

Weather on the Air

A HISTORY OF BROADCAST METEOROLOGY

Robert Henson



AMERICAN METEOROLOGICAL SOCIETY

“*Weather on the Air* captures the full breadth and depth of the engaging—and to many enthusiasts, intoxicating—world of broadcast meteorology. The history, the personalities, the science, the challenges, the beauty, and the warts of weathercasting: It’s all here, and it’s a must-read for any true ‘weather weenie.’”

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“Robert Henson covers a wide swath of weather and broadcast history with warmth, engaging humor, boundless curiosity, and a keen eye for the quirky and overlooked. Whether you approach the atmosphere with the utmost seriousness or laugh at the absurdities of the weather business, *Weather on the Air* is a treasure.”

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“Supplanting baseball, talking about the weather has become our national pastime. This book is a must-read for anyone seeking to understand the evolution of our attraction to, and dependence on, up-to-the-minute news about the weather.”

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“Henson clearly charts the internal storms as well as the fair skies of a profession that has been surprisingly slow to accept the growing scientific consensus of humankind’s contribution to climate change.”

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“Robert Henson’s rollicking story of how the weather news became a staple of American culture has more surprises than a windy day at Wrigley Field. If, like so many of us, you find the weather report oddly compelling and want to know why, this is the book for you.”

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—DAN SATTERFIELD, chief meteorologist, WHNT, Huntsville, Alabama

“From green screens to greenhouse gases, a thorough and very readable history of broadcast meteorology.”

—GREG CARBIN, warning coordination meteorologist, NOAA/NWS Storm Prediction Center

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Robert Henson

A M E R I C A N M E T E O R O L O G I C A L S O C I E T Y

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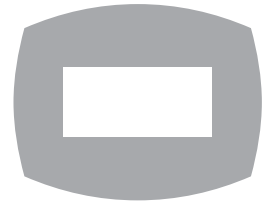
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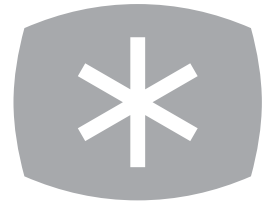
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Foreword



For me, growing up in the 1950s in the Hudson Valley north of New York City, it was Tex Antoine. Like almost every young aspiring meteorologist I know, I loved snowstorms, even if snow meant a long, cold day of delivering the local and New York newspapers. I knew my customers depended on me for the news, just like I depended on Tex Antoine for my weather fix and as my closest contact, even if it was on TV, with someone who seemed to like weather and trying to forecast the weather as much as I did. If you lived in Chicago, it might have been Harry Volkman or Jim Tilmon. In Oklahoma it was, and still is, Gary England. In Florida it was probably Roy Leep and George Winterling; Louis Allen in Washington, D.C.; Gordon Weir in Los Angeles; June Bacon-Bercey in snowy Buffalo; Jack Capell in Portland, Oregon; and of course the late, great Don Kent in New England. The list goes on. These were the great pioneers who brought not only the weather forecast, but also a bit of the science of weather, into the homes of so many of us who would eventually grow up to become meteorologists.

Many meteorologists may think we were just born that way, but we probably can also name a weathercaster who became an important part of our childhood, the person who helped nurture our interest in the atmosphere.

The story of *Weather on the Air* is not just a story of the people and the history of broadcast meteorology. It is a story of the history of meteorology itself. A story of the advance in science and the application of the sciences we

love. It is a story of the advances in technology and broadcast technology, the advances in how we communicate. A story of the only connection the average person has to a science, the weathercast. A story of the people, including comedians, amateurs, and trained scientists, who have communicated the daily weather report and who continue to represent science to millions of Americans and, for that matter, people around the world. This is also a story of our more inclusive society, reflected in the communication and communicators of the most critical information about the future on a day-to-day basis . . . tomorrow's weather.

From the early days of radio and black-and-white eight-inch DuMont television sets to the current exploding world of digital communication, weather forecasts and broadcast meteorology have been one of the main reasons people listen to radio, watch TV, and now, with “new media,” even participate in weather forecasts online by sharing their comments and opinions.

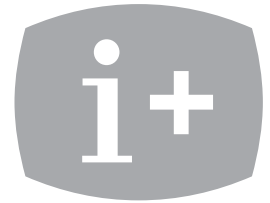
John Coleman, who had the vision that became The Weather Channel, once said to me that the secret of television weathercasting (or any form of communication, for that matter) is, “people watch [and listen to, and read about] people.” No one in any community, even with the explosion of information technologies, is probably better known and more recognizable than the local TV weathercaster.

The story continues as we move from “Weather on the Air” to weather and climate information and forecasts available through every new and future method of communication. It is a story of something that affects our daily lives, prepared and delivered by people who can effectively communicate ever more detailed, and at times life-saving, information for the viewer and forecast user to make the best decision. What has that weather communication history been? How did the story begin? Who was there? Where is it now, and, of course, where is it going?

Stay tuned, as we say in the business, and by all means read on.

