From Networks to Netflix

A Guide to Changing Channels

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The Weather Channel

Genre, Trust, and Unscripted Television in an Age of Apps

Jon Kraszewski

The launch of The Weather Channel's IOS app in 2007 and its Android app in 2008 quickly rendered the station's prime-time television programming obsolete. *The Evening Edition* (2001–2009) had conveyed meteorological information to viewers through three segments: the local on the 8s (which gave local conditions, local radar, and a weekly forecast), regional weather (where on-site meteorologists reported significant weather patterns in different parts of the country), and national weather (told from studio meteorologists analyzing radar, weather maps, and forecasts). *The Evening Edition* allowed viewers to learn their local forecast and place it in the context of regional and national weather, but the new app offered The Weather Channel viewers access to information normally available on the local on the 8s at any time, with just the touch of a finger. Thus, within four months of the Android app's debut, executives cancelled *The Evening Edition*. Over the next 20 months, The Weather Channel executives rebranded the channel so that unscripted television programs were its defining prime-time feature. In 2011, *Coast Guard Alaska* (2011–2015) premiered. The following year included the debuts of *Coast Guard Florida* (2012) and *Lifeguard* (2012). Mid-decade programs such as *Coast Guard Cape Disappointment/Pacific Northwest* (2014) and *Fat Guys in the Woods* (2014–2015) made the everyday lives of professionals who worked in extreme weather conditions central to evening lineups.

This chapter focuses on the way different players in the television industry constructed the generic identity of these unscripted programs on The Weather Channel. When the shows premiered on The Weather Channel, station executives billed them as "docu-series" in an attempt to brand them as serious entertainment. However, by 2014 the cable companies DirecTV and Verizon Fios denigrated these same programs as "reality TV" and claimed that fledging weather stations such as AccuWeather and Weather Nation offered viewers valuable meteorology information while The Weather Channel aired trashy reality television series. How and why could channel executives

and cable companies have different classifications for the unscripted shows and different value assessments of The Weather Channel itself?

Two industrial issues guide my examination of this battle over the generic identity of these programs. First, how do these unscripted shows emerge from a history of The Weather Channel's efforts to reconstitute trust as new technologies render obsolete old formats (i.e., key textual features that mark a program or group of programs of a station as unique)? Trust is a foundational value at The Weather Channel, as executives have always wanted viewers to trust the information offered. It might seem obvious that executives would ask viewers to believe scientific data about weather on the station, but the construction of trust at The Weather Channel is a complex issue. Media scholar Roger Silverstone argues that trust is an essential quality of media. Trust allows media to "invite us to believe in the authenticity and authority of the electronic image" (1999, 123). Television garners trust in institutions and the knowledge they provide for our daily living. But this trust is manufactured. The trust that institutions offer becomes a product that we consume. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) extends this line of inquiry into branding cultures, arguing that companies manufacture feelings of authenticity central to the identities and politics of consumers. We consume brands because of the way they package their authenticity and trustworthiness. Following Silverstone's and Banet-Weiser's leads, I investigate how station executives packaged the weather in formats meant to convey trust and how The Weather Channel's emerging programming strategies reimagined trust as new technologies took over the channel's prior role in disseminating older forms of trustworthy material.

Second, how do battles over defining the generic identity of unscripted programs on The Weather Channel reveal the discursive terrain of genre that makes it a site of industrial struggle over channel value, status, and trust/authenticity? The way that two companies in the cable industry had contrasting generic definitions for these unscripted programs underscores how genres operate not as sets of textual properties but as discursive categories spoken by various users. While all of these unscripted programs on The Weather Channel share textual features that give them a distinct format, the struggle to label them as either docu-series or reality television has more to do with the assumptions of cultural value of those genres than with matching the right textual features to the right generic category. Television genre theorist Jason Mittell argues that "by regarding genre as a property and function of discourse, we can examine the various ways in which various forms of communication work to constitute generic definitions, meanings, and values within a particular historical context" (2004, 12). Susan Murray (2009) has used Mittell's theory of genre to analyze the differences between documentary series and reality television, arguing that many programs have liminal textual features that could fall within either category. For Murray, a proper analysis explores how users bestow those categories onto unscripted series in an effort to value or devalue them, for documentary series are assumed to be high-minded, artistic, and objective, whereas reality shows are viewed as sensationalistic, lowbrow, and subjective. I agree with Murray's assessment of the cultural weight those categories have, but I am interested in seeing how those generic designations assign value to the channel itself, not merely to the texts. Executives can build prestige into a cable brand by promoting it

