



# MEDIA MYTHS FREE MARKET PROJECT

AUDITING THE MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF THE FREE MARKET SYSTEM



FREE MARKET PROJECT . 325 SOUTH PATRICK ST . ALEXANDRIA, VA 22314 . (703)683-9733 . WWW.FREEMARKETPROJECT.ORG

December 6, 2005

## 2005 Hurricane Season Recap

# More Hot Air Networks Link Global Warming to Increase in Hurricanes

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2005 Atlantic hurricane season brought with it a storm of controversy that is still having impact. When two studies alleged a link between increasing strength of storms and global warming, climate change advocates found another reason to blast the United States for not signing the Kyoto treaty.

Now, more than 8,000 representatives from 180 nations are debating the future of that pact at the United Nations Climate Change Conference.

Unfortunately, flawed media coverage of the reported hurricane link will make that discussion more complicated.

Nearly 40 percent of Americans now believe there is a link - and that impacts public policy decision making, even though the nation's hurricane experts and numerous other professionals dispute global warming's role.

The Media Research Center's Free Market Project looked at how broadcast news -

ABC, CBS and NBC - covered hurricanes and the issue of climate change from June 1 through November 30.

"Scientists have long warned that global warming could make hurricanes increasingly destructive. They couldn't prove it until now."

-- ABC's Bill Weir,  
"Good Morning America," Sept. 16, 2005

Here are those findings:

- **Networks Link Storms and Warming:** The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) said that this busy hurricane season was part of a natural cycle. But when networks discussed the powerful storms and climate change, they blamed global warming for stronger hurricanes 72 percent of the time.
- **No Balance of Experts:** Stories included both sides of the

discussion less than half the time (45 percent) and that led to skewed coverage of hurricane season.

- **Little Mention of the Hurricane Cycle:** NOAA explained that the heavy hurricane season was the result of a decades-long natural cycle, but that information was only found in 38 percent of the stories.
- **ABC the Worst:** ABC was consistently among the worst networks in every category analyzed. The network made the connection between climate change and hurricanes and then gave little time to opposing views. It mentioned the natural cycle in only 20 percent of the network's stories.
- **CBS the Best:** CBS was far and away the best network on the issue of hurricanes and global warming. Its stories presented more balance than either ABC or NBC, and it delivered the most complete explanation of both the natural hurricane cycle and the history of other storms.



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# More Hot Air

## Networks Link Global Warming to Increase in Hurricanes

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The images of the 2005 hurricane season are seared into the minds of the American public. Hurricane Katrina's devastation of the Gulf region dominated news coverage, but it was just one of 13 hurricanes during the record-setting season. Twenty-five total storms occurred in the Atlantic basin from June 1 to November 30, prompting some in the media to blame climate change for the increase.

ABC's Bill Weir summed up that network's take on the season after his September 16 "Good Morning America" piece about Hurricane Ophelia: "Scientists have long warned that global warming could make hurricanes increasingly destructive. They couldn't prove it until now."

The "proof" that Weir cited wasn't proof at all. He was pointing to a new study that claimed "there has been a substantial increase in the intensity of hurricanes," according to Georgia Tech Professor Peter Webster. Webster's study blamed warming water in the Gulf for the record-breaking storm season.

There is far from universal agreement on that point. The

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-- Reporter Brian Ross  
"20/20," September

nation's hurricane experts - the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration - tried repeatedly to set the record straight and make it clear global warming had nothing to do with the increase. As NOAA meteorologist Gerry Bell explained on NBC's September 21 "Today," "We're in the heart of an active hurricane era, and that means we're going to expect increased hurricane seasons for perhaps another decade or even longer."

NOAA has been frank about the hurricane season, making it clear that climate change wasn't linked with the increase in storms. "This era has been unfolding in the Atlantic since 1995, and is expected to continue for the next decade or perhaps longer," said an article on the NOAA Web site.