—Bob Ryan
Longtime broadcast meteorologist in
Washington, D.C., and past president of
the American Meteorological Society
Washington, D.C., April 2010

Preface



I was seven years old when I first came under the spell of weather, both on television and outside. It was a muggy spring night in Oklahoma, and severe thunderstorms were approaching, as they so often do that time of year. As I sat watching one of the particularly mindless situation comedies peculiar to the 1960s, the show was interrupted by a serious young woman talking about tornadoes.

How does she know what the weather's doing? I wondered. The way Lola Hall described terrifying storms with such calmness and authority carried a touch of magic for me. From that night onward, I was hooked on meteorology, and on the way television and weather interacted.

That fascination has held firm. Weather is still a cornerstone of my life, and though I often turn first to maps and discussions available on the Internet, few things are more comforting and appealing than heading to The Weather Channel or one of my local weather anchors. Not everyone shares my degree of interest, but there is an ever-present demand from the general public for weather information, and TV remains one of the main providers of that information.

Weathercasting has never been taken as seriously as it deserves to be. As a student of meteorology and journalism in graduate school, I was appalled to find that the profession was all but ignored as a subject of serious inquiry. Books focused entirely on television news or sports lined the shelves, but

there were none on television weather. Major dictionaries defined *newscast* and *sportscast* but not *weathercast*. Didn't weather affect people more directly than economic summits or baseball playoffs?

In this atmosphere of intellectual neglect, I set out in 1988 to cobble together a book-length study of how TV and radio weather evolved. This involved piecing together scattered articles, book passages, interviews, and personal recollections. The result was *Television Weathercasting: A History* (McFarland, 1990). That book certainly wasn't the whole story, even for the period through the 1980s. The field has continued to evolve since then, with countless developments in atmospheric science, media technology, broadcasting trends, and viewer habits. *Weather on the Air* brings the discussion up to date through the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century; it also includes new material and photos for the periods covered by the earlier book. Still, this isn't the final word on weathercasting—it is only a snapshot of a work in progress, work that is updated every day throughout the country in broadcast studios large and small. Much more is happening in the world of weathercasting beyond the United States. A good place to learn more is the International Association of Broadcast Meteorology, <http://www.iabm.org>.

There's no way to adequately express my appreciation and admiration for the dozens of weathercasters I've interviewed over the last 22 years. Gracious and generous with their time, many made the effort to send anecdotes, pictures, and other first-hand material documenting their work. In the pressure cooker that is daily live television, that is no small courtesy, and I'm deeply grateful for their help and support. Among the weathercasters and other professionals who contributed beyond the call of duty for one or both versions of this book are Elliot Abrams, June Bacon-Bercey, Ray Ban, Mark Binkley, Vivian Brown, Valerie Voss Crenshaw, Heidi Cullen, Matthew Havin, Edward Johnson, Roy Leep, Gary Lezak, Mish Michaels, Elliot Myers, Barry Lee Myers, Bryan Norcross, Stu Ostro, James Peronto, Rebecca Reheis, Danny Satterfield, Alan Sealls, Tom Skilling, Wib Walk, George Winterling, and Don Kent, a true pioneer who died in early 2010 as this book was being completed. The late Jim Fidler—whose career encapsulated six decades of broadcast history—was particularly supportive.

Special thanks go to Bob Ryan, Veronica Johnson, Chuck Bell, and Richard Berler, who were kind enough to let me spend a few hours hovering over them while gathering background for the “slice of weathercasting life” portions of Chapter 2.

Thanks also go to everyone who reviewed portions of this book and provided much-needed feedback. I couldn't have asked for a better chief reviewer than Sean Potter, who read each chapter and provided suggestions that were invariably crisp, concise, and on target. Matt Kelsch also provided many thoughtful comments, along with much-appreciated moral support. Robert

Shepard manages to wear multiple hats elegantly, including peerless agent, wise friend, and crackerjack editor.

The staff at AMS has been a delight to work with, especially Sarah Jane Shangraw, with her steady, confident editorial presence, as well as Ken Heideman, whose belief in this project made it possible.

Reference librarians are largely unsung heroes, especially in this Internet-driven age. I owe a great debt to those who guided my search through the stacks of several libraries while writing *Weather on the Air* and its predecessor. These libraries include the University of Oklahoma's Bizzell Memorial Library, the University of Colorado's Norlin Library and William W. White Business Library, the Denver and Boulder public libraries, the Library of Congress, and the National Center for Atmospheric Research Library. Special gratitude goes to Karen Livesy of the National Association of Broadcasters Library and to George Franchois, Luisa Llacuna, and the late Catharine Heinz at NAB's former Broadcast Pioneers Library (BPL). Michael Henry was enormously helpful in facilitating a visit in 2009 to the University of Maryland's superb Library of American Broadcasting, which incorporates the former BPL. Donna Halper (Lesley University) helped me locate several hard-to-find nuggets on Boston's rich broadcasting history.

Writing a book outside the bounds of a full-time job is never easy. My superiors at the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research, Lucy Warner and Jack Fellows, were unfailingly supportive, and my colleagues in UCAR Communications brightened many mornings that were viewed through somewhat bleary eyes.

