

Call It a Crisis



**The Role of U.S. Network News
in Communicating the Urgency of
Climate Change**

Acknowledgments

This report was researched and written by Allison Fisher, outreach director, with research assistance from Sebastian Fernandez, intern, and edited by David Arkush, managing director, of Public Citizen's Climate Program. The cover illustration is by Doug Chayka.

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Public Citizen's Climate Program
215 Pennsylvania Ave. SE
Washington, DC 20003
(202) 546-4996

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Introduction

“Climate change.” “Global warming.” “Greenhouse effect.”

Each term is used to describe and communicate to the public the impacts of pumping massive amounts of carbon pollution into the atmosphere.

But each term is limiting. And in some ways, all are outdated. They were appropriate at a time when severe impacts of burning fossil fuels were further off and we had more time to respond.

Now, the science on current and near-term climate harms, and the need for fast, assertive, unprecedented action to stave off catastrophe, is abundant and alarming. And many of those communicating the science are no longer mincing words. The most recent report by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), released in October 2018, was described by one UN official as “a deafening, piercing smoke alarm going off in the kitchen.”

It’s clear the scientific community is alarmed. By contrast, only 29 percent of Americans say they are “very worried” about climate change. The media can and must help bridge that divide. At present, though, reporting still lags far behind reality. As David Wallace-Wells, author of *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*, reminds us,

as climate change has been dawning more fully into view over the past several decades, all the cognitive biases that push us toward complacency have been abetted by our storytelling about warming—by journalism defined by caution in describing the scale and speed of the threat.

There is no real debate that we now face an emergency on climate change. But by and large, broadcast and cable television news networks are not conveying that message explicitly. This omission deeply disserves television audiences. It gives them a false impression regarding one of the most critical problems of our time, thereby stunting public debate and leaving both the public and policymakers ill-prepared to respond in a manner commensurate with the urgency and gravity of the threat.

This review examines the extent to which national broadcast and cable television news outlets are using the words “crisis” or “emergency” when reporting on climate change or global warming. It includes climate coverage for all of 2018 through April 24 of 2019.

Key Findings

- In 2018, **only 50 of 1,429 segments (3.5 percent) that mentioned climate change** referred to it as a crisis or emergency. Excluding Fox News, the number is still just 3.7 percent.
- **CNN had the most mentions in absolute terms (26), but trailed MSNBC and NBC in the rate of mentions.**

- **MSNBC** used the terms crisis or emergency in **7 percent** of segments; **NBC in 6 percent**; and **CNN in 3 percent**.
- **ABC only once** identified climate change or global warming as a crisis or emergency in 2018.
- Fox News and CBS each had five mentions. However, **all of Fox’s mentions were intended to mock the idea that climate change is a crisis or emergency**.
- In 2018, across all networks except for Fox News, guests used the language of crisis or emergency slightly more than hosts (24 segments to 22 segments). Only CNN hosts used the terms more than their guests.
- Notably, **of CNN’s 16 host mentions, six (38 percent) were by Van Jones** on his eponymous show. Even more remarkable is that his program airs every other Saturday, far less frequently than those of many of his CNN colleagues.
- Of the 24 guest mentions in 2018, **eight (32 percent) were by Sen. Bernie Sanders**.
- The first quarter of 2019 saw a huge spike in results due to President Trump’s declaration of a national emergency at the southern U.S. border. One hundred and forty-one segments referred to climate as an emergency or crisis from January 1, 2019 to April 24, 2019. That is almost triple the number for all of 2018.
- **Sixty-three percent** of those mentions reference the hypothetical **designation of climate change as a national emergency** by a Democratic president.
- Even excluding mentions related to the president’s national emergency declaration, there were **more uses of crisis and emergency when referring to climate change (52) in the first quarter of 2019 than in all of 2018 (50)**.
- **Thirty-seven percent** of the non-national emergency mentions were by **presidential candidates**.

Methodology

For this analysis, we used Nexis to search television transcripts from six national television news networks (ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, MSNBC and NBC) for the word “crisis” or “emergency” within 75 words of “climate change” or “global warming,” from January 1, 2018 to April 24, 2019. We used the “Group Duplicates” feature, set on “High Similarity.” Because the Fox News segments all attempt to dispel the notion of a crisis, they have been excluded from some of the findings.