But NOAA's scientific explanations were often overlooked as reporters sought to find someone or something to blame for the destructive hurricane season. While they spent substantial time to find agencies and individuals responsible for the flooding in New Orleans, they spent far less energy explaining the actual causes of Katrina or any other hurricane. The reporting was often one-sided and based largely on new and controversial studies.

Journalists repeatedly claimed that warming had led to stronger storms, while leaving out experts who challenged that assessment. Few reports mentioned that hurricanes operate on a two- to three-decade cycle. Instead, stories pointed out that 2005 was a record year for storms without making clear how limited the historical record really was.

This coverage was worse than incomplete – it was political. By ignoring some of the scientific facts and squeezing out one side of the debate, journalists supported climate change advocates who insisted that people are causing global warming.

These assessments come from an analysis by the Media Research Center's Free Market Project (FMP). FMP looked at how broadcast news covered hurricanes and the issue of climate change during the 2005 Atlantic hurricane season. This wasn't a typical global warming debate. The government's own hurricane experts and weather experts of all types disputed the connection between the storms and climate

change, but much of the coverage didn't reflect that reality. In all, there were 29 separate stories on ABC, CBS and NBC from June 1 through November 30 that discussed hurricanes and global warming.

## **Powerful Storms**

According to an October 2 Washington Post-ABC News poll, 39 percent of the American public believed global warming was to blame for this year's severe hurricane season. Is it any wonder? Hurricane Katrina was one of the dominant news stories of 2005. Americans sat mesmerized as they watched historic New Orleans fall victim to the storm.

In the midst of that coverage journalists tried to explain the increase in the number and intensity of powerful storms. All three networks looked at global warming as a possible cause for the record hurricane season. The vast majority of those stories (72 percent) linked global warming to stronger hurricanes.

NBC was especially clear about it – connecting climate change to stronger storms in five out of six stories it did on the topic. Robert Bazell, of "NBC Nightly News," did more than suggest cause and effect. In the September 18 broadcast, he said: "Worldwide, the number of Category 4 and 5 hurricanes like Katrina doubled in the past 20 years compared to the 20 years before. Why? During the same period, the oceans got one degree warmer."

There are numerous climatologists who say that isn't the case, but he didn't talk to them. He talked to Webster from Georgia Tech who spoke about his own controversial findings. "There is a warming globe, and we feel in a sense that the ... increased intensity, which is occurring globally, is a response to that," said Webster.

Rather than follow up Webster with a representative from NOAA or one of the many climatologists who debate that position, Bazell added Dr. Stephen Schneider of Stanford University, who took that claim even further, warning "What happens when we warm up three or five, which is projected in the next several decades to the end of the century?" Bazell added no balance to the story and his choice of Schneider was ironic. Schneider, a critic of climate change skeptics, has taken the position that the media give too much coverage to opinions out of the mainstream and that "contrarians are given disproportionate representation in the media."

By his own argument, Schneider's position on this point should have been ignored by Bazell. Instead, Bazell called Schneider's three- or five-degree warning "a sobering question."

Giving only one side of the argument was common, especially at ABC, which often included experts from only one side or simply stated the findings of the Georgia Tech study without opposing comments.

Both ABC and NBC included experts from both sides of the debate only one-third of the time (two stories out of six for both networks.)

At least “20/20” reporter Brian Ross acknowledged the idea that linking climate change to hurricane strength was controversial. In the September 23 ABC show, he explained as part of a one-sided story: “But there is another explanation, one that is highly controversial, but in the last few weeks has gained significant scientific credibility. Global warming. An explanation that essentially blames man for heating up the world and its seas, producing much stronger hurricanes.”

Ross went on to say “what adds to the credibility are three new reports by prominent scientists published in two prestigious scientific journals.”

He then brought on Kevin Trenberth, head of the climate analysis section of the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colo., and “author of one of the papers linking stronger hurricanes to warmer seas and global warming caused by humans.”

“There’s good evidence to show that category 4 and 5 storms are indeed becoming more common and a bigger part of the overall picture of the hurricanes in the world,” said Trenberth.