“And Now, Your Forecast”



A WHIRLWIND TOUR THROUGH TV WEATHER HISTORY

On the shelf of quintessential American phenomena, weathercasting fits quite comfortably next to jazz, baseball, and ice cream cones. Weather presentations on TV are universal, of course, and the weather itself knows no geographic boundaries. However, the roots of weathercasting are firmly planted in a nation that’s populous, highly mobile, plugged into mass media, and blessed (or cursed) with hundreds of different climatic regimes, including some of the most violent weather on earth. Even as U.S. broadcast meteorologists have served as the target of innumerable jokes over the years about their accuracy—or presumed lack of it—they have also saved thousands of lives. Somehow, frivolity and serious information manage to coexist in the world of TV weather.

Though it may seem that weathercasts have always been with us, the look and feel of weathercasting as we know it evolved through experimentation and improvisation at dozens of embryonic U.S. TV stations in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The formula soon crystallized, and today, close to 1,000 Americans make their living by standing in front of a camera talking about warm fronts, supercells, cold-air damming, and whether or not your weekend picnic will get rained out. Roughly half of those weathercasters hold degrees in meteorology, while others come to the field from a variety of backgrounds. Regardless of their pedigrees, weather anchors connect with the public in a way that

few others on television can manage. With their intensely local orientation, their links to public safety, and their aura of scientific credibility, weathercasters can be among a city's most celebrated and trusted personalities, and the newscasts in which they are featured are critical to the financial well-being of local television.

The prototype of the meteorological soothsayer predates television by centuries, but people didn't expect a great deal of science from those who claimed to know the mysteries of the atmosphere. By the turn of the twentieth century, though, as newspapers brought government forecasts to readers each day and the U.S. Weather Bureau* was gaining credibility, the modern archetype of the U.S. weatherperson began to take shape—amiable, persistent, sometimes scorned, but nearly always listened to. The image sharpened further when television put a face to the weather, replacing the never-seen, office-bound forecaster with a very public entertainer-weatherperson. Before long, weather presenters found themselves woven into the fabric of U.S. culture. A radical political group in the 1960s named themselves the Weathermen, and the Weather Girls rose to dance-music fame in the 1980s. Countless comedians have poked fun at the part of the newscast itself most likely to veer toward the lighthearted—at least when tornadoes or snowstorms aren't bearing down on a viewing area.


Is the weather really that important, compared to terrorists and Super Bowls? Survey after survey show that it is. Despite the attention heaped on news and sports anchors, it's weather that consistently ranks as the top draw in local news, and national newscasts often lead with the weather disaster du jour. Five stations polled by the National Weather Service in 1980 were unanimous in naming weather “the major reason that people watch the news program.”¹ Research in the 1990s by the Radio and Television News Directors Foundation showed that 72 percent of viewers were interested in the local forecast, versus 65 percent in crime and 31 percent in sports.² And as the editor of *Broadcasting & Cable* put it in 2003, “It's not the day's mayhem that is dragging eyeballs to the 11:00 news. It's the weather.”³

There's more to the popularity of TV weather than the information it presents. Many weathercasters are remarkably well-known figures on their home turf. A survey in the nation's top 50 television markets** found that weather-

* Throughout this book, “National Weather Service” and “U.S. Weather Bureau” are used to describe the same agency at various points in its history. See Chapter 3 for a full explanation.

** *Market* is the general term broadcasters use to denote a geographical zone, usually a single metropolitan area, served by a well-defined set of TV stations. In 2009, the Federal Communications Commission recognized 210 “television market areas” across the 50 states.

THEY WERE ONCE WEATHERCASTERS

 For some, it may have been only a way station to stardom, but weathercasting played a critical role in the careers of many celebrities. Especially in the 1960s and 1970s, before the reemergence of science-driven weathercasts, people without meteorology backgrounds could often land entry-level weather gigs at small- and medium-market stations. Since the job requires a good deal of on-air time and plenty of ad-libbing, it's an excellent way to become comfortable in front of a camera.

Veteran NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw grew up in southeastern South Dakota listening to Whitey Larson, a Sioux City newscaster who opened each of his 6:00 and 10:00 P.M. reports with the weather forecast. As Brokaw recalled, “Whitey’s down-home style always left me with the feeling he was sitting there in our small living room, telling it just to us.” Brokaw later handled both news and weather duties at Sioux City’s KITV in the early 1960s while completing his bachelor’s degree at the University of South Dakota.

Several women began illustrious careers in front of weather maps during the waning days of the “weathergirl” era. In the early 1960s, long before she became a world-famous sex symbol, Raquel Welch was doing morning weather in San Diego as Raquel Tejada, KFMB’s “Sun-Up Weather Girl.” Later in the decade, Diane Sawyer took a brief turn as a weathercaster at Louisville’s WLKY before joining the press office of President Richard Nixon and later serving as the long-running host of *Good Morning America* (GMA). On GMA, however, Sawyer didn’t do the weather. Neither did a contemporary of hers, Barbara Walters, during her years on NBC’s *Today* show in the 1960s and early 1970s. Walters had already seen weathercasting at its most gimmicky when she served as a writer and producer at CBS on *The Morning Show* in the mid-1950s. There, she witnessed such antics as a weathercast delivered from a water-filled tank (see page 113). “No matter what we did, nobody watched the show,” Walters later wrote. “Looking back on those segments, perhaps it was understandable.”⁴