as a center for docu-series production. Likewise to build a station brand around reality television might articulate a lower cultural status to a channel within these dominant genre discourses.

The battle over classifying The Weather Channel's unscripted television programs was a battle over the value of the station itself. The Weather Channel executives originally billed their unscripted programs as docu-series in an effort to promote the value of the television station as offering a type of programming that encouraged viewers to continue to tune in, despite the fact that they could retrieve meteorological data from the app. By associating The Weather Channel with docu-series production, executives envisioned the station as continuing to deliver trustworthy material to viewers through serious television programming. Meanwhile, cable companies later classified the unscripted shows as reality television while renegotiating carrier fees with the channel. Carrier fees are part of customers' monthly cable bills, in which a certain portion of each subscriber payment goes to each television station that the cable provider carries. Some fees are relatively high, with ESPN charging $5.06 a month per customer. The Weather Channel's fee, $0.13, is cheap by comparison. Still, during carrier fee renegotiations in 2014, DirecTV and Verizon Fios attempted to devalue The Weather Channel and secure a lower carrying fee by arguing that the station's focus on reality television programming made it less relevant than upstart weather channels such as AccuWeather and Weather Nation, which focused on forecasts and not unscripted programming. The resolution to this genre war has less to do with one company winning and more to do with a continuing need to reimagine trust to fit the changing commercial needs of the industry.

When The Weather Channel premiered on May 2, 1982, executives viewed trust as both a central tenet of the channel's brand and as a way to unite disparate branding practices under a common goal. Executives partly built trust into the brand through a no-frills presentation that prioritized meteorology over entertainment. Frank Batten, chairman and CEO of Landmark Communications Inc., The Weather Channel's founding company, said that "although our product was rough and ready, people trusted it. Because we gave good information, and because we presented it in a low-key, nonflashy way, we earned our viewers' trust" (Batten and Cruikshank 2002, 166). Executives constructed trust in the 1980s and early 1990s by employing talented meteorologists and making them on-screen reporters. They lacked on-screen dynamism but were promoted as the most qualified people to explain weather to the public. Moreover, The Weather Channel founder John Coleman insisted that his meteorologists resist weather hyping and infotainment in order to provide reliable information. The no-frills logo and graphics for the channel also conveyed trust. Executives knew that their blue box logo with white letters spelling out the channel's name was retro. Yet this aesthetic implied that the scientists at the channel cared more about their work than design (166–7). In this way, the channel's brand was a sort of anti-brand. Batten claims that "during The Weather Channel's first twelve years, we never gave a lot of thought to developing our brand. We had other things on our mind" (166). To focus on polished professionalism takes time away from conveying trustworthy information.

Executives grouped two other aspects of the channel's accidental/anti-brand with trust. First, The Weather Channel was always "there." Whenever viewers needed to know how changing weather and major weather events would affect their lives, The Weather Channel had meteorologists on the scene. Batten claims, "Whenever they [viewers] needed to know how their lives would be affected by one of the most changeable forces of nature, we were there to tell them" (166). Viewers could trust The Weather Channel to cover major weather events. Second, the channel expanded into new markets—most notably new media markets. While executives found their adventures in creating channels in other countries typically failed, they recognized the importance of meeting American consumers in different platforms beyond television. This occurred first with the launch of Weather.com in April of 1995. Viewers could trust that they could find The Weather Channel in various media, wherever they needed it.