The story then included comment from Professor Hugh Willoughby, “the government’s

“NOAA research shows that the tropical multi-decadal signal is causing the increased Atlantic hurricane activity since 1995, and is not related to greenhouse warming.”

— National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

former hurricane research director,” who admitted to changing his opinion and now agreeing with Trenberth. “Global warming makes this nasty weather nastier,” he claimed.

At the very end, Ross added one short statement from meteorologist Bill Gray of Colorado State University who disagreed. “The humans aren’t doing it, it’s nature,” explained Gray.

Only CBS worked at giving both sides of the story. In 63 percent of the CBS stories involving experts, the network delivered both sides of the controversy. Anchor Bob Schieffer set up a September 23 “CBS Evening News” story with this question: “Is it part of a predictable cycle, or are we paying the price for global warming?”

That story presented almost a Cliff Notes version of hurricanes for the viewer and included everything from hurricane history to information on the regular, decades-long cycle. Toward the end of the story, reporter Elizabeth Kaledin asked and answered the pertinent question: “Can global warming be blamed? The consensus is ‘Not really.’”

CBS didn’t just deliver the government position either. Russ Mitchell interviewed both sides during his September 22 “Early Show” story, including a NOAA representative and meteorologist Michael Schlacter of Weather 2000.

Schlacter warned that “it actually only takes maybe 2 to 4 degrees Fahrenheit to be the difference between being able to support a Category 3 hurricane and a Category 5 hurricane.”

While Schlacter didn’t name global warming as the only possible culprit, he made it clear he thought temperature made the storms more powerful.

There is far more to that story. In an October 20 piece published in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, climatologist Pat Michaels explained: “Almost all severe hurricanes must experience water of 82 degrees sometime in their life cycle. Oddly enough, there is no relationship between more intense hurricanes and ocean surface temperature once this threshold is reached.”

Although network reporters didn’t make it clear, the debate was about the intensity of storms.

Even climate alarmists agreed “that global warming does not have any impact on the frequency” of hurricanes, explained Kerry Emanuel, MIT professor of atmospheric science, as quoted in the September 26 Los Angeles Times.



## Weather or Not?

It was a challenge for reporters to describe a topic that came across as wonky and technical as a hurricane cycle. In one of the clearer reports, Kelly Cobiella detailed why the hurricane season varies on the July 10 "CBS Evening News."

"It's because of the Atlantic Decadal Oscillation, a global temperature dance between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Every 20 to 40 years one ocean cools; right now it's the Pacific," she explained.

NOAA put it this way on its Web site: "These cycles, called 'the tropical multi-decadal signal,' typically last several decades (20 to 30 years or even longer)." The agency elaborated: "NOAA research shows that the tropical multi-decadal signal is causing the increased Atlantic hurricane activity since 1995, and is not related to greenhouse warming."

According to NOAA, the 2005 Atlantic hurricane season set numerous records including 25 named storms. (Another named hurricane occurred in early December, but that was after the official end of the season.) NOAA resorted to Greek letters to designate them, the first time ever since storms were first named in 1953. The 13-hurricane season also topped the record of 12 hurricanes set in 1969. However, 2005 didn't surprise experts that much. NOAA had predicted 18 to 21 storms and 9 to 11 hurricanes.

The rest of the scientific case against a global warming link to hurricanes didn't receive the attention it deserved. As storms in the Atlantic and Gulf increased, they declined in the East Pacific. NOAA's May 16 "2005 East Pacific Hurricane Season Outlook" called for "below normal activity" predicting 11-15 tropical storms, with six to eight of them hurricanes.

The season ended with 15 named tropical storms and seven of those hurricanes. Only one became a major hurricane, which was three below average.

"There tends to be a seesaw effect between the East Pacific and North Atlantic hurricane seasons," said Jim Laver, director of NOAA's Climate Prediction Center in Camp Springs, Md. "When there is above normal seasonal activity in the Atlantic there tends to be below normal seasonal activity in the Pacific.

This has been especially true since 1995. Six of the last ten East Pacific hurricane seasons have been below normal, and NOAA scientists are expecting lower levels of activity again this season."

