



... AND HERE COMES THE WEATHER - Austrian TV and radio weather news in the eye of the public

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Media weather reports as the main avenue of meteorological and climatological information to the general public have always been in the focus of critical investigation. Former research found that although weather reports are high-interest topics, the amount of information recalled by non-experts is rather low, and criticized this.

A pilot study (Keul et al., 2009) by the Salzburg University in cooperation with ORF, the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation, used historic radio files on a fair-weather and a storm situation. It identified the importance of intelligible wording of the weather forecast messages for lay people. Without quality control, weather information can stimulate rumours, false comfort or false alarms. More qualitative and experimental research, also on TV weather, seems justified. This need for further research was addressed by a second and larger field experiment in the spring of 2010.

The survey took place in Salzburg City, Austria, with a quota sample of about 90 lay persons. This time TV and radio weather reports were used and a more realistic listening and viewing situation was created by presenting the latest weather forecasts of the given day to the test persons in the very next hours after originally broadcasting them. It asked lay people what they find important in the weather reports and what they remember for their actual next-day use. Reports of a fairweather prognosis were compared with a warning condition. The weather media mix of the users was explored.

A second part of the study was a questionnaire which tested the understanding of typical figures of speech used in weather forecasts or even meteorological terms, which might also be important for fully understanding the severe weather warnings. This leads to quantitative and qualitative analysis from which the most important and unexpected results are presented.

Short presentation times (1.5 to 2 minutes) make Austrian radio and TV weather reports a narrow compromise between general, regional, singular and average data sets, between infotainment and alarm. To dig deeper for media-relevant results, user studies should move out of the laboratory into the life of the lay users.

Reference:

2009, Keul, A.G., Holzer, A.M., Sterzinger, P., Rudolf, S., Reinmüller, A. & Messerklinger, S.; Are Austrian radio weather warnings user-friendly?, Proceedings, 5thECSS Landshut, p. 133.