

## The Storm Kings

If you're a Rhode Island TV news outlet, you certainly don't hide your Doppler under a bushel. You use it, and you make sure that viewers know about it.

Technology plays a prominent role in branding a station's weathercast, as do the familiar personalities marshaling the gear. Channel 12 (WPRI) has Pinpoint Doppler-wielding Tony Petrarca, Channel 10 (WJAR) counters with Gary Ley and his VIPIR, while Channel 6 (WLNE) sends Mark Searles and the StormTracker into battle.

While quick-changing coastal conditions and New England's four seasons play a role, the biggest factor in explaining the prominence afforded local weathercasts is the collective memory of the Big One. "We're still getting over the Blizzard of '78 mentality," says veteran Channel 10 weatherman John Ghiorse. More than two feet of snow fell in Providence during the two-day February 1978 storm, trapping thousands in their homes and cars, and leaving many southern New Englanders with a lemming-like tendency to clog supermarkets — reflexively buying bread and milk — when even a small amount of snow is forecast.

But our climate and once-in-a-generation severe weather events aren't the whole story. Southern New England is hardly the only area of the country with storms and variable weather; nor is feverish coverage of low-pressure systems unique to this region. In Rhode Island — as elsewhere — high-octane weather reports are part and parcel of promoting local newscasts. Seen this way, local newscasts stoke the meteorological frenzy of viewers as much as they respond to it.

For those working in tourism, construction, fishing, and some other professions, the weather is important, even vital. For many others, it's handy for gauging the morning commute, or predicting the likelihood of junior's soccer game being cancelled. "It impacts everyone's lives, from putting kids on the school bus to pouring a foundation," notes WJAR news director Betty-Jo Cugini.

And while not everyone is fascinated by politics or even the Patriots, it's hard to find anyone who lacks a passing interest in the weather — unless they are incarcerated without yard privileges.

The universality of sunshine and rain, in fact, and the apolitical, non-controversial nature of the weather make it the perfect centerpiece for a local newscast. When a weather story plays near the top of the TV news — a surprisingly common occurrence — the line between weather and news blurs, and in addition to an update from the meteorologist, reporters are dispatched to T.F. Green, a frigid overpass on Route 95, rain-soaked Kennedy Plaza, wherever the flakes or raindrops might be falling.

A major storm that shuts down roads and airports and causes communications and power outages is a big deal, of course, although such instances are rare.

"A lot of storms are hyped," admits Ghiorse, noting the tendency to talk about every tropical depression in terms of Hurricane Katrina, and to relate snowstorms to the infamous 1978 event.

Channel 12's Michelle Muscatello concedes that there are but a half-dozen times a year when weather is likely to seriously impact people's lives or property, yet even that estimate may be generous.

Former television news producer Alan Schroeder, a professor of journalism at Northeastern University in Boston, notes that weather doesn't have many downsides as a story since it affects everyone. "It's almost too easy as a lead," he says, adding, "It's a bit of a lazy choice."

In other words, if a tree falls on a suburban street during a storm, you might not hear it, but you will get pictures at six and 11 — either from a crew dispatched to the scene, or thanks to a concerned citizen snapping a photo and e-mailing it to the station.

### **The weather gets professional**

Ghiorse, who has worked in the field for more than 40 years, says that when he interviewed at WJAR in 1968, nonprofessionals were the norm. "I had to convince them to hire a meteorologist, namely me," he laughs. Ghiorse, who has a Harvard chemistry degree and studied meteorology at Penn State, was an Air Force meteorologist before taking a job at a Hartford broadcasting outlet and then signing on at Channel 10.

WJAR soon trumpeted how its weather report came from an actual meteorologist, not just someone reading National Weather Service summaries. The other local channels followed suit, and most stations in mid and large-sized markets across the country now employ credentialed meteorologists. A meteorology degree, not to mention seals from the American Meteorological Society and the National Weather Association, have become standard for TV weathercasters.

One thing that hasn't changed is that weathercasters are expected to be upbeat, outgoing types, equal parts scientist, folksy authority, and local celebrity. "So much of local television news is personality," notes Northeastern's Schroeder.

In recent years, dueling technology has also been injected into the local TV weather wars. The battle seems particularly breathless between WJAR, the traditional ratings leader in Rhode Island, and its closest competitor, WPRI. Channel 10's VIPIR (Volumetric Imaging and Processing of Integrated Radar), for example, is touted by its distributor as "the world's most advanced 3D weather system for broadcasters." Channel 12, meanwhile, in introducing its Pinpoint Doppler, called it, "The most powerful cutting-edge technology available to meteorologists anywhere."

(By contrast, recalls Ghiorse, "I had three large maps tacked to the wall," in his studio set-up in the 1960s, "and I'd walk from one to the other." He also used magnetic letters, and the camera would zoom in as he pointed to satellite photos.)

These days, weathercasters are skilled in computer graphics, deploying a veritable storm of maps, models, and images during a three-minute weather segment. The sophistication of the contemporary bells and whistles seems a bit extreme, given how most viewers just want a sense of whether it's going to rain or snow.

