

As Weather Becomes Big Story, TV Forecasters Play the Hero

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T. Lynne Pixley for The New York Times

Glenn Burns, a longtime forecaster, says: "Weather is the reason to watch a newscast. It's king."

By KIM SEVERSON
Published: July 18, 2011

ATLANTA — One evening in April, Tina Eller had the television on. Glenn Burns, the steely chief meteorologist for WSB-TV, said a [tornado](#) was three minutes away from slamming into her community.

Mr. Burns's instructions were simple: Take cover.

Ms. Eller, 51, rushed to a closet with her mother, two sisters and four dogs.

"All of the sudden you hear the glass shattering and wood cracking and the trees just rattling," she said.

Every room in the house was wrecked, except the space that held her family.

"It was that warning we got from him that got us into the closet on time," she said. "I never would have lived through it."

As the nation moves through a year of remarkable floods, drought and its deadliest tornado season in half a century, the broadcast meteorologist has emerged as an unlikely hero.

Increasingly, the weather is becoming a bigger part of the national conversation. As scientists explore the implications of [climate change](#) and severe weather's effect on everything from crops to urban infrastructure, broadcast meteorologists like [Mr. Burns](#) are the ones who bring it home every day in eye-popping computer graphics.

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Tracking the Storm

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T. Lynne Pixley for The New York Times

Glenn Burns is chief meteorologist at WSB-TV in Atlanta.

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“The weather is more extreme, the floods are wetter and the droughts are drier,” said Chris Vaccaro, a spokesman for the [National Weather Service](#). “That’s going to have real implications on society, and it elevates the need for more information and a need for those on-air personalities. It’s beyond what to wear for the day or do I need to carry an umbrella.”

Gone are the days when the local weather guy had to climb on a tricycle at the clown parade, and Diane Sawyer, who got her start delivering forecasts in Louisville, Ky., was called a weather bunny. Now, the forecaster is the egghead of the newsroom. Most have advanced degrees that include courses in calculus and atmospheric thermodynamics.

Mr. Burns, a man with affection for Porsches and astrophysics, has for 30 years predicted the weather for viewers in the Atlanta area. In the old days, he used to have to wait for his turn in the newscast, slap a magnetic sun on a map and hope it didn’t rain.

Now he presides over a new \$1.7 million radar system and has more real estate on the set than the newscasters have.

As that kind of technology offers the ability to predict with great precision how a severe storm will move, the weather forecast has become about saving lives.

In Alabama, Gov. Robert Bentley called [James Spann](#), the rock star of meteorology in the state, a hero for his role when an unprecedented string of tornadoes bore down there this spring and killed nearly 250 people.

Without the rapid warnings Mr. Spann sent out via Twitter, Internet streams and television, surely more lives would have been lost.

Like firefighters or war heroes, meteorologists talk a lot among themselves about a job that has turned from explaining the finer points of a jet stream to one where lives depend on it.

“If somebody is hurt or killed by severe weather, there isn’t a person among us who doesn’t think, ‘What could I have done differently? What could I have done better?’ ” said [Jay Trobec](#), meteorologist for KELO-TV in Sioux Falls, S.D., and commissioner for professional affairs for the [American Meteorological Society](#), which certifies broadcasters who deliver the weather.

“In the old days,” Mr. Trobec said, “it was good enough to be able to rip and read the forecast from the National Weather Service.”

Exactly when the role changed from the guy who fouled up weekend plans with a botched forecast to community hero remains a topic of debate. But part of the evolution can be traced to the late 1980s when Doppler radar — a term even the casual viewer knows but perhaps does not understand — became a tool for broadcast meteorologists.

The radar technology, named after an effect noted by a 19th-century Austrian physicist, is a way to measure speed and direction. It allowed local forecasters to be more precise.

Whereas the technology was once a rarity, now about 350 of the nation’s 762 television stations that produce local news own Doppler radar systems, Mr. Trobec said.

Certainly the Weather Channel, which made its debut in 1982, has made the weather game more competitive. But meteorologists maintain that there is nothing like a local forecast from someone in the community.

Changing weather has had something to do with the popularity of local forecasts, too.

“When this El Niño stuff started popping up a lot in the 1990s, that’s when weather started to really have a presence,” said Monica Pearson, a veteran newscaster who has worked with Mr. Burns in Atlanta since he arrived at the station in 1981.

“I remember when we used to take time away from Glenn,” Ms. Pearson said. “Now he takes time away from us.”

And that is how it should be, said Mr. Burns, whose fascination with weather began when he was a boy hanging out at the Miami television station his father used to run.

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“Weather is the reason to watch a newscast,” Mr. Burns said. “It’s king.”

An evening on the WSB-TV news set makes that clear. From late afternoon to the 11 p.m. broadcast, Mr. Burns dominates.

He runs his empire from two consoles of computer screens that rival a [Star Trek](#) set. His equipment has names like StormTracker 2HD.

At its heart is something called Klystron dual-polarization Doppler. His is one of two stations in the country that have installed it.

“It’s life-saving technology,” he said with all the enthusiasm of a seventh-grade science geek. “I can peel away the layers of a storm and see inside of it. I can scan a flock of geese 300 miles away.”

He is even ahead of the National Weather Service, which over the next couple of years will be upgrading its 160 radar stations with the same technology at a cost of about \$40 million.

It was that radar, installed only a few days before the deadly storms tore through Georgia in April that allowed Mr. Burns to warn people like Ms. Ellis.

Of course, not everyone is impressed with the technological wizardry. The station’s new radar was the subject of a lively discussion at [Radio-Info.com](#), an online community for broadcast professionals.

“It takes too damn long to describe some three-dee whatsit and oddball ‘middle of the storm’ transition color modeling,” wrote a poster called nightmanager. “I am not sure the current way of doing things is much better than the old way when we knew there was a storm coming and everybody just took shelter.”

And sometimes, people just want to know if it is going to rain over the weekend. And they hold the forecaster personally responsible when it does.

“I get people asking me every day, ‘Why don’t you do something about this?’ ” said [Marshall McPeck](#), a popular forecaster in Columbus, Ohio.

His answer?

“If I could change the weather, do you think I’d still be in television?”

A version of this article appeared in print on July 19, 2011, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: As Weather Becomes Big Story, TV Forecasters Play the Hero.

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