

Talking about the weather isn't so simple—on TV

CHANNELING THE WEATHER

by **STEVE MIRSKY**

The easiest job in America is probably being a television weather forecaster in San Diego. If you can say the words “sunny” and “70” without ejecting your dentures, go ahead and fill out a job application. Or so you’d think. Actually, performing on television is a lot more difficult than it looks. I know. That guy in the picture is me. Fortunately for the good people of Pennsylvania, my single appearance as a TV weather guy projected no farther than the studio control booth at Pennsylvania State University.

Only about half of America’s TV weather folk are certified meteorologists, a statistic that annoyed meteorologist Fred Gadomski enough for him to offer senior meteorology majors at Penn State a class on how to be on TV. “In a perfect world, everyone who told you about the weather on television should be a meteorologist,” Gadomski says. “They know the most about it, and there are a few times each year when the weather gets really serious, and it can mean something to your life or your property. You don’t want some Joe Schmoe handling it.”

Gadomski understands, however, that TV watchers want more than facts. “All those other times when the weather is not so serious,” he says, “you want someone interesting telling you about it. And that’s what we’re trying to get across here.”

I visited Gadomski’s class a few years back and got to try my hand, which is pointing at my hometown. About 20 seniors enroll every year, most of whom will nonetheless pursue conventional meteorology careers at the National Weather Service or airports or in the military. But five or six will go on to TV.

Gadomski’s class meets twice weekly. The first session covers the technology currently available for creating compelling television graphics that help explain the weather better. For that discussion, students sit in a classroom, wearing jeans and T-shirts. A couple of days later, however, they move into the TV studio. Then they go from looking ratty to looking natty, donning suits to strut their stuff in front of a camera.

On the day of my visit, the students were practicing the kind of one-minute forecast that a local weatherperson does during

a network morning news program. After exactly one minute, the network broadcast reasserts its dominion and cuts off the local weather, whether or not. So you’d better have wrapped it up in that 60 seconds. Finish in 52 seconds, and you’re facing the unblinking eye of a TV camera for eight seconds that will feel longer

than a Minneapolis winter.

Add to that time pressure the fact that there’s actually no map behind the weather guy. Instead there’s a big, blank, blue wall and TV magic, which replaces that wall with an image of a map. Weatherpeople have to look at an offscreen monitor to see where they should be pointing their own hand, which in fact is flailing at something that is not really there (kind of like being a Congressman figuring out how to spend the budget surplus). Predicting the course of a low-pressure front can thus be simple compared with finding Philadelphia with your finger. (The blue wall can also lead to horseplay, as the monitors are insensitive to anything that same shade of blue. “You can throw a blue ball at someone,” says one student, “and it won’t show up on camera, but the guy will flinch.”)

The toughest battle aside from invisible dodgeball, however, is the delivery. Television demands an unusual combination of attitudes: relaxed and conversational but energetic and upbeat. The biggest, phoniest smile you can possibly imagine plastering on your face will seem just about normal on TV, whereas your typical facial expression and speech pattern may make you look like you’ve just returned from delivering the eulogy at your dog’s funeral. For the average student, the semester in front of the camera is thus a slow peeling away of layers of performance inhibitions.

Those are the rules of the TV game, and anyone who wishes to play has to abide by them. The benefits, however, are worth the arduous investment. Students who do not pursue TV careers nonetheless enhance their communication skills, which will serve them well wherever they wind up. And those students who do wind up on a newscast serve all of us well, by being something rare and positive: trained scientists appearing on television daily.

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