David Letterman’s career arc from local weathercaster to stand-up comic to late-night host is more



At the start of the 1960s, before gaining worldwide fame as a movie star and sex symbol, Raquel Welch was Raquel Tejada, the “Sun-up Weather Girl” on San Diego’s KFMB. (Courtesy KFMB)

consistent than it might seem. After graduating from Ball State University, Letterman embraced the comic latitude that was allowed to weathercasters in the early 1970s and ran with it. During his stint at WLWI (now WTHR) in Indianapolis, Letterman joked about “hailstones the size of canned hams,” cited statistics for made-up cities, and once congratulated a tropical storm for reaching hurricane status. Harking back to his past, Letterman’s “Top Ten lists” have included “Top Ten Things You Hope You Never Hear Your Weathercaster Say on Television” (2001) and “Top Ten Signs Your Weathercaster Is Nuts” (2008). In noting Letterman’s pervasive influence on American humor, *Time* magazine writer James Poniewozik concluded: “Dave started out as a weatherman; today he’s the weather, whether we realize we’re breathing him in or not.”

Even one of America’s most famous game-show hosts cut his teeth as a weather presenter. Pat Sajak of “Wheel of Fortune” did weathercasts at WSM in Nashville and spent four years at KNBC in Los Angeles before being tapped to host “Wheel of Fortune” in 1981. Though never formally trained in meteorology, Sajak hasn’t hesitated to question the acceptance of climate change science in recent years. “We’ve faced environmental issues throughout our history, but it’s difficult to remember one which has gained such ‘status’ in such a short time,” wrote Sajak in 2007. “To a skeptic, there seems to be a religious fervor that makes one wary.”

casters were rated above their news and sports counterparts for awareness and appeal.⁵ Willard Scott, the jovial and immensely popular weathercaster on NBC's *Today* from 1980 to 1996, drew over 27,000 supportive phone calls when the newspaper *USA Today* asked its readers whether Scott was helping or hindering the show.⁶

Unlike many other topics appearing in the daily news, weather is universally tangible. It's right outside the window every second of every day. That presence, mixed with the constant change and variety of day-to-day weather events, makes tomorrow's forecast one of the most important elements in local news. And when hurricanes, blizzards, or other major storms strike, weather can dominate television news for days on end. Of course, dry facts alone aren't enough to attract TV audiences, especially when potential viewers can easily go to their computers or cell phones and get an avalanche of weather data. A weathercaster can't hope to compete with the Internet when it comes to providing sheer volume of information (though many broadcast meteorologists are now frequent bloggers). What she can provide is something quite different: a human touch that puts raw data in perspective. A skilled weathercaster can zero in on critical and timely details when weather threats loom, serving both to inform and to calm anxious viewers. When conditions are more placid, weathercasters may provide a dose of science education, help connect viewers to their communities, or simply give voice to the shared appreciation of a bright spring day or a picture-perfect snowfall.

In searching for the blend of science and show biz that keeps viewers coming back, stations once went to absurd lengths. What serious newscaster would be asked to read the day's headlines while submerged in a tank of water, as Ginger Stanley did for the CBS *Morning Show* weather in 1957?⁷ Would even the best-paid sportscaster in the United States report for duty dressed as Carmen Miranda, as Willard Scott did in the early 1980s? Don Noe, John Coleman, and Lloyd Lindsay Young all delivered weather segments while standing on their heads.⁸ Sean Potter (then at KYMA in Yuma, Arizona) presented an entire segment while spinning in a giant gyroscope.⁹ Were such things ever asked of Katie Couric or Brian Williams?

Thanks to such stunts, weathercasting was long ago tied to wackiness in the eyes of many. Yet even when silly weathercasts were at their peak, the job had its deadly serious side. Weather anchors in Tornado Alley stayed up all night during storm season, doggedly watching radar screens and warning the public of life-threatening twisters. News and weather reporters traveled thousands of miles each year to cover hurricanes threatening the United States. Seldom does television aid the public in such a direct fashion. Today, covering severe weather with accuracy and immediacy often means the difference between ratings success and disaster for local stations.

In the process of watching weathercasters, Americans have learned something about weather itself. Seeing a cold front march across the United States over a week's time illuminates the connection between record heat one day and biting chill the next. And as the public's weather savvy has increased, so have the tools of the television weather trade. An ever-more-sophisticated array of graphic tools is now at the disposal of weather presenters. At its worst, the frenetic 3D imagery can leave viewers bedazzled but perplexed, still just wanting to know whether it'll rain tomorrow. At its best, it can bring clarity, simplifying the vast processes underlying world climate and giving the impression that weather makes sense.

