

Climate Crisis

Why isn't the message on climate change getting through?

Reports of extreme weather events are still being described as unavoidable or rare, while the findings of scientists are often dismissed as inflexible dogma

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US president Donald Trump in Kerrville, Texas, following the floods. His second term will be a major blow to attempts to wean the world's largest economy off fossil fuels. Photograph: Haiyun Jiang/The New York Times

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Almost       I heard on radio or TV this summer, it strikes me that the conversation on climate change is in drastic need of a reset.

Time and again, reports are broadcast concerning extreme weather events, from unprecedented [rainfall in Asia](#) to searing [heatwaves in southern Europe](#), from record temperatures in the Arctic to devastating flooding in the US. One particularly [tragic event](#) this month was the loss of many young lives at a much-loved summer camp for girls in Texas.

Time and again, these events are described as once-in-a-lifetime occurrences, rare events that are hugely regrettable but unavoidable. Indeed, I was struck by the number of times the expression “acts of God” was used on US news channels – or “acts of satan” as conservative American journalist Cal Thomas put it on the Last Word on Today FM

Although understandable, this reaction is wide of the mark. This is because it has been known for many years now that the probability of such events occurring is greatly enhanced in a warming climate. Indeed, it is a matter of basic physics that, as our atmosphere warms, extreme weather events such as violent storms will undoubtedly become more frequent and more severe.

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Why isn't this message getting through? I lost count of the number of media reports I saw that failed to mention the issue of climate change altogether, or referred to it in passing as a side issue.

One reason may be a genuine misunderstanding of the science. It is true that there have been plenty of extreme weather events in the past and it is

also true that one cannot usually draw a direct link between a particular weather event and climate change. However, innumerable studies have shown such events are becoming much more common and are rendered much more likely by a warming atmosphere.

A second reason is politics. For some reason, a great many of those on the conservative side of the political spectrum seem unable to accept the findings of climate scientists, dismissing them as exaggerated or “woke”. Thus an entire field of science has been dragged into the culture wars.

Some argue that this rejection is not surprising as conservative parties tend to maintain close links with corporate interests. Given that a central finding of climate science is that global warming is closely linked with the emission of greenhouse gases from industrial activity – in particular with the burning of fossil fuels – it was entirely predictable that these industries would use their considerable wealth and power to convince their friends in politics to ignore the science.

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An extreme example of this behaviour can be found in the US . A striking characteristic of US president Donald Trump's “big beautiful bill” is a systematic attempt to hamper developments in renewable energy at every turn, whilst removing almost all constraints on the mining of fossil fuels. There is little question that Trump's second term will be a major blow to attempts to wean the world's largest economy off fossil fuels, a regression that is already causing several other countries to review their own commitments in reducing emissions.

One answer to this dangerous situation is communication. After all, not many people – whatever their politics – would genuinely wish an unstable climate on their children. What is needed is a sea-change in attitude, similar to what occurred in the case of the tobacco industry. As historians such as Naomi Oreskes have pointed out, the tobacco lobby used its power and influence to block action on smoking for many years. Yet the truth eventually prevailed and smoking is no longer the menace it once was.

[Let's inconvenience some oligarchs before we come for exhausted mothers]

Thus, it is incumbent on scientists and science communicators to redouble efforts to convey the threat posed by climate change. It seems to me the best way to do this is to explain both the basics of climate science and aspects of the practice of science such as convergence (how different lines of evidence can point to a single explanation) and consensus (how scientists come to agree, often after great initial scepticism and much debate, on that explanation).

The alternative is that the painstaking findings of climate scientists are perceived as inflexible dogma, a not uncommon view that is as dangerous as it is mistaken.

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