

## ALICE'S BLOG



### Reflections on news coverage of recent disasters

By Alice Loyd

October 23, 2017

**The impacts of climate disruption are being presented to the public in ways that won't disrupt the industrial economy.** In the recent series of hurricane disasters, the first and most repeated headlines reported power outages, as for example, "Authorities flew over the island Saturday, and were stunned by what they saw. No cellphones, water or power" ([CNN](#)). The authorities flying above Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria must also have seen houses without roofs and an island without trees, but almost every US media outlet began the hurricane narrative with an account of downed power lines and cell towers—damaged features of the industrial economy that required restoration. Power outages are undeniably important in today's world, but their importance relates to the needs of living beings—clean water to drink, safe food to eat, sanitation to prevent disease, and life-saving medical equipment. To find articles that might generate understanding of the real life consequences of hurricane tragedies, a reader has to search on sites such as [vox.com](#) "Why Puerto Rico's Power Outages Could Prove Very Deadly," and [motherjones.com](#) "Puerto Rico's Drinking Water-Crisis Isn't Going Away Anytime Soon." Fox News doesn't show that when tanks storing poisons leak into flood waters, people of color in whose neighborhoods the tanks were placed will be the ones most affected; I found that kind of reporting on [gizmodo.com](#) "Climate Change Will Always Hurt Poor People the Most." To learn that poor women and their children may lack the means to evacuate, we need a [medium.com](#) article "Surviving Disasters: 4 Ways to Help Women of Color Recover after Harvey and Irma." To see how government policies exacerbate the crisis, we need the stories offered on [guardian.com](#)—"Congress Could Help Puerto Rico Recover. What's Stopping It?"—and [theatlantic.com](#)—"What's Happening with the Relief Effort in Puerto Rico." To find out what happens to wild animals in a hurricane we need [miamiherald.com](#)'s "What Happens to Wild Animals during a Hurricane?", and to learn about animal rescue we need [bestfriends.org](#)—"Help for the Animals of Hurricane Harvey."

**News articles about the California fire disasters look more closely at causes than hurricane coverage does.** That may be because even though as with climate change causation is ascribed to human action—as in carelessness with campfires or in failing to thin dry forests, unlike climate change, fire disasters seem manageable within the current economic system. So articles about fire disasters say, for example, "Study says letting some wildfires burn would help control them, as drier forests and expanding development make the problem worse" ([insideclimatenews.org](#)); "As the city limits (of Santa Rosa) extended and the population increased by 135,000, the open land in that earlier fire corridor became a destination for developers" ([washingtonpost.com](#)). The "endlessly time-consuming and cost-prohibitive

restriction” of the National Environmental Policy Act and the Endangered Species Act “are literally killing our forests,” said Republican Rep. Tom McClintock on the floor of the California House ([latimes.com](http://latimes.com)). “The root problem,” says the same news story: “the US Forest Service is strapped for cash. Its firefighting budget amounts to a fraction of what it actually costs to fight fires,” which implies that the problem can be solved within the current system with more funding.

**I want to see news articles showing that the root problem of both fiercer fires and more destructive hurricanes is the overuse of fossil fuels**—the practice central to the over-exploitation of Earth resources by the industrial economy that a once-hospitable Earth System made possible. I admit the difficulty of conveying that complex picture within the demands journalists face today, and to be fair, the [Los Angeles Times](http://Los Angeles Times) regularly mentioned climate change as a factor in the recent blitzkrieg of fires. *Have you read a news story that reached the average American that links hurricane or fire catastrophes not just with climate change but with fossil fuel usage?* More important, have you seen news stories that link these catastrophes with preventive actions or policies? If so, please share them with us. Please also consider writing a letter to the editor of your local newspaper that establishes these connections; and if it’s published, share that with us, too.

**Maybe it will help for people to read about these associations. Apparently Republican voters are no more likely to acknowledge the human role in climate change following this last round of storms than they were in 2005 before Hurricane Katrina.** While, according to a September 2017 [Washington Post-ABC News poll](http://Washington Post-ABC News poll), 55% of all voters (up from 42% before Katrina) acknowledge a connection, there was a sharp split among parties: 23% of Republicans did (down from 24%), 56% of independents did (up from 42%), and 78% of Democrats did (up from 46%). Despite the recent hurricane damage in Texas and Florida, less than half of the respondents in those states acknowledge a connection ([houstonchronicle.com](http://houstonchronicle.com)). People might be more likely to see a connection if newscasters and others stopped referring to climate disasters as “natural.” That’s what Kerry Emanuel, hurricane specialist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, argued in an opinion editorial ([washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com)).

