

Who's Really Responsible for Hurricane Relief Aid?

You wouldn't know if you only rely on corporate media.

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In addition to providing informational resources for green citizens, a key aspiration of green news reporting is to help people grasp the big picture. For journalists investigating the devastating hurricanes and tropical storms of recent weeks, this means giving the public the context of these events, providing causal explanations to settle issues of accountability, and determining the duty of care that government (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/politics>), industry, and individuals have for the people and places harmed. This is not an easy task, as most of us have become accustomed to commercial media's short attention span—an outcome of their overreliance on official sources, corporate PR, and codependent relationships with advertisers (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14616700306492?journalCode=rjos20>).

We can illustrate this tension by reviewing the way the mainstream media reported on Hurricane Harvey relief aid. It has been over a month since Harvey hit the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, stalling over the Houston area and causing major flooding. But media attention on Harvey's effects quickly shifted as journalists turned away from Houston to focus on a series of new hurricanes ripping through the Caribbean. It will be months before the damage to the Houston area will be fully assessed, making Harvey one of the biggest ongoing stories of environmental catastrophe the media aren't covering.

Context is vital for green reporting. According to atmospheric scientists (<http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/article171632462.html>), the ecological context for Hurricane Harvey was shaped by a mix of warmer ocean water and variable natural conditions, such as changing ocean currents, volcanic eruptions, the sun's intensity, and so on. Higher sea temperatures add fuel to hurricanes, increasing their energy and destructive power, which happened to Harvey as it moved into the Gulf. Scientists found evidence that global warming led to the higher ocean temperature behind Harvey's intensification.

Despite the daily abundance of source material, commercial media only break their silence on global warming when extreme weather events like Harvey make the ecological context hard to ignore. A recent study showed (<https://www.citizen.org/stormofsilence>) that nearly three quarters of all news items on Harvey in which climate change (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/environment>) or global warming were mentioned came from four sources (CNN, *The Houston Chronicle*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*). These reports, along with one in the *L.A. Times*, offered multidimensional coverage of climate science, political action, and public policies related to adaptation (such as urban planning) and mitigation (for example, renewables).

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Meanwhile, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Chicago Tribune*, Fox News, and *USA Today* ran mixed pieces that gave space to climate-change denial. Fox attacked other media outlets for discussing the topic in relation to Harvey, saying that doing so was premature and politicized the suffering of Texans. *The New York Post*, ABC and NBC said nothing about climate change.

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In assessing accountability, green reporting explains that carbon dioxide is the most potent ingredient in the chemical cocktail that causes global warming (<https://climate.nasa.gov/blog/260/>). There is plenty of blame to go around for human-caused CO₂ emissions, especially in societies accustomed to car-based transit systems, industrial agriculture, refrigeration, air conditioning, and other features of consumerism (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/consumer-behavior>).

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It's easy to blame consumers for their wasteful lifestyles; but when reporting on questions of accountability for Hurricane Harvey it's important to underscore the overwhelming impact of the fossil-fuel industry, which is responsible for two-thirds of the world's greenhouse-gas emissions (<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/04/170418160036.htm>).

In the case of Hurricane Harvey, this is especially pertinent, because oil refineries and petrochemical production are concentrated in the US along the Gulf coast, where Houston lies. These businesses have [a reputation for withholding information](https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/exxon-knew-about-climate-change-almost-40-years-ago/) (<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/exxon-knew-about-climate-change-almost-40-years-ago/>) about their liability for carbon emissions and their facilities' vulnerability to, and preparedness for, extreme weather.

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As evidence emerged in state and federal regulatory filings concerning the damage to oil and petrochemical facilities, [this issue became depressingly clear](#) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/29/business/energy-environment/harvey-energy-industry-texas.html>). *The New York Times* reported (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/09/08/us/houston-hurricane-harvey-hazardous-chemicals.html>) that when the hurricane hit, “damaged plants released an estimated 4.6 million pounds of airborne emissions [while] at least 14 toxic waste sites were flooded or damaged,” and nearly 100 spills of toxic substances occurred. One “giant plastics plant … released about 1.3 million pounds of excess emissions, including toxic gases like benzene, when it restarted after the storm.”