IN PRINT: THE BEGINNINGS OF WEATHER NEWS

Television weather in the United States evolved from a long-standing tradition of weather reporting, a legacy going back to the personal records kept by colonial weather observers. Presidents George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were both avid weather followers, recording sky and wind data at least twice daily for periods of years. Jefferson duly noted the temperature of 72.5 degrees in Philadelphia at 1:00 P.M. on July 4, 1776, the day he and others signed the Declaration of Independence. Washington kept meticulous records until the day before he died.¹⁰

Storms also drew the interest of early weather observers, just as they do today. Among the earliest published accounts of weather was a report from one British weekly in the 1650s of a severe rainstorm, scooping the competition.¹¹ But such pioneering weather reports left much to be desired, because the process of compiling data at a central point to analyze storm progress had not been established. Even as long-distance communication improved in the late 1800s, a major storm could still go unreported beyond its area of impact. A huge gale on New Year's Day 1895 killed some 400 people in ships off the British coast, but the event failed to make London papers for days.¹²

In the United States, sporadic weather coverage in almanacs of the colonial era improved with the advent of "penny papers" in the 1830s. As the first news publications aimed at a mass audience, these newspapers emphasized concrete events over abstract political discussions.¹³ Still, weather was hardly a staple of the newspapers' editorial diet; as late as 1860, the *New York Times* carried no regular weather feature.

It was the formation of the National Weather Service within the U.S. Signal Service in 1870 that paved the way for routine weather coverage in newspapers, and later in radio and television. Compiling telegraph data from across the growing nation, the government issued reports and "indications"

(forecasts) and distributed these daily to newspapers. Within five years, the *New York Times* carried several column inches daily devoted to the weather, including a summary of the previous day's conditions and forecasts for states in the Northeast.

The “new journalism” of the 1880s further emphasized reader service, and weather news became even more prominent. Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* founded the traditional weather “ear” at the upper right-hand corner of the front page, summarizing the next day's forecast.¹⁴ By 1900, the *New York Times* had followed suit with a front-page box giving forecasts and instructing readers to look inside for more details.

Despite the havoc it wreaked, World War I provided a major step forward in weather forecasting and weather news treatment. Wilhelm Bjerknes, a Scandinavian military meteorologist, discovered the presence of moving boundaries that separated warm and cold air masses. Using a wartime analogy, he labeled the boundaries “fronts,” and developed a comprehensive theory of their behavior. The discovery improved forecasts dramatically while adding a new element to the vocabulary of weather news. In the 1920s, many U.S. papers began printing weather maps, complete with fronts, substantially increasing the space devoted to weather. At the same time, a new electronic medium was sweeping into U.S. households, giving millions of people their first taste of weather on the air.

WIRELESS WEATHER: THE EARLY DAYS OF RADIO

In 1900, the Weather Bureau subsidized an experiment to test whether sending vocalized message by radio was feasible. Weather stayed on the front line of early programming, as experimental stations at colleges and civic centers transmitted weather segments as early as the 1910s. However, these first efforts were scattered and sporadic. Radio wasn't yet accepted as the proper means of transmitting important news, even as the medium grew by leaps and bounds in the next decade. “The broadcasting of news on a daily basis as we know it today was not a feature of radio in the 1920s,” historian George Douglas noted.¹⁵

It took President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal to make weather a standard part of radio. Under FDR, the Weather Bureau stepped up its involvement with radio stations, forging a set of links between local broadcasters and local Weather Bureau personnel. Radio listeners of the late 1930s heard weather incorporated into the burgeoning news programs of the day, and the subject occasionally got its own daily 15-minute spot.

Even in this nonvisual medium, the seeds of television weather were being

planted. Some stations assigned the task of covering weather to an anchor who might or might not have added life to the statistics. But in a few cities, there was the “weatherman,” specifically designed to lend a touch of character and authority to the forecast. One of the first people to carve out a niche in radio weathercasting in these early days was E. B. Rideout, who debuted on Boston’s WEEI in 1925 only a year after the station itself was launched. As the *Boston Globe* later observed, “The Rideout forecasts—written in clinical meteorological fashion and given in a clipped, high-pitched tone from his home in Belmont—could have been right out of a Central Casting idea of a crusty Yankee giving the weather on the radio from his living room.”¹⁶

Another such pioneer was Jim Fidler, a young scientist fresh out of Ball State University who began doing weather in 1934 for WLBC in Muncie, Indiana. A typical Fidler broadcast began like this:

By telephone, telegraph, teletype, radio and the mail, WLBC’s own meteorologist, Jimmie Fidler, “radio’s original weatherman,” gathers the information on the weather as it is and as it is to be. Now, here is Jimmie with his maze of weather data that he will unravel into a simple and complete picture of the weather.


Fidler’s segment was the essence of down-to-earth weather reporting, complete and accurate yet uncluttered with jargon:

Good afternoon. Here is the U.S. Weather Bureau forecast for the eastern part of the U.S. The outlook is for increasing cloudiness over most of the New England states and with rising temperatures over the Central Atlantic states tonight and Saturday. . . .¹⁷

A hint of what would soon transform weather news even further came in 1940 and 1941, when a handful of experimental television stations began broadcasting. Jim Fidler moved to television in Cincinnati, where he used a straightforward format similar to that of his radio show. Other experimental weather shows appeared on the few television sets in existence, mostly in the Northeast, and these programs foreshadowed a different approach.

