

MEDIA

Don't blame the meteorologists for hyping the 'Snor'easter'

21 HOURS AGO



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Wednesday's Nor'easter was supposed to be one of the biggest of the year – bringing 15 inches of snow to Connecticut, according to some television meteorologists. Schools closed early, businesses sent workers home, and plows stood ready on the sides of highways. But this storm, unlike the one two weeks prior, never lived up to the hype.

That caused a lot of TV weather crews to get a lot of criticism on social media. Some posters demand to know why the forecasts were overblown (<https://twitter.com/jeter4Pres/status/976918596101296129>). Others told TV meteorologists to “forget your ego and admit you're wrong!” (<https://twitter.com/JGonzalezNews12/status/976554596586934272>). One poster even threatened to start his own YouTube weather channel that “gives you the facts and isn't wrong all the time.” (https://twitter.com/Im_A_Product/status/976859506889150464).

But this anger is misplaced. Don't blame the meteorologists! It's not their fault.

Instead, it's a problem with how local news is marketed. Weather is the most important part of any local newscast, because it's the one segment that affects everyone. We all need to know if it's going to rain, snow, be hot or cold or if a big storm is coming. News managers know that having a strong and trusted weather team leads to higher ratings, so

stations go all-out to convince you that they're the sole weather authority – the only one to trust when the weather turns bad. They do this by running commercials describing the weather team using terms like “the most accurate” and “the most experienced” and touting their accuracy rates.

Even when the storms turn out to be nothing more than a dusting, station managers still hype them as a looming danger that could turn serious at any moment. The worst thing the anchors could say, after all, is that the storm is a bust. That tells people to turn the channel. But if they imply there's still a chance several more inches could fall, then viewers will stay tuned.

The weather hype machine never rests, even after the sun starts to melt the ice and snow. Just look around the state. Some stations, like NBC Connecticut, buy special weather vehicles that they send out in the worst of the weather. The station's “SnowMonster” – a souped-up SUV – even has its own Twitter account and “talks” back to critics (<http://www.ftvlive.com/sqsp-test/2018/3/22/throwing-shade-at-the-snow-monster>).

Other stations, like WFSB, choose catchy names for Connecticut's winter storms (<https://ctviewpoints.org/2017/02/24/opinion-ben-bogardus-3/>). While some viewers find this fun, others find it confusing, because the Weather Channel assigns the same storms different names, and the National Weather Service doesn't name winter storms at all.

Still others, like WTNH, hire two chief meteorologists, describing one as a “renowned meteorologist” (<http://wtnh.com/2017/09/11/meteorologist-joe-furey-to-join-storm-team-8/>) who “bolsters the state's most experienced and respected television meteorology team just in time for the inclement weather season.”

And if anyone is unsure about when the news is on, stations like Fox 61 Tweet about their “LIVE continuous coverage” (<https://twitter.com/newsbell/status/976269408313200640>) of the storm that begins at 4 a.m. – before most people even wake up.

The problem with all this is, that when the forecasts are wrong, viewers who bought into the gimmicks, the “weather authority” branding and the dire warnings to “keep watching” feel disappointed and misled. Television meteorologists are obviously doing the best they can with the data they have. But when viewers are told over and over again how accurate the station's forecasts are, they're being set up for disappointment when the forecasts turn out to be wrong.

So what can be done? Meteorologists and news anchors must cut back on the hype. They must constantly remind people that weather isn't an exact science. There are too many variables in the atmosphere for any one person, let alone a computer, to calculate. Forecasts are just that – predictions that are often correct, but sometimes wrong. One local meteorologist is on the right track, tweeting that “I want you all to think I'm a superhuman forecaster that can see into the future and fights crime on the weekends. But (shrugging shoulders emoji.)” (https://twitter.com/RachelFrank_CT/status/976439933031407616).

So while you may be tempted to blame the forecaster for missing the mark, it's not solely his or her fault. Instead, constant weather promotion by news bosses has set expectations for accuracy much too high. And no one can live up to that level of hype.

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(<https://www.qu.edu/academics/colleges-schools-and-departments/school-of-communications/>)

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