

MEDIA

Niko, Chris, Orson, Diana, yikes! Please don't name winter storms!

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Connecticut was dealt a double-blow by winter storms Chris and Diana earlier this month. Or was it winter storms Niko and Orson? Or just Thursday and Sunday's winter storms? The answer depends on which TV station you're watching. Not only is that confusing, but it can also be dangerous.

The [National Weather Service](http://www.weather.gov/) (<http://www.weather.gov/>), which issues severe weather advisories, watches, and alerts, has never named any storms other than tropical storms and hurricanes. The reason is that winter storms constantly strengthen and weaken, making it difficult to decide where one storm ends and another begins. Plus, with the number of winter storms that happen each year around the country, naming them all would be a full-time job.

But despite this, TV stations like WFSB give big storms a human name each year. The Rocky Hill-based CBS affiliate says it's been naming winter storms since 1971, based on a [new theme each year](http://www.wfsb.com/story/30608790/list-of-this-seasons-channel-3-winter-storm-names) (<http://www.wfsb.com/story/30608790/list-of-this-seasons-channel-3-winter-storm-names>). This year, it's Connecticut sports figures like Chris Drury (Thursday's storm) and Diana Taurasi (Sunday's storm.) Last year, it was U.S. first ladies, and the year before that, it was Connecticut town names that can also be people's names, like Ashford, Bethany and Chester.

The Weather Channel is relatively new to the naming game. It started naming winter weather back in 2012, based on its own criteria for what constitutes a bad storm. The list of names, which this year includes Niko (Thursday's storm) and Orson (Sunday's storm), has been provided by the "experts" in a [Bozeman, Montana, high school Latin class](http://www.nbcmontana.com/news/ktvm/students-at-bozeman-high-get-ready-to-reveal-winter-storm-name-picks/9525195) (<http://www.nbcmontana.com/news/ktvm/students-at-bozeman-high-get-ready-to-reveal-winter-storm-name-picks/9525195>) for the past three years.

So why do these stations go against the [National Weather Service's policy](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/capital-weather-gang/post/national-weather-service-just-say-no-to-athena/2012/11/07/2eee7154-28e8-11e2-bab2-eda209503684_blog.html?utm_term=.88abo4223bdf) (https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/capital-weather-gang/post/national-weather-service-just-say-no-to-athena/2012/11/07/2eee7154-28e8-11e2-bab2-eda209503684_blog.html?utm_term=.88abo4223bdf), and name winter storms? WFSB says it's a fun tradition people look forward to each year. The Weather Channel says it's to make it "[easier to communicate a complex storm](https://weather.com/storms/winter/news/winter-storm-names-2016-2017), (<https://weather.com/storms/winter/news/winter-storm-names-2016-2017>)" since "good communications benefits everyone."

But despite these justifications, the real reason isn't about helping viewers or keeping them safe. It's about marketing and branding.

Television is a hyper-competitive business, where stations are constantly competing for ratings. Losing even a fraction of a ratings point can cost the station thousands of dollars in revenue, since advertisers pay more to place commercials in higher-rated shows. Stations, therefore, do everything they can to make their coverage stand out from the competition. During breaking news or severe weather coverage, that means "owning" the story – covering every aspect of it so viewers will turn to them, instead of the competition.

Naming winter storms is one of the easiest ways to assert a sense of "ownership" over snow forecasts, coverage of icy roads, and lists of school closings. Not only does it create an identifiable brand, complete with on-air graphics, eye-catching animations, and "stay with us" teases, but it also creates the impression that the made-up name is an official term. That gives added, yet undeserved, legitimacy to that station's forecast by making it look like its forecasters know something the others don't.

But branding is a minor issue compared to the potential danger that comes from naming winter storms. When one channel, for instance, says Diana is bringing freezing rain, but another says it's coming from Orson, viewers are left wondering if there's one storm or two. Sowing confusion among viewers is the last thing broadcasters should do, especially when reporting on dangerous weather. Viewers should get one consistent message in the face of danger. For severe weather coverage, that means deferring to the anti-naming policy of government forecasters.

Naming winter weather also takes away from the uniqueness of assigning names only to hurricanes and tropical storms. The government started naming hurricanes in 1953 (http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/aboutnames_history.shtml) in order to differentiate between two or more storms forming at the same time, and to make it easier for people to keep track of them as they slowly moved towards land. But much like saying “everyone gets a trophy” in youth sports makes the actual trophy less meaningful, saying “every storm gets a name” makes naming storms less important. That can lead to people taking hurricanes less seriously than they should.

So the next time it snows and you hear WFSB talk about winter storm Eugene (named for Eugene Robinson) or the Weather Channel talk about a storm named Quid (from the Latin phrase “*quid pro quo*,”) don’t repeat those made-up names on Facebook or Twitter. Stopping its spread is the first step in stopping a bad TV news habit.

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