New York City’s first television weathercast appeared October 14, 1941, on the experimental outlet WNBT (later to become WNBC). The star was Woolly Lamb, an animated creature that remained on WNBT for seven years. Woolly introduced each program by looking skyward with a telescope, then faced viewers to sing: “It’s hot, it’s cold. It’s rain, it’s fair. It’s all mixed up together. But I, as Botany’s Woolly Lamb, predict tomorrow’s weather.” After Woolly’s exit, a slide showing the next day’s forecast was displayed. (“Botany” referred to Botany Wrinkle-Proof Ties, the sponsor.)¹⁸

the
WEATHERMAN
has a story to tell!

Jimmie Fidler
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DO YOU ENJOY KNOWING ABOUT THE WEATHER?

THE LISTENER WRITES:
 THE FARMER—
 "WE PLAN OUR WORK BY YOUR REPORTS!"
 THE TRUCKER:
 "YOU HAVE SAVED US MANY DOLLARS!"
 THE BUILDER:
 "DID JIMMIE SAY IT WOULD BE OK TO POUR—TODAY?"
 HOUSEWIVES:
 "I'M GOING TO WASH TOMORROW—
 JIMMIE SAID THE SUN WILL SHINE."

OFFICIALLY JIMMIE IS KNOWN AS:
JAMES C. FIDLER
 CO-OPERATIVE OBSERVER
 U. S. WEATHER BUREAU

YOUR CLUB OR GROUP WILL ENJOY THE VIVID WAY Jimmie PRESENTS HIS STORY IN PERSON




IT'S INTERESTING



IT'S EDUCATIONAL

FOR ENGAGEMENT DATES WRITE:

Jimmie Fidler
RADIO'S ORIGINAL WEATHERMAN



This 1934 brochure promoted the radio weathercasts of Jim Fidler, who had just begun at station WLBC in Muncie, Indiana. Fidler was among the first to use weather broadcasting as a chance to expand on Weather Bureau reports. (Courtesy Jim Fidler)

Perhaps it struck nobody as odd that an innocuous lamb was chosen to announce events that greatly affect life and property. In any case, Woolly Lamb was a harbinger of weather's eventual segregation from other television news. World War II postponed the further expansion of television for a few years, but television weather now had its first big-city role model.

TV WEATHER TAKES OFF

Following World War II, television emerged from its experimental phase with remarkable speed. The number of sets in use soared to 3.6 million in 1949 and 9.7 million in 1950, with far greater growth to come over the next few years.¹⁹ A total of 69 television stations were on the air in 1949. Unlike the experimental stations of 1940–41, which were clustered in the Midwest and Northeast, these stations were scattered across the United States.²⁰

In spite of the precedent set by Woolly Lamb, the earliest days of TV weather were distinctly sober. With almost 20 years of traumatic world events behind them, the U.S. public of the late 1940s took its news seriously. Weather was no exception, given that radio had generally treated weather as a subset of the news at large. “The first training for a new man in our newsroom is learning to write the weather story,” said one radio news director in 1946.²¹ Some radio stations called on meteorologists from the Weather Bureau or even hired their own. In short, weather news on radio was delivered with respect.

Inevitably, television weather would depart from its radio roots. The visual nature of television demanded “action” in the form of weather maps and bright, attractive people who could explain them. The frontal theory of weather forecasting was then just 30 years old; weather maps had become a newspaper standby, but the workings of occluded fronts and high-pressure ridges were hardly common knowledge among laypeople. Looking back at his early days, weathercasting pioneer Louis Allen took note of the gap in public awareness: “When I started out, the ‘high’ and the ‘low’ and the ‘fronts’ really meant nothing. It was all part of the scientific jargon.”²² Taking into consideration this lack of knowledge, early television stations often looked for weathercasters who were not necessarily polished announcers—after all, the medium itself was still unpolished—but who did know something about weather. As it happened, a bumper crop of such people had just emerged from World War II, where weather forecasts had made a critical difference in the outcome of such events as the D-Day invasion of Normandy. The war effort had trained thousands of enlisted men in meteorology, many of whom came back ready to use their knowledge in civilian life. Dozens of these veterans showed up on local weather programs in the late 1940s. Washington, D.C., got its first television weather in 1948 from Louis Allen, who combined a drive to educate the public with an easygoing delivery. Allen’s meteorological background came from service in the navy; he was among the forecasters of sea and swell conditions for the pivotal U.S. invasions of Iwo Jima and Okinawa.²³

While Allen and his contemporaries brought weather to local television, John Clinton Youle was among the first to take it nationwide. Youle debuted with John Cameron Swayze’s *Camel News Caravan* on NBC in 1949. His back-

Like many of his contemporaries at local stations, John Clinton Youle sketched weather features while delivering his reports. Youle, the first nationally broadcast weather anchor, appeared on NBC's *Camel News Caravan* from 1949 to 1956. (Courtesy Weatherwise/WNBQ)



ground as an air force weatherman and a writer–editor for NBC proved ideal for the task.²⁴ Still, as many who followed him were to learn, no weathercaster was immune to public ribbing. In this exchange from December 1949, Youle is introduced by reporter Cliff Utley, who had just interviewed Otis Hewitt of the Burlington, Iowa, Liars' Club:

UTLEY: Now, here's my colleague, Clint Youle, the NBC weatherman, whose predictions . . . well, Otis, you might consider Clint for membership in your club sometime!

