tornado warnings over radio and television

Allen D. Pearson

National Severe Storms Forecast Center, ESSA

Kansas City, Mo.

About a year ago, we issued a tornado watch for a portion of Kansas. Several hours later, I was called by a little old lady who complained bitterly about having spent four hours in the basement without anything happening. Several months later, she called again, even more vehement about having spent six hours in the basement. After spending three hours in the basement during the third watch, she came up to find the house gone. She quickly called me and said, "Now, that's more like it."

Two and a half years ago, I visited the north central states that were hard hit by the Palm Sunday outbreak. The devastation was nearly total, and 272 people were killed. All of us can understand a sudden tragedy when it has not been forewarned, but this was not the case. Those of us who toured the area did so with a troubled conscience. Why should so many people have died needlessly; had we erred?

Since we could not question the dead, we turned our attention to the living, many of them still in various degrees of shock. The words came slowly at first, usually ending with a torrent of words to the effect, "No one warned us," "We didn't think it would ever happen here," "I didn't hear any sirens," "I was watching TV, and all of a sudden the house was gone." The favorite question usually started with "Why didn't they . . ."—"they" being never defined but akin to an overwatching government deity.

Gradually a pattern evolved, and it was not one favorable to radio, television, or weathermen. It indicated a sluggish system, unresponsive at best and somewhat like the old tag line of trying to fight a tiger with a wet noodle. Most stations were not geared to anything other than normal weather and to normal broadcast schedules. When it came time for quick reactions, nothing happened. There was little indication that anyone had given sufficient forethought to handling the unusual.

I'm sure that some of you are already thinking, "Ah, another government expert trying to tell us how to run our business. What does he know about weather casting? Doesn't he know that I have a regular audience of a quarter of a million people on the 10:00 p.m.

show?" My answer to this is simple—if the severe weather hits at 9:50 p.m., you've got it made. But what about during the middle of the ball game when your show was preempted, your day off, or even in mid-morning? Will your station function just as well? Can it react in a minute or two? The average tornado has a life span of less than 30 minutes, and quick station reaction is an absolute must. The only difference between the run-of-the-mill storm and a killer is generally that a town got in the way.

I'm sure that some of you have complete control of your shows and can do pretty much what you like. Unfortunately this seems to be the exception rather than the rule. It seems to me that weather casting varies all the way from truly public service to almost pure entertainment. On-camera time varies from a few minutes to an eternity, and gimmicks abound. Other news stories nudge the weather farther and farther towards the end of the show, and I have seen some cases where the weathercaster was literally breathless at the completion. If he had a message, it was lost in the gusts. Meteorology and weather forecasting is a fascinating field, and it should be done well without the gimmicks. I don't care what her measurements are, if the weather girl doesn't get the facts, I lose interest. Another thing, while weather during the past 24 hours is interesting, the emphasis should always be on the forecast. This ties in with the problem of decision making that I mentioned earlier. Many weather shows overly-dwell on little goodies far removed from the viewer's area. While I have no objection to knowing the location of Typhoon Rachel off Japan or the afternoon high at Needles, this shouldn't be given at the expense of the local forecast. John Q can read about that in the paper the next day; give him his forecast now. Lay out your material in such a manner to make perfectly clear to the listener what his prospects are. Maybe you will have to edit us a bit, but we expect that. Our forecasts aren't etched in stone.

But I came here mainly to talk about severe weather and how I feel it should be handled. It is easier to show how it shouldn't be handled, so let's accentuate the negative for a while. The slides will help those who have succumbed to my fearless rhetoric.

¹ Paper presented at the Second Conference on Weather-casting, Tampa, Fla., 8-9 December 1967.

These can be called the Pearson Techniques for Keeping Us All in Hot Water—the acronym is PTKUAHW.

First Slide. Don't have an arrangement with your local Bureau to routinely advise you of the severe weather prospects for the next 24 hours. This way the outlook that Kansas City sends out each morn-

ing on facsimile won't help you at all. Our outlook areas may be for larger areas than the later boxes, and our batting average for confirmed tornadoes is only 0.500, but even the Georgia Peach didn't hit that well.

is your duty to let the general public make the decision. I am fully convinced that we could get confirmed sightings on a 10-foot woman with green hair if we put out 10-foot-woman-with-green-hair watches.

Third Slide. Work closely with your own exclusive group of volunteers, be they Eagles, Boy Scouts, or the Spanish American War Widows. Retrain them every ten years or so, and always figure that they will be home when you need them. Hide them from your competition. This way you will have the satisfaction of being the only station in town that is carrying tornado bulletins—a clear jump on that nasty competitor. Don't let it bother you at all that some people in the area may never get the word if it is an honest-to-goodness tornado—your own private network came through once again.

broadcast, since someone might recognize the announcer as not being your man.

words. Besides, you know how many angry letters you got the last time you interrupted a program.