We considered programming from only the morning and 4 p.m. to midnight blocks, and we examined all results to discard false positives. When crisis or emergency was used to describe climate change, we examined whether the speaker was a program host, guest, or both. In some cases, the host was quoting another person referring to climate change as a crisis or emergency. We further examined the 2019 results to consider whether the mentions were made in the context of discussing President Trump’s border emergency declaration.

The bulk of the analysis focuses on the 2018 results because it offers a full year’s worth of data to draw from. We separate the first quarter of 2019 results from 2018 to address events that have boosted the national discussion around climate change.

2018 Results

Not Calling It a Crisis

In 2018, the six major news networks ran 1,429 segments that mentioned climate change or global warming. Fifty of those segments, a mere 3.5 percent, called the phenomenon a crisis or emergency. In absolute terms, CNN had the most mentions with 26, but it trailed both MSNBC and NBC by rate of mentions. The top three networks by rate of using crisis or emergency language in 2018 were MSNBC at 7 percent, NBC at 6 percent and CNN at 3 percent. Fox News and CBS each had five mentions. All of Fox's were intended to mock the idea that climate change is a crisis or emergency. ABC identified climate change as a crisis or emergency only once in 2018. See Table 1 below for full data.

A Dire Warning

This review looks narrowly at whether hosts or guests are referring to climate change *explicitly* as a crisis or emergency. It is important to note that the absence of those words does not necessarily mean that the severity or urgency of the issue isn't being communicated. The release of the IPCC report in October and Volume 2 of the Fourth National Climate Assessment in November helped produce an uptick in climate coverage in 2018. Anecdotally, these publications also appear to have increased the sense of urgency in the media.

That said, what distinguishes terms like "crisis" and "emergency" from other means of describing a threat is that these terms are unambiguous regarding both the severity of the problem and the need for immediate action. Even very strong statements on the severity of the threats from climate change often place the consequences far in the future and give the impression, even if only implicitly, that the available time to respond effectively responses is far longer than the science demonstrates. The message that climate catastrophes are a distant, future threat—possibly one outside of the lifetime of most Americans—is not just false, but a barrier to the bold and urgent action needed to prevent those very catastrophes.

Fox News: An American Plague

In 2018, Fox News mentioned the words crisis or emergency in relation to climate change on five occasions. All five were attempts to minimize the issue with false reasoning, mockery, and misinformation.

Four of the five mentions appeared on two opinion shows, "Tucker Carlson Tonight" and "Watters World" with host Jesse Watters. The final one appeared on "The Five."

One example is a segment appearing on *Watters World* on December 22. Jesse Watters responds to a tweet from Al Gore stating that "People from all over the world are being forced to migrate because the climate crisis is affecting their livelihood." Watters responds:

And it's beautiful in Central America—it's like—what is it? Eighty-five and sunny every day? If there's a climate crisis down there, I want some of that climate crisis. I'm going to be on the next plane down there.

In fact, climate-driven migration is well documented and is even one of the core [climate change threats identified by the Pentagon](#).

Washington Post media columnist Margaret Sullivan, responding to [Jane Mayer's expose in *The New Yorker*](#) on the relationship between Fox News and the Trump administration, made the case that [Fox News has become "destructive,"](#) poisoning public discourse with misinformation. Its treatment of the climate crisis is a prime example. Mocking and attempting to undermine those who are raising the alarm on climate is beyond irresponsible. It's dangerous.

Host vs. Guest

In 2018, across all networks except Fox News, guests referred to climate change as a crisis or emergency slightly more often than hosts (24 mentions versus 22 mentions, respectively). CNN hosts are the only ones who used the terms more than their guests. Guests on MSNBC were responsible for six of nine mentions. On CBS, the number was four of five. ABC's only mention was by a guest and NBC's were split equally, at two and two.

Notably, of CNN's 16 host mentions, six (38 percent) were by Van Jones on his eponymous show. Even more remarkable is that his program airs every other Saturday—meaning that he appears far less frequently than many of his CNN colleagues. Of the 25 guest mentions across all networks in 2018, eight (32 percent) were by one individual, Sen. Bernie Sanders. See Table 1 below for full data.

Table 1. Number and percentage of 2018 segments referring to climate change as a crisis or emergency, and number of times that a host, guest, or both used those terms, by network.

