

'Crisis' label for climate tests limit of objectivity

200 news outlets to increase coverage

BY VALERIE RICHARDSON THE WASHINGTON TIMES, Sept. 5, 2019

With its town hall Wednesday on climate change, CNN joined nearly 200 other media outlets vowing to increase their coverage of the "climate crisis," raising concerns that the real crisis may be less about rising temperatures than the erosion of journalistic objectivity.

The network aired an "unprecedented prime-time event on the climate crisis," a seven-hour marathon featuring 10 of the 2020 Democratic presidential primary candidates, who took questions early on from activists and audience members, with nary a skeptic in sight.

"We have 11 years to avoid the catastrophic consequences of this crisis. Food shortages. Rising sea levels. More extreme weather events like Hurricane Dorian," CNN host Wolf Blitzer said at the town hall.

CNN is hardly an outlier. The Columbia Journalism Review announced last week that more than 170 U.S. and international news outlets had signed onto Covering Climate Now, a project it

launched in April with the leftist magazine The Nation "aimed at strengthening the media's focus on the climate crisis."

The list leans heavily toward leftwing organs such as Democracy Now and Mother Jones but also includes mainstream outlets such as CBS News, PBS "NewsHour," a host of local television stations, and regional newspapers such as the Colorado Springs Gazette and the Minneapolis Star Tribune.

Those joining the initiative agreed to run "a week's worth of climate coverage in the lead-up to the United Nations Climate Action Summit in New York on Sept. 23," the Columbia Journalism Review said.

Placing more emphasis on climate reporting is one thing, critics say, but embracing the "crisis" label pushed by global warming activists shows the news organizations have taken sides on a complex, contentious issue and abandoned any pretense of balanced or neutral coverage.

"The fact that the Columbia Journalism Review has joined forces with farleftist publications The Guardian and The Nation to propagandize a phony climate panic tells you all you need to know about the sad and hopelessly biased state of legacy media outlets today," said Jim Lakely, a spokesman for the free market Heartland Institute.

Kelly McBride, senior vice president at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, defended the project as well as the "climate crisis" tag. She said "a majority of scientists would say it's a crisis."

"I think a lot of journalists have shifted from viewing the climate issue as one that is disputed to one that is affecting different communities in different ways," she said. "So rather than reporting on whether climate change is happening, they are reporting on the actual impact."

All reputable climate scientists, even those dismissed as "deniers," say the rise in atmospheric carbon dioxide levels, driven by human-caused emissions, has had an impact on the Earth's climate, but that's a far cry from declaring the planet in crisis.

Roy Spencer, a University of Alabama at Huntsville climate scientist formerly with NASA, called the "crisis" label a "gross exaggeration."

"To use a term like 'crisis' when discussing climate change is a gross exaggeration, especially for journalists," said Mr. Spencer, author of "Inevitable Disaster: Why Hurricanes Can't Be Blamed on Global Warming." "There is no aspect of climate change which is of 'crisis' proportions."

That is not the impression conveyed by the Columbia Journalism Review's Covering Climate Now, aimed at "reframing the way journalists cover climate change" at a time when "civilization is accelerating toward disaster."

"The media are complacent while the world burns," the Columbia Journalism Review declared in an April 22 headline accompanied by a wildfire photo.

Then again, NASA found that the area burned by global wildfires dropped by 25% from 2003 to 2019, raising the question: What happens to stories that run counter to the "climate crisis" narrative, already underreported by mainstream media outlets?

Climate skeptic Marc Morano, who runs many of those stories on his Climate Depot website, called the journalism initiative "totally unnecessary," given that the media are "already doing the most crappy reporting they could possibly do."

"This latest attempt basically says, 'Keep up more of the same crappy reporting,'" said Mr. Morano. "No dissent. No debate. Let's promote the U.N. line, let's promote the U.N. claims, let's promote the idea that the government can control the climate."

Tim Graham, vice president for media analysis at the conservative Media Research Center, accused the news industry of attempting to snuff debate on climate science and policy.

"The media elites are not only goaded by the left to see climate change as the overriding story of our lives, but they are goaded to make sure democracy dies in darkness," Mr. Graham said.

The Columbia Journalism Review's Emily Tamkin discouraged CNN from lapsing back into what she called a "both sides" approach to the climate story. She said "the moderators should operate on the assumption that the climate is in crisis and that this needs to be addressed."

Covering Climate Now comes after years of environmental groups urging media outlets to devote more coverage to climate change. The campaign drew headlines after MSNBC's Chris Hayes tweeted in July 2018 that climate was "a palpable ratings killer."

Liberal foundations have been eager to fund climate journalism. The Columbia Journalism Review initiative reported receiving \$1 million from Bill Moyers, president of the left-tilting Schumann Media Center, which also funds The Nation Institute and Democracy Now, according to InfluenceWatch.

The Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, which publishes the Review, has come under scrutiny in recent years for its Energy and Environmental Reporting Project, which is funded in part by Democratic megadonor George Soros' Open Society Foundations and several Rockefeller charities, known for their climate advocacy.

The industry group Energy in Depth accused Columbia of "paid-for journalism" over the project's 2017 article in the Los Angeles Times blaming the Exxon Valdez oil spill on climate change.

Two years earlier, an "Exxon Knew" article failed to disclose the project's funders, which the Times later added.

The Times said the reporting was not influenced by its funders, although Rockefeller Family Fund President Lew Wasserman said in 2016 that "we paid a team of independent reporters" from Columbia "to try to determine what Exxon and other U.S. oil companies had really known about climate science, and when."

Climate reporting has done well in the Columbia-hosted Pulitzer Prize competition. InsideClimate News was a 2016 Pulitzer finalist for its "Exxon Knew" series, and "Amity and Prosperity," an anti-fracking book by Eliza Griswold, won a Pulitzer for nonfiction this year.

Ms. Griswold is married to Steve Coll, dean of the Columbia journalism graduate school and a Pulitzer board member, who authored the 2012 book "Private Empire: ExxonMobil and American Power." The Pulitzer administrator said Mr. Coll recused himself from the voting in all book categories.

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