



APOCALYPSE SOON

[Eleanor Cummins](#)/October 27, 2021

Fox Weather Doesn't Deny Climate Change. It Just Ignores It.

On its debut day, the new streaming service treated climate as a separate issue, instead of acknowledging the way global warming drives the severe weather it covers.



On Sunday night, two meteorological phenomena known as a bomb cyclone and an atmospheric river joined forces to rattle the West Coast, knocking out power to hundreds of thousands in Washington State, inundating California with record rainfall, and setting up Fox Weather, the Murdoch family's newest platform, for an energetic debut. At 6 a.m. Eastern on Monday, the countdown clock on the free, ad-supported app gave way to a livestream of the caffeinated meteorologists inside America's Weather Station. Within minutes, morning hosts Jason Frazer and Britta Merwin were spinning viewers around in circles, transporting them from construction on Sacramento's aging levee to hurricane recovery in the Gulf, all in the turn of a camera.

Journalists, media critics, and spectators have fretted over the launch of Fox Weather for months—and with good reason, given its parent network has been a major source of misinformation about anthropogenic climate change for more than a decade. Of 247 Fox News segments touching on the topic in 2019, for example, 212 were “dismissive,” cast doubt, “or employed fear mongering when discussing climate solutions,” according to an analysis by the consumer rights advocacy group Public Citizen. “The danger of [Fox] running a weather channel,” Geoffrey Supran, a research fellow in the history of science at Harvard University, told *The Guardian* in July, “is that if they pervert news about the weather anything like how they’ve perverted news about climate change and energy politics, millions of Americans will be further misled about this crisis.”

Fox Weather's 100-plus team members, who are funded by a \$10 million investment from Fox News Media, have been quick to volley back. “If you’re asking about climate change, climate change is part of our lives. It’s how we live. It’s not going to be ignored,” Sharri Berg, an executive overseeing the station launch, told *Variety* last week, adding, “We will be reporting facts.” (Berg has already assigned a meteorologist to cover the 2021 U.N. Climate Change Conference in Glasgow.) “I’m part of a team of some of the best science journalists in the country,” Florida-based producer Emilee Speck wrote Monday in response to tweets critical of Fox’s current climate coverage. “If you have followed my reporting, you’ll know I wouldn’t sign up for anything I couldn’t stand by.”

But if the launch of the 24/7 broadcast is any indication of the service's overall approach, Fox Weather seems likely to treat climate change as a real but standalone story, not the engine driving every wildfire and bomb cyclone. In emphasizing the symptoms of global warming but ignoring the underlying disease, it ensures viewers consume a dozen weather updates without realizing that climate change is, in fact, already infecting every aspect of our lives. In the first six hours of the show, I saw storm-front reports, turbulence reports, school-day forecasts, a power outage tracker, expert advice on filing for homeowner's insurance, viewer-created videos under the #FoxWeather hashtag, and plenty of Monday night sports banter—all slickly produced and often genuinely informative. What I didn't hear was mention of the scientific consensus that climate change is well underway.

Weather is a tricky business. Meteorologists rely on an international network of mostly government-funded satellites and supercomputers to make predictions and a host of branded platforms to get their forecasts out into the world—and hopefully return a profit. “We’ve seen so many companies come into the weather space and then either not succeed or decide to move in a different direction,” Jon Porter, the chief meteorologist at AccuWeather, told *The Washington Post*. In 2008, for example, NBC pulled the plug on its Weather Plus service after just four years. Fox is betting the landscape looks a little different today, despite the competition it will face from stalwarts like the Weather Channel and AccuWeather NOW. (So far, it seems to be working: As of Tuesday afternoon, Fox Weather was the top free app in the App Store.)

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As climate reporter Geoff Dembicki told NPR last week, what may seem like a contradiction between Fox News’s climate denial and Fox Weather’s core purpose actually makes perfect business sense: The “simple, coherent strategy behind all of this,” he said, is that Fox “seems to do whatever will make it the most money in a given situation.” Climate denial works for the news channel. Going carbon neutral, which the Murdochs did back in 2011, well before any of their industry peers, works for the parent company, which has saved tens of millions of dollars. And Fox Weather presents an opportunity to play it straight while profiting off climate change, which drives extreme weather, which drives ratings—a brilliant, and dystopian, strategy.