The astonishing success of The Weather Channel's website in the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, required that executives reimagine trust on the television channel in interpersonal, not scientific, terms. By late 1998 the website received 150 million hits per month and was ranked 19th on Relevant Knowledge's world ranking of websites. By 2002 the site averaged 3.5 billion page views per year (192). The Weather Channel's website succeeded because it could do what the television channel did in the 1980s and early 1990s: deliver weather data in a no-frills, impersonal manner. The website eliminated the on-screen personality of the weather person in favor of numbers, forecasts, and radars. With ratings declining on the television station, executives wanted viewers to think of the channel as a "trusted and caring friend instead of just a box of meteorological data" (Kempner 2002). Patrick Scott, president of The Weather Channel networks, said, "Up until now, the weather has been the star, not the people. Weather is still the star, but we can add more personality" (Kempner 2002). Scott hired on-camera talent who were trained television personalities, not meteorologists. Although The Weather Channel meteorologists in the 1980s were mostly white men, executives now wanted on-air talent to show gender, racial, and ethnic diversity (Kempner 2002). These engaging, multicultural personalities invited viewers to trust them as friends, not scientists. To stress the interpersonal connections between viewers and on-screen personalities, the shows increasingly ignored technical aspects of weather deemed irrelevant to the average viewer (Kempner 2002).

The Evening Edition was created in 2001 as an effort to place these new engaging station personalities in programming blocks instead of round-the-clock formats focusing on weather information. To build on this initiative, The Weather Channel premiered *Storm Stories* (2003–2007) two years later; it was an hour-long weather disaster show that ran at 8 p.m. Episodes mixed personal recordings, surveillance footage, and first-person accounts of the way people survived weather disasters. On *Storm Stories*, weather threatened the fabric of communities, and it placed our trust in humanity to triumph over nature. *Storm Stories* boosted the channel's ratings 81% in the 8–9 p.m. hour (Pursell 2007).

Hit hardly by the recession of 2008, Landmark Communications looked to sell most of its media companies, including over 50 daily newspapers. Selling The Weather Channel was a tall order, though; its value was high due to its successful website and apps.

Ad Age ranked Weather.com as the eighth best web brand that year; it was also the most trafficked website for a television channel (Hampp 2008). Additionally The Weather Channel launched its IOS app and neared completion on its Android app. Put up for sale at $5 billion, The Weather Channel's only potential buyers were NBC Universal and Time Warner. Ultimately, NBC Universal paid $3.5 billion. Company President Jeff Zucker said The Weather Channel "really gives us a suite of unparalleled assets, and it gives us a real push ahead in digital. This is where we see the strength of our company in the coming years—cable and digital" (Littleton 2008). While digital potential drew NBC Universal to The Weather Channel, the company invested significant energies to boost the ratings and expand the audience for the television channel. Furthermore, such a move to redefine The Weather Channel's television station was imperative given the success of The Weather Channel app. As of 2013, the app had been downloaded over 100 million times. The app receives, on average, 38 million users on phones and 6 million users on tablets per month (Butcher 2013). To put it bluntly, the television channel risked becoming irrelevant because users found what they needed just on the apps.

NBC Universal attempted to bolster The Weather Channel's television ratings by filling its evening schedules with docu-series; the use of that genre moniker—as opposed to reality television—shows the continuing importance and the evolving nature of trust and authenticity on the channel. Al Roker, the long-standing weather person on NBC's *The Today Show* (1952–), emerged as a major player at The Weather Channel. He became a station personality with the premiere of *Wake Up With Al* (2009–2015), a weekday morning show co-hosted with Stephanie Abrams that included news from MSNBC rolling at the bottom of the screen and celebrity interviews from *The Today Show*. Roker then started producing series for The Weather Channel. News stories written about Roker's first series, *Coast Guard Alaska*, in *Hollywood Reporter, New York Daily News, New York Post, Daily Variety*, and *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* defined the program as a docu-series. The assumptions of the genre's objectivity, educational nature, and commitment to enlightenment reinforced The Weather Channel's commitment to public safety, trust, and authenticity. Turning The Weather Channel into a docu-series channel added prestige to the television station in an effort to bring back viewers.

