

As climate issues intensify the media, incredibly, throws in the towel

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OPINION: GLOBALLY, 2010 was a year of weather-related disasters on an almost unprecedented scale. Last year was worse, with a record \$380 billion in economic losses attributed to “natural” disasters, many climate-related, according to insurance giant Munich Re.

Few experts expect to see any break in this upward trend this year, or any time soon. Instead, as record emissions of greenhouse gases continue unabated, the climate system is now behaving precisely as scientists have been projecting for decades. The rapid build-up of energy in the system is the “engine” that is fuelling extremes, from storms and floods to severe droughts.

This time last January, an area of Australia twice the size of France lay submerged. Last summer, more than 3,000 monthly weather records were shattered across continental United States. Meanwhile, Ireland, has endured a series of so-called one in a century flooding events in recent years.

Whether or not you choose to “believe” in climate change and what is fuelling it, only the most obstinate or delusional persist in denying that it’s real, it’s serious and it’s getting worse.

Of course, none of this is news. But what is news is that it’s not news. At a time of unprecedented weather disasters fuelled by climate change, the media has, both here and abroad, largely walked away from the story. Given what is at stake, this is a truly extraordinary state of affairs.

RTÉ, under its public service broadcasting charter, is committed to covering a wide range of areas, from news and current affairs to entertainment, religion, children’s programmes, sport, etc. Nowhere in its extensive charter is there any mention of the environment.

Indeed, since Paul Cunningham left early in 2011 for a new posting, the position of environment correspondent has been “suppressed”, a spokesperson told me this week. This means RTÉ isn’t even considering filling it. It’s simply not a priority for a station with 2,000 staff and a €350 million-plus annual budget. And it shows. November 28th last marked the first day of the crucial UN climate conference. Not alone did RTÉ have no reporter in Durban, the COP 17 conference didn’t even make that evening’s TV bulletins.

Nor is RTÉ alone in throwing in the towel. This newspaper’s environmental coverage peaked in 2007 and 2008, with, on average 6.2 mentions per edition of the phrase “climate change” or “global warming”. By 2011, coverage had slumped to about 1.5 mentions per issue – the lowest level since 2004.

Overall, that’s a 75 per cent drop in coverage intensity in just four years (in contrast, the UK *Guardian*, with twice the circulation of *The Irish Times*, gave climate issues seven times greater frequency of coverage in 2011).

The situation is much worse elsewhere, with many media outlets, notably those controlled by Rupert Murdoch, engaging in open ideological warfare against climate science.

Globally, the decline in newspaper coverage is flowing from the top down. The number of newspaper editorials on climate change fell by over 50 per cent between 2009-2011, according to monitoring website, Dailyclimate.org.

Eric Pooley of Harvard University framed the issue like this: “Suppose our leading scientists discovered a

meteor, hurtling toward the earth . . . governments had less than 10 years to divert or destroy it. How would news organisations cover this story?”

Even in an era of recession and financial distress they would, he argued, “throw teams of reporters at it”. The race to stop the meteor “would be the story of the century”. The analogy is imperfect but useful. The man-made meteor that is climate change is right on target to render much of the planet uninhabitable later this century. The Harvard study pointed to a combination of “climate fatigue” among editors and editorial cutbacks leading to the loss of specialist, science-literate reporters.

Given the complexity of the issues involved, non-specialist journalists are often easy meat to be drawn into spurious “debates” which give unwarranted airtime to contrarians and industry shills (this is known as bias-in-balance). And, as in RTÉ’s case, without a senior correspondent to guide them, the news desk often simply ducks the story entirely. The lone voices in the Montrose wilderness (Duncan Stewart and Met Éireann) have this in common: neither is on the staff of RTÉ.

Analyst and author, Prof Justin Lewis argues that the media is collectively engaged in “one of the most obstinate displays of inertia in human history, a time when, like latter-day Neros, we fiddle while our planet burns”.

Environmental scientist Prof Robert Brulle adds: “people take their cues about what’s important from what shows up in the headline of a newspaper”.

The decline in public understanding of the gravity of climate change is directly attributable, he says, to decisions being made at editorial meetings every day.

It took forecaster Evelyn Cusack to remind us one evening last September: “climate change is not a matter of faith, it’s a matter of physics”.

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