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OUR VIEW

A chance to learn after natural disasters

In Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, residents and authorities had several days to brace for a looming disaster in the form of this year's horrendous hurricanes. In hindsight, they didn't do enough. There are things we can learn from their experiences.

Thanks to modern atmospheric science, the Caribbean islands, Texas and Florida all were warned about giant storms while they were still far off in the Atlantic.

In each case, the hurricanes' exact tracks gradually came into focus in forecasting models, with the odds of harm spiking from very little to very likely. It was like watching from a distance as a drunken driver swerved back and forth across the highway before finally crashing into a gas pump.

Until advances in geology and our understanding of Earth's plate tectonics initiated in the 1990s by professor Brian Atwater, our coast was completely ignorant about subduction-zone earthquakes and tsunamis. It is as if we were Caribbean villagers who not only didn't know about the hurricane barreling toward us from just over the horizon, but didn't even suspect such disasters were capable of happening. Atwater and his colleagues opened our eyes.

After 20 years of research, scientists believe that in the next 30 years, the Pacific Northwest has about a 10 percent chance of a magnitude 8 to 9 megathrust earthquake on the Cascadia Subduction Zone. Ten percent isn't very frightening and 30 years is more than a third of an average American lifetime. Odds are pretty good that we living here today will be long gone before this epic cataclysm occurs. On the other hand, when it was still forming in the Atlantic, the odds were remote

of Hurricane Maria hammering Puerto Rico. Yet it happened.

Average people — including our elected leaders — are bad at assessing risk and understanding probabilities. On top of that weakness, there are inherent limits to how much to prepare for threats that are legitimate but which have uncertain or distant timelines. We all know we're going to need to retire someday, but how many make enough effort to save for that eventuality?

The mess in Puerto Rico informs us that even with the vast assets of federal government, getting help to where it's needed can take weeks after a worst-case disaster.

It's even easier to procrastinate about disaster preparedness. The mess in Puerto Rico informs us that even with the vast assets of federal government, getting help to where it's needed can take weeks after a worst-case disaster. It's possible the Trump administration or

territorial government could be doing better, but even the most competent agencies are going to be hard pressed to deliver medical triage, potable water, rations and fuel to remote areas where highways and bridges have been destroyed.

In the calm before the storm, it's important to remember that money spent on science can save lives. The behavior of subduction zones still isn't well understood. Perhaps research can provide reliable clues about when the Cascadia zone is about to break loose.

Also highlighted is that even in the worst circumstances, individual actions do make a difference. The enormity of threats can't be allowed to paralyze us into inaction. It's up to each of us to help our neighbors whenever need arises, and to take common sense precautions on our own behalf — everything from keeping bottled water on hand to signing up for first aid and Community Emergency Response Team classes.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of publisher Kathryn Brown, managing editor Daniel Wattenburger, and opinion page editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.

OTHER VIEWS

Ratepayers shouldn't foot bill for charging stations

The Bend Bulletin, Oct. 11

Electric cars may someday rule the road. It won't happen if there aren't enough places for them to plug in.

But who should pay for the charging stations?

Both Pacific Power and Portland General Electric have proposals before Oregon's Public Utility Commission that would allow them to pass the cost of building about a half a dozen charging stations apiece to their ratepayers.

They may only be pilot programs, but it's the wrong model. It's wrong for ratepayers to underwrite the expansion of the monopoly that electrical utilities already have to include charging stations. If the two investor-owned utilities want to plunge into the charging market, they should come up with the money themselves just like any other business.

Electric cars are still a novelty on the road. Last year they were only about 1 percent of vehicles sold worldwide. But more electric cars are being built

and bought. The price point for electric vehicles may decline even as engineers come up with ways to extend their range.

The right model of charging stations may not be like the gas station. Even with fast chargers, it can take a half an hour to fully recharge a car battery. It makes more sense to have people recharge where they park — at home, where they do their shopping or where they work. There would still be a need for charging stations along highways for people making longer trips.

Electric vehicles and charging stations are a fledgling industry. Oregon should be encouraging innovation, competition and customer choice. It doesn't do that by giving utilities the ability to use their ratepayers to squeeze out the competition. How is another charging business supposed to compete with utilities being able to fund charging station construction by ratepayers?

Some ratepayers might be happy to support electric vehicles. But it's not fair to other ratepayers to compel them to pay to grow a utility's monopoly.

LETTERS POLICY

The East Oregonian welcomes original letters of 400 words or less on public issues and public policies for publication in the newspaper and on our website. The newspaper reserves the right to withhold letters that address concerns about individual services and products or letters that infringe on the rights of private citizens. Submitted letters must be signed by the author and include the city of residence and a daytime phone number. The phone number will not be published. Unsigned letters will not be published. Send letters to managing editor Daniel Wattenburger, 211 S.E. Byers Ave. Pendleton, OR 97801 or email editor@eastoregonian.com.

Comment online at www.eastoregonian.com



OTHER VIEWS

From Russia with poison

There is an abiding dream in the tech world that when all the planet's people and data are connected it will be a better place. That may prove true. But getting there is turning into a nightmare — a world where billions of people are connected but without sufficient legal structures, security protections or moral muscles among companies and users to handle all these connections without abuse.