YOULE: Cliff, I hardly know whether to be flattered or chagrined at that sort of introduction.²⁵

Youle and Allen's relaxed approaches were about as lighthearted as the earliest television weathercasts got. The influx of military men doing weather, some of them untrained in public speaking, gave television weather of the late 1940s and early 1950s a serious, formal tone. Oklahoma City's WKY inaugurated its weather programming in 1950 with a sergeant from nearby Tinker Air Force Base whose comments were limited to a rehashing of the air force outlook. "It was pretty deadly stuff," wrote an observer years later.²⁶

Thanks to government fiat, the days of straightforward weathercasting lasted longer than they might have otherwise. Worried about the rapid proliferation of TV stations clogging limited frequencies, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) put a freeze on station licensing from 1948 to 1952. This left the majority of U.S. cities with only a single TV station during the four-year freeze. With no competitors to spur new approaches to weathercasting, those stations already in place kept whatever formats they had already devised. If some of those early styles were dry and pedantic, they were impressive in their devotion to presenting weather with no frills.

Enter the Entertainers

Television use soared in the early 1950s in spite of the FCC's freeze. Some 21.8 million sets were in U.S. homes by 1952.²⁷ The first few nationwide hit series, such as *I Love Lucy*, drew huge audiences. Networks expanded their reach, acquiring station affiliates across the country and assembling slates of daily and weekly programs. The infant medium was growing up.

Once the FCC freeze was lifted, applications for station licenses skyrocketed. The number of stations on the air grew from 108 to 469 in the first three post-freeze years (1952–55).²⁸ Most cities with populations over 100,000 had at least two stations competing for viewers by the mid-1950s. The ratings race was now under way, and television weather was not to escape its effects.

Polish, appearance, and gimmicks became important tools in the newly competitive world of local television. If television was home entertainment, then surely even newscasts could be made entertaining. There were obvious constraints on the news itself—fires and shootings were hardly the stuff of comedy—so weather evolved into a primary arena for making the newscast more palatable. The result was TV weather's wildest and most uninhibited period, the age of puppets, costumes, and “weathergirls.” A Nashville weathercaster gave his forecast in verse (e.g., “Rain today and rain tonight / Tomorrow still more rain in sight”).²⁹ Viewers in New York could get weather information at midnight from an ostensibly sleepy woman in a short nightgown, tucking herself into bed.³⁰

These methods of enlivening the weathercast had surprisingly little impact on the material presented, because most data and forecasts at that time were taken directly from the National Weather Service (see Chapter 3). The familiar weathercast sequence—consisting of current weather conditions, previous highs and lows, current map, forecast map, and local forecast—was already well established; it carried such strong inherent logic that only the most daring

TV WEATHER ON THE BIG SCREEN

It took a surprisingly long time for weathercasters to make their way into Hollywood cinema. TV sitcoms were poking fun at weatherpeople as far back as 1964, as noted by Sean Potter in *Weatherwise* magazine.³¹ However, for many decades, major films—including even the 1987 smash *Broadcast News*—steered away from using weathercasters as lead characters.

The ice broke with 1991's *L.A. Story*, which starred Steve Martin as Harris K. Telemacher, a “wacky weatherman” in Los Angeles. Written by Martin, the comedy uses the inherent irony of being a weathercaster in normally tranquil Los Angeles as a metaphor for Telemacher's pleasantly ludicrous L.A. life, which gains meaning only with some supernatural help.

Following *L.A. Story*, weathercasting made its way into the plots of a number of other high-profile films. Perhaps the most intriguing pair are 1993's *Groundhog Day*, with Bill Murray, and 2005's *The Weather Man*, with Nicolas Cage. In both films, the star is a weather presenter—one in Pittsburgh, the other in Chicago—who's soured on his life both personally and professionally. The weather itself, largely wintry and overcast in both films, echoes the futility of the main characters' lives.

In *Groundhog Day*, an unexplained metaphysical glitch forces Murray's character, Phil Connors, to relive a particular day of his life (February 2, when he's covering the Groundhog Day ceremony in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania) over and over. Nothing he does seems to affect the endless repetition; only by



Pennsylvania weathercaster Phil Connors, played by Bill Murray, finds that every day is Groundhog Day. (Courtesy Columbia Pictures)

accepting that he can't change his circumstance, and then looking for ways to improve himself, does he find a way forward. For a romantic comedy/fantasy, *Groundhog Day* touches on deep philosophical issues; some observers have labeled it a Buddhist parable. It was added in 2006 to the Library of Congress's prestigious National Film Registry.

Although *The Weather Man* has its moments of dry humor, it's a much more somber film. As played by Nicolas Cage, Dave Spritz (his last name a common term for quick bursts of rain or snow) is trapped in his own infinite loop—one of klutziness and inattention that alienates those around him. He's lulled into this lazy haze in part because his job is so easy, as he's a nonmeteorologist briefed by a meteorologist each day. “I receive a large reward for pretty much zero effort and contribution,” Spritz tells the audience.

of programmers altered it. Still, humorous goings-on were all too capable of detracting from important weather information or pushing it from the weathercast altogether.