There are other problems with the connection and even with the studies that indicated there is a relationship between sea temperatures and the intensity of hurricanes. Cato's Michaels critiqued the study done by Georgia Tech's Peter Webster.

According to Michaels, the analysis using "data back to 1970, released a paper arguing that hurricane severity has increased." That ignored the current stage of the hurricane cycle, Michaels explained. He argued for a more complete study: "Had he looked at reliable hurricane-hunter aircraft data over the Atlantic back to 1945, he would have discovered that the proportion of severe storms was exactly the same in the 1940s and 1950s as it is now."

"The conclusion many draw from papers such as these is that anthropogenic global warming from the burning of fossil fuels by humans is causing more lethal storms. A closer look, though, reveals not human actions but rather natural cycles are the primary cause," Michaels concluded.

## Those who ignore history...

Watching a storm with the destructive force of Hurricane Katrina, it is easy to imagine that it was the worst hurricane in American history - but it wasn't.

The 1900 Galveston hurricane killed between 8,000 and 12,000 people in a city of 36,000. The 1928 hurricane that hit Florida took nearly 3,500 lives and two hurricanes in 1893 each reportedly killed more than 2,000 people. Even climate change advocates don't claim that global warming caused those deadly hurricanes.

But that history was seldom present when reporters explored the causes behind the 2005 season. Only four stories out of those studied (14 percent) presented any historical reference for viewers. One rare case was the September 22 "Early Show" where reporter Russ Mitchell attempted to remind those watching of modern hurricane history. "The experts will tell us back in the '50s and '60s we saw some monster hurricanes but we just have very short memories," he said.

Mitchell was right. While each network made some sort of historical reference, there was little explanation of the limits of the historical record.

Satellite monitoring of hurricanes goes back to 1970 and hurricane hunter aircraft a few decades before that. That means storms that didn't threaten land, such as the 26th storm of 2005, could easily have gone undiscovered and uncounted less than a century ago.

## Methodology

To study any report that referenced a relationship between hurricanes and global warming, the Free Market Project combed through the thousands of stories that dealt with hurricanes this season. Of those, 29 stories from news programs on NBC, CBS, and ABC looked at that connection during the Atlantic hurricane season – from June 1 through

November 30. Stories were examined for balance in selection of experts and discussion of academic research purporting to show a relationship between hurricanes and global warming.

## Conclusion

Hurricane Katrina will likely live on as a collective memory just as the Challenger explosion, 9/11 and other similar national tragedies captured on television. But there is a discrepancy between what people witnessed and what they believe.

According to an October 2 Washington Post-ABC News poll, 39 percent of the American public believes global warming was to blame for this year's hurricane season, despite scientific statements to the contrary.

TV news shows are, in part, responsible for this sad state of affairs. And that misinformation then serves as a basis for public policy decisions.

Of the three major networks, only CBS did a good job of both informing the public of essential information and balancing it with newsworthy theories claiming a link between global warming and hurricanes.

To report studies and theory is the obligation of journalists. CBS did that much. But the other two networks, especially ABC, went further and reported them as fact or delivered the news in an

unbalanced way that gave the viewer that impression.

In ABC's September 23 "20/20," reporter Brian Ross discussed different theories behind the storms including this: "The hurricanes are seen as being foretold in the Bible as God's warning to repent." Perhaps, hidden in that warning, is advice for the network journalists as well – to repent from their scaremongering and deliver balanced and authoritative news.

Here are a few recommendations to help the networks accomplish that:

- **Give Both Sides:** Stories repeatedly described new studies without pointing out how they differed from existing scientific beliefs. Networks have an obligation to present the other side, especially when they represent a non-partisan group such as NOAA.
- **Don't Report Studies As Fact:** That should be Journalism 101, but somehow the problem crept into the news as broadcasters tried to cut stories to keep them short for TV.
- **Don't Hype Hurricane Season 2006:** NOAA experts predict that 2006 and beyond will feature heightened hurricane activity unrelated to climate change. Journalists need to understand this and not hype every single storm like it is the next potential Katrina.