News stories promoting *Coast Guard Alaska*, for example, lent the trustworthiness of channel meteorologists to the cast members of the docu-series. In a July 28, 2011, article "Meteorologists Explain Why They Weather The Storm," The Weather Channel executive vice president Bob Walker says one of the channel's main goals is to "make sure we keep people safe." Walker then outlines how both on-location meteorologists and docu-series cast members help to achieve this goal: both take "people and immers[e] them in the actual weather experience themselves." Meteorologist Stephanie Abrams says, "I can tell people how to prepare better because I've lived it." Likewise, the cast members of *Coast Guard Alaska* help people deal with the grueling weather on the perilous waters off the Alaska shores. Walker claims both types of programs build trust because "severe coverage for us is about helping people understand what is going on, helping people understand why it is going on" (Owen 2011).

This emphasis on the trustworthiness of Coast Guard members and meteorologists shaped the rather narrow ways in which the unscripted shows represent what the

FIGURE 12.1 *Screenshot of The Weather Channel's attempts to place promotional emphasis on* Coast Guard Alaska *as a docu-series.*

Coast Guard actually does. The US Coast Guard is one of the five branches of the US Armed Forces and is the only branch that operates under the Department of Homeland Security. According to its government webpage, its mission is to "ensure our Nation's maritime safety, security, and stewardship" ("Missions" n.d.). For the Department of Homeland Security, the Coast Guard enforces port, waterway, and coastal security; drug interdiction; defense readiness; and other law enforcement. These items rarely appear in The Weather Channel programs. The series instead focus primarily on the missions that are outside of the jurisdiction of Homeland Security, items such as marine safety, search and rescue, and ice operations. The programs mediate relevant aspects of the Coast Guard's duties by focusing on the ones that involve braving the elements and ignoring the ones that entail broader law enforcement and security measures.

For example, *Coast Guard Alaska* shows Coast Guard members responding to medical emergencies—both job-induced injuries and general health emergencies—on commercial fishing boats. Because of the extreme climate of Alaska, rescuers on the series stress the dangerous nature of the rescue itself: how rescues are done via helicopters because the rough waters prohibit boat rescues, how long the Coast Guard members can be in the water during a rescue because of its cold temperature, and how winds can affect the lowering of a Coast Guard member from the helicopter to the boat or ocean.

Coast Guard Florida emphasizes the trustworthiness of the Coast Guard to rescue vacationers, novice water enthusiasts, and experienced water sports athletes from the risks of the seemingly inviting Atlantic and Gulf waters. One episode focuses on a vacationer snorkeling. He doesn't understand the power of a boat motor and suffers lacerations when he gets sucked into it. Other episodes follow the Coast Guard helping vacationers who get the bends while scuba diving. In one episode the Coast Guard rescues a senior citizen with Alzheimer's disease who mistakenly walks into the Gulf waters and gets carried away by the current. When *Coast Guard Florida* does acknowledge the Homeland Security agency's drug prevention mission, many such episodes ask viewers to trust that the Coast Guard will keep Americans safe from drug smugglers moving drugs from other countries to Miami's ports.