Lately, it feels as if we're all connected but no one's in charge.

Equifax, the credit reporting bureau, became brilliant at vacuuming up all your personal credit data — without your permission — and selling it to companies that wanted to lend you money. But it was so lax in securing that data that it failed to install simple software security fixes, leaving a hole for hackers to get the Social Security numbers and other personal information of some 146 million Americans, or nearly half the country.

But don't worry, Equifax ousted its CEO, Richard Smith, with "a payday worth as much as \$90 million — or roughly 63 cents for every customer whose data was potentially exposed in its recent security breach," Fortune reported. That will teach him!

Smith and his board should be in jail. I'm with Sen. Elizabeth Warren, who told CNBC, "So long as there is no personal responsibility when these big companies breach consumers' trust, let their data get stolen, cheat their consumers ... then nothing is going to change."

Facebook, Google and Twitter are different animals in my mind. Twitter has enabled more people than ever to participate in the global conversation; Facebook has enabled more people than ever to connect and build communities; Google has enabled everyone to find things like never before.

Those are all good things. But the three companies are also businesses, and the last election suggests they've all connected more people than they can manage and they've been naive about how many bad guys were abusing their platforms.

As Mark Warner, the top Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, put it to me, "Up to now these companies have not taken the threat that Russia and other foreign agents pose to our system seriously enough or invested enough or to really reveal what happened in 2016 — or what is still happening now."

In November last year, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg dismissed as "a pretty crazy idea" evidence that people were using Facebook to generate fake news to tip the U.S. election. Last week, after disclosing hundreds of Russia-linked accounts — where fictional people posing as U.S. activists spread inflammatory messages about immigration and guns and trashed Hillary Clinton and boosted Donald Trump — Zuckerberg admitted, "Calling that crazy



THOMAS FRIEDMAN
Comment

was dismissive and I regret it."

One reason Facebook was slow to respond is that its business model was to absorb all of the readers of the mainstream media newspapers and magazines and to absorb all their advertisers — but as few of their editors as possible. An editor is a human being you have to pay to bring editorial judgment to content on your website, to make sure things are accurate and to correct them if they're not. Social networks

preferred to use algorithms instead, but these are easily gamed.

America's democracy is built on two principles: truth and trust. We trust that our elections are fair and that enables our peaceful rotations of power. And we trust that the news we get from our mainstream outlets is true and that it is corrected if it is not. And we expect our president to defend both. But today many people are getting news from platforms that are easily polluted by Russian or other hackers with fake news. And our president is a liar who refuses to hold Russia to account for anything. It's a terrible combination.

We can't fix Trump right now. But have Equifax and these big social networks become so much part of the wiring of our lives — and the effects of their failures so consequential — that they should be regulated in new ways? I don't know, but I know it's time for this discussion. It's already started.

These companies make billions selling our data, but they're ambivalent about taking responsibility "for the uses, and abuses, of their platforms," argued Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel. "They can't have it both ways. If they claim they are neutral pipes and wires, like the phone company or the electric company, they should be regulated as public utilities. But if, on the other hand, they want to claim the freedoms associated with news media, they can't deny responsibility for promulgating fake news."

In the early 20th century, Sandel added, "the rise of monopolies and concentrated economic power brought forth an era of progressive reform that regulated railroads, banks and utilities in the public interest. Today, we need a similar spirit of reform. These platforms are so dominant that, like electric wires or telephone lines, we can scarcely avoid using them. But when they allow our personal data — or elections — to be hacked, there's not much we can do about it."

"A century ago, we found ways to rein in the unaccountable power associated with the Industrial Revolution," Sandel concluded. "Today, we need to figure out how to rein in the unaccountable power associated with the digital revolution."

Thomas L. Friedman became the New York Times' foreign affairs columnist in 1995 and has been awarded three Pulitzer prizes.

YOUR VIEWS

Political manipulation swings both ways

Friday, Oct. 6, 2017, was the deadline for referring legislative action to the ballot. Our democratic overlords in Salem have again done their best to corrupt and defeat our referendum/petition system. It appears the tax or assessment on health care will qualify while the gun confiscation law will not.

Our overlords use various tactics. On the health care referral the title was drafted by a democratic committee that called the tax an assessment. That language is being challenged as supporters want rightly to call the tax a tax. Assessment sounds more benign to voters.

On the gun confiscation law Governor Kate Brown delayed signing the bill into law, which reduced by 30 days the time allowed to collect signatures. It may have not qualified anyway but Brown should have signed the bill and let our system work.

No matter which way you swing this manipulation should give you pause. My democratic friends are outraged at the manipulation at the federal level because it

doesn't fit their political view. I am outraged at all political corruption and manipulation of the voters' right to decide.

Bruce Staley
Pendleton

County commissioners paid better than governors

Umatilla County commissioners announced that two are running for re-election. George Murdock said his focus remains on the county's financial management and stability. He is the commissioner responsible for the county budget and said he works closely with the chief financial officer and department heads to keep the county on a financially "prudent" path.

Umatilla County pays each of its three county commissioners more than Colorado pays its governor. Umatilla County commissioners' salaries are \$90,853 while Colorado's governor brings in \$90,000. Not to mention Maine's governor only makes \$70,000.

Sally Sundin
Walla Walla