We know the context, and we have a top candidate to hold accountable for the damage. So who stepped up to fulfill the social obligation of caring for those affected? After the storm passed, the commercial media focused primarily on individual volunteers and [teams](#) (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/teamwork>) from the Federal Emergency [Management](#) (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/leadership>) Agency (FEMA). Most volunteers were affiliated with [faith](#) (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/religion>)-based organizations, though the reporters focused on ready-made media heroes such as [the Cajun Navy](#) (https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/cajun-navy-races-from-louisiana-to-texas-using-boats-to-pay-it-forward/2017/08/28/1a010c8a-8c1f-11e7-84c0-02cc069f2c37_story.html?utm_term=.2fbb5472bf45), which formed during Hurricane Katrina to help stranded people to safety.

At taxpayers’ expense, FEMA supplies food, water, and equipment to affected regions. But [USA Today](#)

reported (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/09/10/hurricane-irma-faith-groups-provide-bulk-disaster-recovery-coordination-fema/651007001/>) that the agency only provided about 20 percent of aid, an amount outmatched by donations and supplies distributed by volunteers working for faith-based organizations. The state is supposed to add the equivalent of about 10 percent of what FEMA spends on relief, but FEMA allows the state to count as part of its own contribution hours of volunteer labor (at \$25 per hour that volunteers never see).

The oil and petrochemical companies were not discussed in these stories of individuals and underfunded state and federal agencies enacting their duty of care. Behind the scenes, the corporations took some responsibility for relief aid (<http://www.bicmagazine.com/departments/health-safety-environmental-subsection/october-2017-industry-responds-hurricane-harvey-relief/>), primarily through charitable contributions totaling almost \$36 million, with further commitments to match employee contributions. Another \$10 million was promised though not yet delivered as of this writing.

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But let's be clear: We're talking about the fossil-fuel industry. Think about the following:

The US fossil fuel industries (the ones who must report profits) have posted a collective net income of \$6 billion in the first quarter of 2017 (<http://www.ogj.com/articles/print/volume-115/issue-6/general-interest/oil-and-gas-firms-first-quarter-results-improved-on-higher-oil-prices.html>) on revenue of \$211.64 billion (Exxon Mobil alone reported profits of \$4 billion in this period).

The US government gave the fossil fuel industry an average of \$20 billion (http://priceofoil.org/content/uploads/2017/10/OCI_US-Fossil-Fuel-Subs-2015-16_Final_Oct2017.pdf) in subsidies in 2015 and 2016.

The oil and gas industry spent over \$100 million on political contributions and lobbying (<https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/contrib.php?ind=E01&Bkdn=DemRep&cycle=2016>) the federal government in 2016.

Scott Pruitt (<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/features/scott-pruitt-is-gutting-the-epa-serving-fossil-fuel-industry-w494156>), head of the Environmental Protection Agency, accepted more than \$350,000 in contributions from the fossil-fuel sector (<https://maplight.org/story/epa-nominee-pruitt-received-more-than-350000-from-energy-sources-in-oklahoma-races/>) between 2002 and 2016.

Texas state senators received about \$3.4 million from the oil and gas industry (<http://fuelfix.com/blog/2017/05/09/oil-and-gas-industry-gives-millions-to-texas-lawmakers/>), and representatives about \$5.6 million.

The former CEO of Exxon Mobil is the current US Secretary of State.

No wonder that more than 130 non-profit organizations (<https://www.commondreams.org/newswire/2017/09/21/130-organizations-demand-just-harvey-relief-effort-without-subsidies-fossil-fuel>) in Texas and around the country are suspicious of the oil and petrochemical industry's motivations. In a joint statement, they called on government leaders to ensure that none of the relief aid ends up in the accounts of big oil and gas. But how, you might ask, could that happen? Well, Houston's mayor appointed former Shell CEO Marvin Odum to lead the recovery efforts (<http://www.houstonpress.com/news/mayor-turner-names-former-shell-ceo-as-recovery-czar-9792380>) in Texas.

Once we can see the big picture, it becomes crystal clear that the fossil-fuel industry owes more to the people of Houston. At a minimum, they should pay the cost of long-term recovery from Harvey, now estimated to be between \$100 and \$180 billion (<http://www.newsweek.com/hurricane-irma-and-harveys-15b-disaster-fund-wont-last-30-days-says-ex-fema-664002>).

Green citizens can learn to act (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/therapy-types/acceptance-and-commitment-therapy>) rationally and collectively once they have the full context that explains the issues confronting them. But while many actors operate in the shadows, we lack that information and the power to remake our world.

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In Print: [Greening the Media](#) (<https://www.amazon.com/Greening-Media-Richard-Maxwell/dp/0199914672>)

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