

David Novak
Statement of Interest
WAS*IS 2007 Summer Workshop

My awareness of the cultural impact, interpretation and use of the weather forecasts I develop has grown since my first day working for AccuWeather. As a newly minted meteorologist, I was quite naive about how the language of my forecasts would affect the public. I had not put much thought into how the audience would interpret my forecast. My job was to just give out the information and it was the responsibility of others to decide how to use it. My mindset changed four months into my young career when I was asked to prepare a forecast and create graphics for a television station in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Hurricane Hortense was 24 hours away from crossing the islands, and it was my responsibility to inform the station and, in essence, all the stations viewers, of the forecast and impacts – winds, rain, storm path, surge – Hortense would have on them, both in words and in graphics. That was the first time I had to think about the responsibility I have to the public and how their lives could be affected by the forecast and information I create as a meteorologist. Since then, I have frequently considered the effect my forecasts and weather descriptions have on the intended recipients. I now realize that the forecasts I prepare have the potential for significant human impact. I was again reminded of this when a newspaper reporter who contacted me to discuss the weather conditions in Pittsburgh, PA on a specific winter night. He was writing a story about a baby that had recently been abandoned in an alley. He wanted to know the temperature at the time the baby was found, along with wind speeds, wind chill temperature, and any other weather factors that may have been harmful or life threatening.

Knowing your audience is critical to selecting the method that will best convey the intended message. More than once, I have given presentations on the use of ensembles and probabilistic forecasting tools that may help in their business decisions, only to realize that my audience of potential customers were looking at me blankly because the technical level of my presentation was beyond their meteorological experience.

The one valuable lesson from all these situations is that it is clear the field has changed dramatically. The simple forecast duty of saying “high today 65, chance of rain tomorrow” is becoming obsolete. Now it is left to the meteorologists to give the forecast and the impacts of what the forecast will be on the end user. Meteorologists need to be, and are becoming, experts in communication as much as experts in the atmosphere and weather forecasting. Forecasts from private companies and governments now include impact statements on clothing needs due to adverse weather conditions, damage estimates, and economic impacts. More time is now spent rendering forecasts and information, as even a technically perfect forecast can be interpreted incorrectly if it's communicated poorly. This changing trend is what has interested me in the WAS*IS workshop. I work for an organization that is actively involved in providing weather information to the public in a variety of different ways on a national and international scale. New challenges on communicating weather information to the public and customers often arise. With my experience in both forecasting and programming, I feel I can bring an interesting perspective on how weather forecasters are dealing with issues such as the social impact of forecasts, interpretation of weather forecasts and how weather information is being used by the public and private companies. I also feel WAS*IS will provide an excellent opportunity for me to learn more about research and other topics related to the social impacts of the weather. It is exciting to think I could be part of a group that will chart the direction of relation of the societal impacts produced by the national weather enterprise.

Thank you for considering me for the 2007 summer WAS*IS workshop.