Ironically, weathercasting as comic relief hit its apex in the mid-1950s just as real progress was being made in meteorology. Radar scopes could now pinpoint severe thunderstorms and even some tornadoes; “hurricane hunter” planes retrieved valuable data that improved warnings; jet-stream analysis and computer forecasting models came into use. However, in most weathercasts

The Weather Man stands out in its realistic depiction of how chromakey is used; most other movies, even those set in the computer-graphics era, put weathercasters in front of an old-school map. “I know it’s not neurosurgery,” says Spritz in a voiceover, “but green screens are the one part of my job that’s not really easy.” Toward the film’s end, after being ravaged by a series of personal crises, Spritz stands alone in his studio, the blank green screen now symbolizing how his life has been pared to the bone: “That’s who I am. The weather man.”

Two other films draw on the stereotype of the good-natured weatherperson in vastly different ways. In *Anchorman: The Story of Ron Burgundy* (2004), a takeoff on 1970s “happy news” formats, Steve Carell portrays Brick Tamland, a learning-disabled weathercaster whose naïve, well-meaning ways stand in contrast to the behavior of his more tawdry, narcissistic costars. The mordant 1995 drama *To Die For* features Nicole Kidman as an ambitious woman who takes a late-night weather gig at a small New England TV station as a potential stepping stone to greater stardom. Kidman’s character ends up arranging the murder of her husband, but her weather segments remain perky even as the dirty deed is being executed at her home. (A series of crosscuts between studio and the house during the killing makes for one of the more disturbing weathercasts in cinema history).

Hollywood’s smartest critique of weathercasting appears, interestingly enough, in a kids’ film. *Snow Day* (2000) centers on a record snowfall in Syracuse correctly predicted by Tom Brandston (Chevy Chase). It’s a coup for Brandston, a meteorologist



As “*The Weather Man*,” Nicolas Cage brought a sad-sack demeanor to Dave Spritz, whose success at weathercasting belies a host of personal problems. (Courtesy Paramount Pictures)

who’s forced by producers to don absurd costumes and work with old-fashioned graphics. Meanwhile, his rival, the oily Chad Symmonz (John Schneider), dazzles viewers with the kind of dizzying fly-through graphics that had swept the nation by 2000. “Climb aboard as we dip down underneath the clouds for our exclusive Channel 10 3-D Dopeler radar!”, exclaims Symmonz (mangling the term “Doppler”). After the big snow hits, Symmonz takes credit for catching it first, prompting a showdown in which Brandston exposes Symmonz as a fraud by asking him to explain how snow is formed. The film’s tone is gentle, but the issues explored—the seductiveness of high-tech graphics, the credentials of weather presenters, producers who promote undignified acts—strike at the heart of real-world weathercasting.

of the era, these scientific advances were buried under the sheer weight of jokes and gags.

Return of the Professionals

Stepping in to quell the comic trend of television weather was the American Meteorological Society (AMS). Founded in 1919, the AMS included several

thousand scholars, government forecasters, and others who took a serious interest in weather. Radio's treatment of weather in the pre-television era had drawn little complaint from the AMS; in fact, articles in the group's monthly journal, the *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*, had noted the potential benefits of mass distribution of weather data. However, by the mid-1950s, television weather had strayed far enough from its businesslike roots in radio to alarm the AMS hierarchy.

The Society's response was to create an AMS seal of approval to be conferred on weathercasters whose work met AMS guidelines for completeness, clarity, and professionalism. Plans for the seal were suggested in 1954 and approved in a May 1955 meeting of the AMS Council.³² Word of the AMS plans reached the public in a *TV Guide* article of July 1955 bluntly titled "Weather Is No Laughing Matter." Author Francis Davis, a physics professor and a pioneer radio and TV weathercaster in Philadelphia, summarized the AMS position:

If TV weathermen are going to pose as experts, we feel they *should* be experts. We think the weather should be discussed with dignity. Dignity, not dullness. We think many TV "weathermen" make a caricature of what is essentially a serious and scientific occupation, help foster the notion that forecasters merely grab forecasts out of a fish bowl.³³

Pointed as the AMS criticisms were, they had little initial impact on the tide of humor engulfing television weather. The late 1950s saw a continuation of lighthearted weather segments across the United States while the AMS worked to put together its seal-of-approval protocol. Newspapers and magazines covered the AMS efforts while taking the opportunity to highlight the latest gimmicks. *Newsweek* looked at "Tricky Weather" in 1957, noting a puppet on St. Louis television, a "weather lion" in New York, and Bill Williams, the Nashville poet-weathercaster quoted on page 11.³⁴

It was two more years before the AMS seal program finally began, with the first six seals awarded to those members who had collaborated in drawing up seal requirements. The numbers of seal holders grew slowly through the early 1960s, with 46 television weathercasters certified by 1964. Most of these were in large cities along the Midwestern and Northeastern urban corridors, with a few scattered across the southern plains and Gulf Coast.³⁵ While such small numbers hardly made a dent in the national weathercaster total, the AMS influence was greater than that count might indicate. As early as 1959, *TV Guide* observed that gimmicky weathercasting was on the wane.

Today, there's less intentional humor in the weather forecasts we see on television . . . but we are getting more factual information. In the past 10 years alone, television weathercasts have matured from off-the-cuff reading of the official