

Missing the storm for the waves

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CULLOWHEE - One lesson I have learned from Hurricane Irene is that television coverage of the storm was, to use announcers' own words, "terrible," "extreme," "disastrous," "devastating." The accuracy of the reporting (other than about the storm track) and explanations of hurricane processes were terrible. The mischaracterization of storm effects was extreme. The impact on the public understanding and respect for the science of meteorology and oceanography will be disastrous, and the effect on future evacuation efforts may be devastating.

Before 24-hour news saturation, many local network affiliates had well-trained meteorologists who would have hours to prepare carefully thought-out forecasts and descriptions of hurricane effects. As a graduate student at Duke, I actually learned some science by watching a particularly good meteorologist at a local affiliate in Raleigh.

Today, we have higher quality data available from so many sources, including the National Hurricane Center, but the presentation to the public by media outlets has deteriorated into meaningless theater. The requirement for constant, unending coverage leaves mostly untrained reporters with dozens of hours to fill on everything from The Weather Channel to local network affiliates.

It's like watching an old-fashioned Senate filibuster. Take a microphone, stand on the beach and talk unscripted for as long as you can. The problem is that significant portions of what is being relayed to the public are scientifically inaccurate and mischaracterize actual and likely storm effects.

Many analysts have criticized the weather coverage for exaggerating these effects. This misses the real point. Weather reporters exaggerated things that didn't happen (such as coastal erosion in Nags Head) and underplayed effects that truly were catastrophic (the record flooding in Vermont). The national media spent so much time predicting catastrophic "window shattering" in Manhattan and the "most expensive storm in U.S. history" that they rarely considered record flooding in Manteo or in the village of Colington on the backside of the Outer Banks.

Especially comical were the "on the scene" reporters scrambling around the parking lots of coastal hotels looking for "devastating" or "extreme" damage from the winds they predicted that never materialized. A reporter for a New Jersey station stood in the surf zone and declared that he was "standing in the surge."

No, no, you're not. The storm was still 36 hours away.

Yes, this is all humorous to watch. But I believe that it is also full of problems. I hate to see scientifically inaccurate information being provided to millions of viewers by individuals whom most viewers accept as experts. It misinforms, and it makes scientists look bad.

I have cringed as Weather Channel "experts" have erred in their description of storm surge, how it is generated and where the most likely effects will be. I watched analysts describe what is "probably happening out there" by looking at a map and drawing arrows, when I know that what they are describing is unlikely or impossible from a scientific perspective. Sometimes they were flat-out wrong, and that places lives at risk.

I cringe when we see a reporter standing on the beach straining against the wind and rain as the storm comes ashore. First, he is telling us nothing useful, relevant or interesting while he gets blown in the wind. Second, and more important, he is sending a terrible message to all of those who evacuated, say, the Outer Banks, leaving their one chance at summer vacation behind. The message is this: "There really isn't anything to fear, or I wouldn't be here, would I?"

Why should I evacuate if the media folks are able to stand in the waves as the storm passes?

Hurricane Irene was a perfect storm of bad coverage and bad science. The coverage exaggerated the effect in areas where damage was expected and missed the real but less glamorous catastrophe.

The news media tell us the storm is a monster and we should run, then they send their crews to the coast for a little fun and bravado - ridiculous.