Yet meteorologists are also important ambassadors for their stations, and they frequently glad-hand at schools and other venues. “A big part of the job is getting out into the community,” says Channel 12’s Muscatello, one of only two female meteorologists in the Providence market (Channel 10’s Kelly Bates is the other). Having meteorologists talk with third-graders or Rotarians about Rhode Island’s climate helps to extend a station’s brand, cementing connections with viewers.

Weather and climate are lifelong passions for most TV weathercasters. Long before he hit the local airwaves in 1987, Tony Petrarca, Channel 12’s chief meteorologist, was a weather buff, tracking storms from his Warwick bedroom as a grade-schooler. He hung maps on his wall, and plotted blizzards based on data mined from newspapers and television weathercasts. “It was very rude and crude,” admits Petrarca, who went on to obtain a degree in meteorology from Vermont’s Lyndon State College, the alma mater of several local meteorologists.

Jason Shafer, an assistant professor of meteorology at Lyndon State, says of his students, “They’re weather weenies at heart.” Meteorology students are typically drawn to climate extremes. “They want to be storm-chasers,” says Shafer, “or they like severe weather.” Meteorology is a popular degree program at the small school. About one third of the meteorology students there are in the broadcast option, which supplements courses on calculus and cold fronts with instruction on how to act in front of a camera.

### **Providence: “A destination location”**

Among local stations, Channel 12 and Channel 10 are particularly gung-ho in promoting their weather gear, with WPRI’s Pinpoint Weather Mobile and WJAR’s VIPIR serving as two prominent focal points.

According to a promo on the Channel 12 Web site, for example, the Weather Mobile “tracks the weather in your neighborhood as it happens,” and it is extolled for its ability to battle statewide through hurricanes, blizzards and thunderstorms.

Neither WPRI’s Doppler or its Weather Mobile come cheap. “It takes up a substantial part of our budget,” Joe Abouzeid, Channel 12’s news director, says of the weathercast, noting that the station spends “a significant amount” on weather technology.

This kind of spending, in turn, leads to a corresponding emphasis. “The fact that you have the technology,” says Northeastern’s Schroeder, “means you want to get a return on your investment.”

Weather typically comprises a little less than 20 percent of actual air time (not including commercials and promos), a figure that is higher in the morning, when audience turnover dictates frequent weather “hits.”

The weather spots come fast and furious, and in recent years, have grown more daring. The seven-day forecast is a product not only of improved weather prediction technology, but also the

desire to give viewers expanded weather information. “The meteorologists are not happy about the seven-day forecast,” admits Channel 10’s Cugini, since the longer horizon makes accurate predictions more difficult, “but if you don’t give it to [viewers], they’ll go somewhere else.” There is certainly no shortage of weather options, and Petrarca acknowledges that particularly during storms, viewers are inclined to flip around and sample multiple forecasts.

The stations try to hold their audience by alternating weather teasers (“A dreary Turkey Day or late fall delight? Your forecast is next!”), short weather hits of 30 seconds to a minute that promise more detailed information later, and finally, the actual three-minute weather segments.

The local stations aren’t just competing with each other these days. There’s also the Weather Channel, as well as radio, print, and the Internet, not to mention podcasts, and weather reports personally delivered via cell phones and BlackBerrys.

For meteorologists, New England is a prized destination because of its climate. “We get everything from A to Z,” notes Petrarca, who feels it would be “pretty boring” to be a forecaster in Phoenix. It’s also a big enough market that the pay is respectable, although not at the level found in a market like Boston, where a \$500,000 yearly salary is possible.

Still, Providence is a “destination location,” says Mark Searles, Channel 6’s chief meteorologist. Most local TV meteorologists are not looking to move on, in part since many are native to the area and have been working in Rhode Island for decades.

Doing television weather in Providence may be a good gig, but it’s not as easy as some might suspect. “I don’t think a lot of people realize how much time we put into that three-and-a-half minutes,” says Petrarca, who describes meteorology as a “24/7 kind of thing — I’m constantly tracking the weather.”

Inclement winter weather is what most tests the meteorologist’s mettle. Storms are notoriously hard to predict, and small changes in conditions can mean the difference between a blizzard and a slight dusting, or rain.

Moreover, for such a small state, the weather can vary significantly from one location to another in Rhode Island, particularly in the colder months. There can be bare ground in Newport, and a foot of the white stuff in Foster, with varying degrees of precipitation in between. Getting it right, and getting it local, is no easy task.

We nonetheless live in something of a golden age of weathercasts, with better technology, better-trained forecasters, and a very prominent place for the subject in local newscasts.

The last point, though, speaks to a general decline in television news, with lighter subjects and celebrity-focused stories having increasingly taken the place of more significant public issues. It is this vacuum that offers a perfect space for some of Rhode Island’s most recognizable faces — the weathercasters of the state’s TV stations — to literally tell us which way the wind blows.

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