



“Grand day for it”: how forecasting as conversation can speak beyond weather and climate

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There is general despair across the scientific world at what is rightfully perceived as a political retreat from science in the US and many parts of our post-Trump, post-Brexit world. Climate scientists and meteorologists are central to what appears to be a battleground for truth. A moment has arrived where scientists of all hues need to march together for solidarity, to proclaim their voice as knowledge workers, investigating the truths of our world.

But science is part of society, and needs to serve it better, particularly at times of crisis. There are many scientists who resist this urge to ‘get political’, to be involved in activities that are beyond science. In a similar way, in your typical daily weather forecast on broadcast media, the presenter will avoid any mention of climate change, anxious not to ‘mislead’ the public in thinking there is a causal link between weather events and climate change.

This presentation will argue that just as scientists must realise their political role, so weather presenters must realise their social role. In other words, while all scientists get political and become activists as well as objective scientists, the weather presenter beaming into homes during prime time has the opportunity to talk about anything. And that includes topics like climate change and uncertainty- it can no longer be avoided.

The weight of this argument comes from many years of science communication research. In the US, scholars such as Sharon Dunwoody and Matthew Nisbet, and Alan Irwin in Europe have argued for a ‘dialogic model’ of science communication, a means of two-way exchange that prevents the so-called ‘deficit model’. Other scholars such as Maja Horst and Sarah Davies demonstrate how science continues to lose touch with society, with the cultural fabric of what matters to people. In the dialogic model, experts listen, collaborate, inspire, and engage. In the deficit model, they are there only to inform. These scholars would say that this lack of dialogicality has brought us to this impasse in politics and society where now even science is mistrusted.

If we take the Irish context, Irish people love talking about the weather. It is our conversation opener. To extend this conversation further, weather presenters have a key social role, as conversation setters. We have shining examples in Ireland, such as Jean Byrne and Evelyn Cusack, the latter particularly often quickly reflecting on science and climate communication in her allotted time. We, as effective and responsible science communicators, do not need to worry about causal scientific links when we realise the important societal links between topics such as extreme weather events and climate change.

The talk will show examples of the effective social role of the weather presenter in the context of a dialogic approach to weather communication that acknowledges that, even in a short allocation of broadcast time, the conversation can move on to bigger things.