

## John Baer: Worst disaster ever or a gusher of hype?

Written August 9, 2010 by John Baer

I'm bothered by hype, which, I know, is odd for a tabloid columnist.

But here's the thing: Hype fosters fear, drives distrust and detracts from what journalism ought to do - help people get as close to the truth as possible.

Hype examples abound - big and small, new and old.

For months we heard that the Gulf oil spill was an unprecedented tragedy. "America's Chernobyl," the Sierra Club said in May. "The worst environmental disaster America has ever faced," President Obama said in June.

Now federal scientists say the vast majority, 75 percent, of the oil is gone - skimmed, burned, captured, contained or broken down by bacteria - and the rest will break down naturally.

Which assessment is hype? Is there truth in either? Or neither?

"I'd like to think the American public is less gullible than it seems," says H. Sterling Burnett, senior fellow at the National Center for Policy Analysis, a Washington-based conservative think-tank.

Burnett specializes in energy and environmental issues: "The disaster *du jour* almost never stands up to the harsh light of reality." He adds that nobody is saying the spill isn't bad, but that the "credibility of those who label it the 'worst environmental disaster' is being drawn into question."

Seems that way.

Sorta like Y2K ("the disaster *du decade*?") when computers were to crash and bring civilization to a halt at midnight Jan. 1, 2000.

Pennsylvania, the ever-ready state, printed 1 million six-page consumer guides to help citizens contain catastrophe. Tips included advice to store up food, water and medicine along with copies (I'm not making this up) of dental records.

Your government: a shepherd through Armageddon.

Speaking of Armageddon, Gov. Ed in June warned that if Congress fails to provide more money for something called FMAP (Federal Medical Assistance Percentages), we get, yep, "Armageddon" - 20,000 state and local government jobs eliminated, including teachers, cops and firefighters.

This month, he downgraded his disaster number to 12,000 - or, as I like to think of it, Half-a-geddon.

When I ask about the enormous disparity in projected impact, Guv spokesguy Gary Tuma says the first number was "a ballpark estimate," the second "a refined estimate."

Would be nice to get a "reliable estimate." But no matter - with Congress set to pass FMAP this week, neither estimate approaches reality.

This is reminiscent of Ed's claim last summer that a Republican state spending plan meant laying off 800 state troopers, creating an Eden for evildoers.

Shapers of the GOP plan, which largely was enacted, called the claim fantasy forged into scare tactic. The layoffs, of course, never happened.

Speaking of scary, remember when "killer bees" from South America were headed north in swarms to sting us to death? Guess it wasn't to bee.

How about last year's swine-flu panic? Vice President Joe Biden said he wouldn't go on a train or a plane or into any confined space. The word was pretty much get vaccinated or die. Yet last January, 40 million government doses of swine-flu vaccine, worth \$260 million, expired and were discarded. Estimates are that another 30 million doses will have to be tossed.

Guess that's one way to needle taxpayers.

Remember Saddam's WMDs, SARS, bird flu and terrorist czar Tom Ridge's duct tape and color code? As I wrote at the time, color me skeptical.

What is it? Those in authority create crises to get attention, promote agendas or later save us from "disaster" and therefore become our heroes?

Would that they'd just save us from hype.

Traditional media can and do help by trusting little and questioning lots. But too much "new media" moves too much hype with little restraint. And mass misinformation is a threat to a self-governed people.

Thaddeus Stevens, a Civil War-era state legislator and later a congressman, said, "Knowledge is the only foundation on which the Republic can stand."

With more knowledge and less hype, maybe the Republic wouldn't seem so shaky.