comparatively rare.

Notes:

* The newspapers are: *Arizona Republic, Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Baltimore Sun, Boston Globe, Buffalo News, Chicago Sun-Times, Chicago Tribune, Cincinnati Enquirer, Columbus Dispatch, Dallas Morning News, Denver Post, Detroit Free Press, East Bay Times, Honolulu Star-Advertiser, Houston Chronicle, Indianapolis Star, Kansas City Star, Las Vegas Review-Journal, Los Angeles Times, Mercury News, Miami Herald, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, New York Daily News, New York Post, New York Times, Newsday, Oklahoman, Omaha World-Herald, Orange County Register, Oregonian, Portland, Orlando Sentinel, Philadelphia Inquirer, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Plain Dealer, Sacramento Bee, San Diego Union-Tribune, San Francisco Chronicle, Seattle Times, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, St. Paul Pioneer Press, Star Tribune, Star-Ledger, Sun-Sentinel, Tampa Bay Times, Times-Picayune, USA Today, Virginian-Pilot, Wall Street Journal and Washington Post.*

** We searched these sources in Westlaw for ((*hurricane /s harvey*) OR (*hurricane /s irma*) OR (*hurricane /s maria*) OR (*hurricane /s nate*)).

*** For each of these states, we searched all papers in the Westlaw database.

† For these searches, we used “*hurricane season,*” (*unprecedented /p hurricane*), (*historic /p hurricane*), and ((*rapid! /s intensif!*) & *hurricane*), respectively.

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