**The other sensationalized but rarely well-analyzed topic in the news is gun violence**, and this problem seems as divisive an issue as climate change. Guns and violence, like the use of fossil fuels, are intricately interwoven with American life: “Gun Violence in America, Explained in 17 Maps and Charts” ([vox.com](http://vox.com)). A [Pew Research](http://Pew Research) study found there are 270 million to 310 million guns in the United States. Nearly four-in-ten Americans either own a gun or live with someone who does, and 48% of Americans grew up in a household with guns. Nicole Hockley, the mother of Dylan, one of the children killed at Sandy Hook, observed that a “cyclical conversation” on guns moves from assault weapons, to arming more Americans, to mental illness, to policy proposals that may or may not relate at all to what actually occurred. She calls for a new conversation, one with a focus on different ways to save lives, rather than the same old gun law stalemate ([theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com)). One place to begin is with recognizing everyday gun violence. In our country nearly 275 people a day suffer “normal” gun violence, with a weekly total of around 1,925 people—more than triple the number of wounded and dead in Las Vegas. Among

gun casualties, 60% are due to suicide ([latimes.com](http://latimes.com)). Most gun murder victims are men between the ages of 15 and 34. Sixty-six % are black. At least 54% of mass shootings involve domestic or family violence, with the perpetrator shooting a current or former partner or a relative ([fivethirtyeight.com](http://fivethirtyeight.com)). Many media articles proposing solutions after the Las Vegas shooting agree on one point: addressing mass shootings is not the best way to resolve gun violence ([nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com)). In my view [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com) series from 2016 is still the most thorough analysis containing strategies that have been or might be adopted. The link is to the fourth of four articles written by Lois Beckett after the Orlando killing; the other articles in the series are shown at the bottom of that webpage. *Mother Jones* has compiled a widely used [data set](#) of mass killings (defined as four or more victims killed through 2012 and three or more victims killed beginning in 2013) from 1982 through 2017. Until 1996 the Center for Disease Control (CDC) conducted research on gun violence, but then Congress withdrew funding and also prohibited the CDC from advocating or promoting gun control ([businessinsider.com](http://businessinsider.com)). *Mother Jones* editor Monika Bauerlein has stated that “media coverage plays a key part in motivating mass shooters,” and an article by Mark Follman from 2016 outlines ways news outlets can help prevent copycat attacks ([motherjones.com](http://motherjones.com)).

**An opinion piece lamenting the typical “hands thrown up in the air” response to the barrage of horrible events** appeared October 2, 2017, under the headline “We Prefer Catastrophe” ([washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com)) Here I highlight one statement: “We act as though each of these disasters was somehow unforeseeable. The trail of blood from a tsunami of oversize weapons leads directly to the Las Vegas tragedy. The hurricanes, the flooding, the droughts, the wildfires, the tornadoes are all there in the scientific work that has been done on climate change.”

**What effect is the sensationalizing of disasters and technology having on our children and teens?** Author Sherry Turkle (*Reclaiming Conversation*) writes about young people managing the onslaught: “Catastrophes Have the Ring of an Act Of God. They Happen to Us and We Can’t See Them Coming” ([youtube.com](http://youtube.com)). Research published recently in *Child Development* found that in terms of adult activities, American 18-year-olds now look like 15-year-olds once did. The trend is widespread, appearing across gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, region, and both urban and rural locations. Less drinking, less sex, less working for pay might be coupled with fear of the future, or with a longer life expectancy giving more time for childhood, but the trend also might be linked to technology ([qz.com](http://qz.com)). Jean Twenge, professor of psychology at San Diego State University and lead author on that research project, gives weight to the technology theory, pointing out the social isolation that can result when phones replace human in-person contact as the means of connection ([theatlantic.com](http://theatlantic.com)). Whatever the cause of postponed adulthood or its possible relationship to smartphones and the ever-present bombardment of information, a minor movement has developed in Silicon Valley, as people who helped to develop information technologies now try to remove themselves from their reach. The Facebook engineer who created the “like” button has limited his use of Facebook and banned Snapchat and Reddit from his life. Tristan Harris, a former Google employee, says, “I don’t know a more urgent problem than this. It’s changing our democracy, and it’s changing our ability to have the conversations and relationships that we want with each other” ([theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com)).