Fourth Slide. Don't tell the Weather Bureau what you are doing. They are just a bunch of conservative old fuds who brief pilots and take observations that disagree with your forecasts. Why should they have your information when you went to so much trouble to acquire it?

Fifth Slide. Resist any cooperative measures with your competitors. Remind one and all that competition is the very heart of the American System. If Station KABC is the Emergency Broadcast Station, don't use their

Sixth Slide. Never break into a network show. Convince yourself that enough people will be listening to radio to alert their neighbors. Just put that little strip at the bottom with five or ten

Seventh Slide. Don't use any visual aids. Try to list as many small towns that no one ever heard of.

Eighth Slide. Double the volume of your voice and speed it up, too. Make frequent references to the last tornado disaster with hints that a real tragedy is in store. Repeat the old information, but ad lib your own views. Make up some safety rules of your own—let's see, was it the northeast corner of the basement and under the bed?

Ninth Slide. Don't subscribe to the Weather Bureau's wire service; count on the AP or UPI to send you all that you need during the split, even though the split is only 20 minutes of each hour.

Tenth Slide. Demand an exclusive hot line or mike in the Weather Bureau offices.

But enough of the sins; let me tell you how we do it in Kansas City, and you can take pot shots at me afterwards. First, I feel there are two things that are absolutely vital to a

good warning program: one, you must have or help build a strong Civil Defense group; and secondly, you must pool your broadcasts.

About a year and a half ago, we asked all of the Kansas City stations to a meeting, since the sins were all present in varying degrees. It didn't come easy, but we finally worked out a program that combined the Civil Defense with a broadcast pool. Each of the participating stations (seven AM; four TV; seven FM) agreed to chip in towards building and maintaining an amplifier at the Weather Bureau office. The total cost was about \$800.00. The amplifier is always on, and telephone lines run to each of the stations, with an average monthly line charge of \$12.00. All we have to do to activate the circuit is to plug in the mike.

Every morning an outlook is sent on the ESSA Weather Wire and is updated as necessary. This gives the program manager a chance to plan his staffing. All but one of the stations are on the ESSA Weather Wire, and weekly tests are scheduled. Each of the stations is equipped with lights, bells, or buzzers hooked on the teletype. We can activate the alarms with a precut tape that sits ready to go by the teletype machine.

After the lights go on, a 30-second countdown is given over the live mike, and then the warning is given. All our town sirens are ringing, and we figure that people will be running for their basements if they are awake, or if they heard the sirens.

The Emergency Broadcast System is put into effect, and we cut away for one minute so that the signal can be sounded. We have worked long and hard with the Civil Defense and currently every hospital and school

in Kansas City has a tone activated radio that goes on when this signal is sounded. By setting the radio to any one of the four EBS stations, the set is automatically turned on, even though the electric power may have failed. To those people who sleep daytimes, or who are unwilling to monitor the radio, this method insures them instant awareness.

Meantime, the TV stations have also gone to the audio pool, using prearranged safety rule slides. All have been supplied with a large plotting map identical to that used in our office. The map has range circles and azimuths so that plotting is facilitated. Since Kansas and Missouri have their fair share of small towns, we give locations with respect to the town and to the azimuth and range from downtown Kansas City. Even the people at home can follow along, since the Kansas City Star graciously printed the map in the paper. Hot lines from the Civil Defense, Citizens Band radio groups, and City, County, and State police feed information in to us. Some of the info is good; some not so good. We plot it, compare it with radar and other reports, and then feed it back to the million plus people over the broadcast line. The delay is minimal, and the excited kid at 12th and Vine doesn't get his sighting on the air.

Meanwhile, what have the radio and television stations done to preserve their identity? The Weather Bureau spokesman has had his say and has turned the programming back to the stations. Those stations with mobile units move to the area and broadcast information about damage, road conditions, and the like. The stations, in turn, pass information on to us, and if the material is significant, the broadcast system is reactivated and everyone benefits. Since the stations are so mobile, they give an added dimension to the entire warning process.

We have a direct line to the superintendent of schools. If he has some advice for the principals, the students, the bus drivers, and the frantic parents at home, he calls us, and we put him on the air, over all 20 outlets. This gives one and all the same advice and cuts down on the confusion. Similarly, the police or fire departments can announce to one and all to stay away from such and such an area and be sure that every media station got the word.

The Kansas City stations have an understanding that the same procedure will be used whenever a tornado hits within 60 miles of downtown Kansas City. For the first time the rural areas are getting the same coverage that their big city brothers have gotten.

If you are lucky, you won't have a tornado hit your area for many years to come. If you are thorough, you will be ready when the time comes.

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