If the Fox Weather team accepts the reality of climate change but focuses on a decontextualized vision of “weather” whenever possible, well, it will have plenty of company. In the aftermath of Hurricane Ida, for example, Media Matters, a watchdog group, found that ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, NBC, and MSNBC ran 774 stories about the storm between August 27 and 30, but only 34 stories—or 4 percent of the total coverage—ever mentioned climate change. While newscasters of a different persuasion may balk at the comparison, they, like Fox, are participating in a coverage strategy that allows viewers to draw the erroneous conclusion that climate change is still temporally and geographically distant. If their basement floods, or a tree topples onto their new car, the implicit logic goes, it’s not the fault of a few greedy companies whose fossil fuel products and misinformation campaigns have made these events vastly more likely—it’s just the awesome, uncontrollable power of Mother Nature.

Janice Dean, the meteorologist and *Fox & Friends* co-host, unintentionally articulated this common belief undergirding this approach when she visited the Fox Weather set to celebrate

the streaming debut on Monday. “I have friends at the other channels,” she said. “It’s something about the weather that, you know, there’s no politics involved—we all love each other.”

The notion of weather existing in some sort of vacuum has always been farcical, but it’s especially funny when Fox Weather’s in-app and programmatic sponsors include the prepper-baiting propane lobby; the absurdly jingoistic sister network Fox Business; brutal ads for *Cops*, Fox’s long-running reality TV series; and Assured Guaranty, a municipal bond insurance company. Unfortunately, this kind of apolitical posturing persists, in part, because it bridges the waning rhetoric of climate denial and the growing emphasis on climate delay. Delay may *sound* better than denial, but both camps are funded by the same monied interests, including utilities and fossil fuel interest groups, and they’re leading to the same disastrous consequences. When news outlets fail to link weather to climate, and climate to politics, as Mark Hertsgaard wrote in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, that “leaves the public not just uninformed but *misinformed*.”

These sins of omission also enable the same short-sighted politics from which meteorologists claim to stand apart. Joe Manchin, the Democratic senator from West Virginia, embodies this strategy of slow-motion mass suicide. Manchin “has long acknowledged the impacts of climate change in West Virginia,” according to his spokesperson. He also just happens to be opposing a clean electricity program that, in the words of *The New York Times*, “may be the last chance for Congress to reduce planet-warming emissions before the effects of climate change become catastrophic.” It cannot be stressed enough that our system of governance is so broken that one man representing 0.5 percent of Americans stands between the United States and mitigation of an existential threat. But Manchin’s behavior mirrors the commonplace cognitive dissonance at the center of so much mainstream climate discourse.

Some may say that, in the case of climate change, politics only gets in the way. It’s certainly true that “our strong frames of political polarization continue to impose their overwhelming filters on the information we receive and dominate our opinions on climate change,” as climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe wrote in her newest book, *Saving Us*. But it’s still possible for

public sentiment on climate change to move and for the end result to be the decisive political action we need. Consider, for example, the latest [America in One Room Survey](#), which polled a national sample of 962 Americans on their climate and energy positions before and after they attended an event to deliberate on relevant policy. While the control group's attitudes hardly fluctuated, the attitudes of those participating in the event moved on [68 of 72 questions](#), including a bump from 63 to 75 percent on the need for net-zero emissions. Change, in other words, is still possible, it just doesn't get far without good information, compelling storytelling, and healthy debate—the very things that passive news consumption and a hard and fast divide between weather and climate prevent.

It's easy to see why climate change as a siloed story—a special report cordoned off from the weather overhead—holds such an appeal. For those of us concerned about the impending apocalypse, global warming is everywhere. It is an unfathomable [hyperobject](#), a shadow world that stalks my walks through New York City, slicing through a sunny day with questions like, *How high will the waters one day rise—above my ankles, above my head, above the buildings across the street?*

But for TV news consumers, climate change takes up just a [cumulative 112 minutes](#) a year, according to a 2020 Media Matters analysis of nightly news and Sunday morning political programming on ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox. While Fox Weather may yet prove its commitment to climate coverage, everything from the [Sunrise Movement's momentous hunger strike](#) currently underway outside the White House down to the most basic linkage between the West Coast bomb cyclone and the anthropogenic climate change [fueling it](#) was available for coverage on launch day. These stories are the real eye of the storm.

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