

Weatherwise

Take a second to try to name your fifth grade math teacher. Now try to name the weathercaster you watched during your childhood. Chances are that the latter leaped to mind much quicker than the former. While many of us were first enamored with weather as children during a particularly impressive thunderstorm, a crippling snow storm, or even through the destruction of a tornado or hurricane, it was often only through the nightly arrival of the local weathercaster into our living rooms—who made sense of individual storm events as well as forecasts for the region’s weather—that such nascent interest gained focus. Such was the case for Bob Henson, who got his first taste of television weathercasting from KWTW’s (Oklahoma City) Lola Hall. Henson shares his lifelong fascination with weather forecasting in *Weather on the Air: A History of Broadcast Meteorology*.

Like his other books, *The Rough Guide to Weather* and *The Rough Guide to Climate Change*, Bob Henson’s *Weather on the Air* is lovingly written and meticulously researched. It is the culmination of 22 years of research, yet Henson readily admits that it is by no means the final word on weathercasting. More than just a simple timeline detailing the technological innovations that have taken the profession from hand-drawn maps on Plexiglas to today’s touch screen technology, Henson’s book also touches on the philosophical: Are weathercasts necessary? To answer that question, Henson turns to veteran weatherman Bob Ryan who, in turn, quotes TV weather legend John Coleman: “People watch [and listen to, and read about] people.” Recognizing this, weathercasters have for decades tried to find the right balance of science and showbiz to capture audiences. The pendulum has swung between sobriety to wackiness over the years, and Henson offers plenty of anecdotes and archival photos, including Tex Antoine and his forecasting puppet, Uncle Wethbee, as well as a classic shot of Willard Scott dressed up as Carmen Miranda. While there is room for levity in the weathercast, Henson describes today’s successful TV meteorologist as one or more of the following: “a trusted source during severe weather, an authority who knows local climate inside and out, a patient explainer of atmospheric mysteries, a community booster.”

In addition to characteristics, Henson also talks about the credentials of weathercasters, explaining the history and continuing evolution of the broadcast seal programs of both the American Meteorological Society (AMS) and National Weathercasters Association (NWA). He also describes the varying routes through which most of us enter the business: an oncampus mix of meteorology and mass communication at one of dozens of colleges nationwide, or Mississippi State University’s distance-learning approach tailored for weathercasters. As more qualified graduates have hit the market, the demographics of television weathercasters have changed, with more and more minorities and women holding big market and even national positions. Henson notes that, as of 2010, six of The Weather Channel’s 32 on-air staff members are African-American. Gone also are the days of “weather girls” who were hired only to show off the latest fashions: As of 2010, more than 200 women held the AMS Seal of Approval, with 58 being AMS Certified Broadcast Meteorologists.

At no other time in the history of broadcast meteorology have there been so many forecasting and graphical tools at the weathercaster’s disposal, nor has the field ever been so diverse or well-educated. Yet there is a great amount of unease among those already working in the field as well as those

considering weathercasting as a career. In the book's final chapter, "The Extended Outlook: Whither the Weathercast?," the forecast is about as certain as day seven in a seven-day outlook. To be certain, the changing media landscape has forced weathercasters and the stations they work for to find new ways to reach out to an audience no longer satisfied with watching TV at the defined "news" times. Whether it is extra HD channels, a beefed-up Web site, blogs and tweets, or repackaging viewer-generated content such as photos and video, today's weathercaster continues to scramble to keep up with and take advantage of the latest communication tools. Yet despite their best efforts, for many weathercasters, the audience share continues to decline, and this may mean fewer professional opportunities. Even with dwindling ratings, audiences tune in when severe weather threatens, and this may be the key to the survival of the profession. In seeking out that severe weather silver lining, Henson turns to veteran Gary England (Oklahoma City's KWTV): "When individuals feel at risk from severe weather, they seek out and will continue to seek out the person they know and trust."

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