Network	Used "crisis" or "emergency"	Total Segments	Percentage	Host Mention	Guest Mention
CNN	26	772	3.4%	16	11
MSNBC	9	145	6.2%	3	6
CBS News	5	150	3.3%	1	4
Fox News	5	227	2.2%	4	1
NBC News	4	71	5.6%	2	2
ABC News	1	64	1.6%	0	1
Total	50	1,429	3.5%	26	25
Excluding Fox	45	1,202	3.7%	22	24

2019 Results

A National Emergency

On February 15, 2019, President Trump declared a national emergency over a purported crisis at the border between the U.S. and Mexico. Before the announcement, there was much speculation in the media about whether Trump would declare an emergency, as he had suggested.

Both speculation about the announcement and the declaration itself generated voluminous media discussion of what precedent the declaration could set for the future.

Because of this discussion, the first two months of 2019 saw a huge spike in the link between climate change and the notion of a crisis or emergency. Major news networks generated 141 segments connecting climate change to the notion of a crisis or emergency from January 1, 2019 to April 24, 2019, nearly triple the total from all of 2018. Eighty-nine of those segments (63 percent), however, merely discussed the hypothetical designation of climate change as a national emergency by a future president. When looking at the period when the conversation around Trump’s declaration was in heaviest rotation across all networks—between January 8 and March 17—the percentage rises to 74.

Most commentators thought declaring a national emergency was a bad precedent because it could be indiscriminately used by both parties. And there is significantly less value in discussing climate change as something that one political party might designate an emergency than there is in acknowledging and explaining straightforwardly that climate is, in fact, an emergency. But the discussion of climate change as a possible subject of a future emergency declaration suggested, at least implicitly, that some people might believe it is a real crisis. And some commentators explicitly affirmed that view.

Table 2. Number of 2019 segments referring to climate change as a crisis or emergency, and number using those words without discussing a presidential emergency declaration, by network.

Network	Used “crisis” or “emergency”	Used “crisis” or “emergency” without discussing emergency declaration
CNN	68	21
MSNBC	29	11
CBS News	6	5
Fox News	34	14
NBC News	4	1
ABC News	4	0
Total	141	52

Climate 2020

Even without the results generated by the discussion of presidential emergency powers, the rate of discussing climate change as a crisis or emergency was higher in the first quarter of 2019 than in 2018. When excluding mentions related to the national emergency declaration, there were more uses of “crisis” or “emergency” (52) in the first quarter of 2019 than in all of 2018 (50), and the rate of mentions increased from 3.5 percent in 2018 to 7.4 percent.

Although the 2019 numbers exclude discussions of a presidential emergency declaration, they likely are inflated by other temporary factors, like the start of the Democratic presidential primary and developments around the Green New Deal resolutions in Congress. Of the 52 mentions in 2019 unrelated to a presidential emergency declaration, 37 percent were made by presidential candidates discussing their policy proposals and platforms, which sometimes included responses to the Green New Deal.

In addition, 7.4 percent is far too little. It suggests that when national television news networks discuss the most terrible and urgent challenge we face—an existential threat to which we must respond with extreme haste, at unprecedented scale—around 93 percent of the time they fail even to convey that it’s an emergency.

Conclusion

In 2002, GOP pollster Frank Luntz famously advised Republicans to use the phrase “climate change” instead of “global warming” because “climate change” sounded less frightening. Luntz knows that words matter—and the words we use make a difference in how issues are perceived and prioritized.

Warnings from the scientific community state that we must act boldly and immediately to prevent catastrophic, and potentially beyond-catastrophic, harm from greenhouse gas emissions. We have solutions at hand, but we are nearly out of time to implement them before we lock in devastating harm. It could not be clearer that climate change is, in the words of *Vox*’s David Roberts, “an emergency, damn it.”

When media outlets fail to convey this point, they fall far short of their duty. Americans rely on major television news programming to inform them about issues of national concern, including the foundational question of which issues we should prioritize. When media outlets consistently fail to use language that conveys that climate change is a crisis or emergency, they unwittingly put a heavy thumb on the scale in favor of complacency and inaction.

The crisis (or emergency) designation is accurate, concise and informative. It educates the public about the stakes of the issue, as well as the urgency, and it facilitates critical national conversation about what should be done in response. It is past time for the media to call the climate emergency what it is—and to cover it with the regularity, focus, and depth that an urgent, existential crisis merits.