Weather Reporting as Beat Journalism

Conditions are ideal for both the best and worst of local television news around the country.

By Scott M. Libin (more by author)
Leadership and Management faculty

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When the May rating period coincides with peak season for severe weather it produces a near-perfect storm: Conditions are ideal for both the best and worst of local television news around the country.

It's an ideal time to start taking television weather reporting more seriously: not just as gimmickry, gadgetry, hype and science -- though at times it is all of those. It's time to start treating it as journalism.

No other story affects every viewer every day. No other interest drives viewers to local TV more consistently. Yet nobody seems to think of weather as journalism. News, yes -- especially under extreme circumstances such as hurricanes, tornados and blizzards. But journalism, no.

Maybe that's partly because, over the last few decades, weathercasters have gone all the way from clown college to masters of science, many without stopping along the way to learn journalism. And, with a few exceptions, nobody ever invited them to learn it.

I say that invitation's long overdue.

Excellence in reporting on business, medicine, the law and other specialized areas qualifies as journalism. Why not weather?

Doctors and lawyers and other professionals use their education and expertise to report, interpreting important and complex material for consumers of news. Most meteorologists I've known are more than up to the challenge.

What's the challenge? What's the difference between TV weather as we've known it and TV weather as beat journalism?

Journalism helps people understand the world around them and make more informed decisions for themselves. It educates and engages. It puts the pursuit and reporting of truth above all else. It puts the interests of news consumers ahead of any other influence. It recognizes that responsible reporting has consequences, sometimes unpleasant ones, and it seeks to minimize harm.

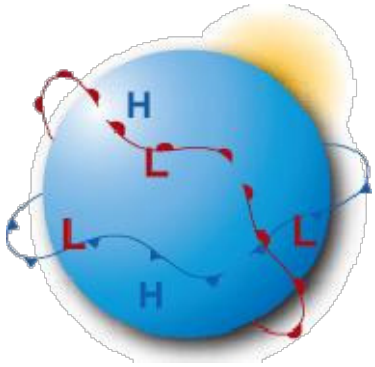
Moving from meteorology as straight science to weather as journalism means more.

Weather reporting on local television can affect more than the way people dress for the day. It can influence more than the decision to schedule a tee time. It can provide more than fodder for small talk around the water cooler.

A severe storm plowing through town is urgent. It demands immediate attention. I want live radar. Save the subjective, relative and evolving truths. Give me a meteorologist I trust with my life to be accurate.

Local TV news gets that, and has for some time.

But beyond the urgent, weather can be important. It can have lasting significance. It has



implications for energy policy, climate change, water rights and other critical political questions. It influences health, commerce, agriculture and tourism. It affects the economy, education and public safety.

That's not a bad list. How many other stories in the last newscast you saw can compare?

And consider weather up against the list of traditional news values -- the things we think make something newsworthy: It has conflict, impact, proximity, timeliness, novelty and audience interest.

Television stations invest enormous amounts in weather talent and technology. It's hard for me to understand how little actual quality control they apply. Weather coverage from reporters in the field is often live, which means there's virtually no editorial process of verification or script-checking. And the reporter assigned to the storm damage tonight was at a murder trial earlier today. He'll be covering a fire tomorrow. Meteorologists often watch and wince.

Now here's where I alienate some of the meteorologists who might have liked this column up to this point.

Meteorologists know all about the science of weather -- and sometimes next to nothing about storytelling or the tools of television journalism. They "loop" or play back satellite and radar time-lapse sequences so regularly, I'd bet half the audience thinks that's the way weather systems actually move: over and over and over. No competent reporter or producer would use any other video that way without a really good reason -- and an on-air explanation.

Weather anchors talk in terms that make sense to the American Meteorological Society and its members, but not to the rest of us. In the five years I've lived in Florida, I've never heard a normal person say anything like, "Boy, it's muggy. The dew point must be approaching 70!" That would be like saying the suspect in a bank robbery has a body-mass index of 32 -- technically precise, but a lousy way to communicate.

And has anybody ever actually understood the weather better because temperature readings glow, spin or cast three-dimensional shadows? The latest fad is a "nothing up my sleeve" stunt by which meteorologists make map effects appear seemingly with their bare hands. This apparently constitutes great sophistication in the world of weather. Out here among viewers, it's like watching a primitive video game -- and not a very good one, at that.

I do not equate the importance of weather with a need for longer weather segments, either -- especially on days when there really isn't that much to report. I think if meteorologists had to fight for time the way other reporters do, most of the time they'd get it and make better use of it. If their work got the editing attention it deserves, it would get more attention from viewers, too. If they participated more fully in story meetings and newsroom decision-making, the product would improve.

And if the rest of us treated television meteorologists more like journalists, they'd learn to act more like journalists -- and those of us watching the news would learn a lot more in the process.

Let's give weather what it deserves -- the scrutiny, skepticism and skills that set journalism apart from entertainment. It's the best local television has to offer, and audiences want it in the worst way.