Trust also surfaces on these series by assuring viewers that only the most qualified people serve in the Coast Guard. Episodes convey this theme through two different narrative arcs. First, each episode follows the training of new recruits. Episodes emphasize that only the fittest—physically and mentally—are cut out for this prestigious institution. Each episode has two new recruits report to the commanding officer in charge of training. The episode intersperses a series of physical tests (long-distance running, long-distance swimming, swimming across a pool while pulling a rescued swimmer, etc.) between rescue missions. Recruits are also not heroes. A majority of them either fail to pass the admissions test or drop out of the program because it is too physically challenging, even though they are in stellar shape. Second, each episode devotes time to regular cast members. In part these segments make the repeatable cast members as familiar as the meteorologists who previously worked for and represented the channel. They become trustworthy people who reappear on television screens to show how to negotiate extreme weather safely. Another way that regular cast members convey trust on these shows is through vignettes that show their lives with spouses and children away from the job. Cast members are loving family members, and spouses talk about each guard's commitment to public safety. Segments then show the family's favorite leisure activities, such as camping, walking on the beach, and going to wildlife sanctuaries. These vignettes build viewer trust in the Coast Guard by demonstrating that the people who work in this institution are moral and grounded in their commitment to traditional ideological structures such as the family.

Despite these efforts to produce trusted docu-series, a different value judgment of The Weather Channel's unscripted programs came as cable companies tried to renegotiate carrier fees in the mid-2010s and claimed the channel aired nothing but reality television. The first and most publicized dispute materialized with DirecTV in January

FIGURE 12.2 *Scene from* Coast Guard Florida *demonstrating the importance of training as a means of evoking trust.*

of 2014. The Weather Channel requested a modest increase from its 13-cent fee during a carrier renewal. DirecTV demanded a lower fee, given that the company had its own weather station, Weather Nation, which provided only meteorological information and no unscripted programming (Atkinson 2014b). Additionally, AccuWeather planned to launch its own competing cable weather station in 2015. While The Weather Channel's app still cornered the market for the consumption of meteorological data on mobile devices, The Weather Channel's television station appeared not to be as valuable because of this increasing competition. DirecTV dropped The Weather Channel from its lineup for three months, claiming in articles in popular newspapers such as the *New York Post* that The Weather Channel no longer provided the public with important weather information (Atkinson 2014a). The circulation of these claims in newspapers as opposed to industry trades suggests DirecTV was trying to court television viewers/subscribers to support its position in the battle and not merely announce its position to industry insiders. In 2015 Verizon Fios followed DirecTV's path and permanently dropped The Weather Channel because AccuWeather's new station offered weather at a cheaper carriage fee and didn't show reality television (Daily 2015).

After a three-month feud with DirecTV that often continued to take place in the popular press, The Weather Channel executives felt as if their image as a trustworthy channel had indeed been tarnished by the efforts of cable companies to reclassify its unscripted shows as reality TV. Once again, therefore, executives reimagined the channel's claim to public trust in response to the changing media landscape (in this case, the rise of competing cable weather stations). The Weather Channel abruptly cancelled all of the unscripted shows that had been frequently classified as reality television shows in exchange for a 1-cent increase in its carrier fee from DirecTV customers. To further entice DirecTV to increase the carrier fee, The Blackstone Group, a minority owner of both The Weather Channel and Hilton Hotels, agreed to make DirecTV the cable provider in Hilton Hotels if the company continued to carry The Weather Channel. The Weather Channel did not drop unscripted prime-time programs altogether, however. While it cancelled all of its continuing character shows such as *Coast Guard Alaska* and *Fat Guys in the Woods*, it retained unscripted science shows such as *Strangest Weather on Earth* (2013–), which use a narrator and scientists to explain unique weather phenomena. The Weather Channel's new image of trustworthiness stemmed from a return to weather and science, and the channel promised DirecTV that it would offer more weather reporting.

The tale of The Weather Channel's unscripted programs focusing on professionals who brave extreme weather conditions—and the generic classification of them—is a fascinating look into the way genre functions as a key discourse in the battle over the value and status of a channel's brand identity. Initially The Weather Channel executives promoted these programs as docu-series in an effort to win back viewers to the station through prestige shows during a moment when The Weather Channel apps became a ubiquitous part of American digital culture. Years later, DirecTV and Verizon Fios devalued The Weather Channel's brand by claiming it prioritized the perceived trash of reality television more than meteorological information and public safety. DirecTV

did not win this classification battle; yet they set the terms for The Weather Channel executives to reimagine trust in a television channel once more.

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