

Weatherman creates storm with shaky report

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A report from a major storm is creating a tempest nationwide. Screen shot.

Lexington Park, MD – Hurricane Florence has proven to be a devastating storm, pounding the Carolinas with heavy rains and rising floodwaters. The Category 4 hurricane has left at least 20 people confirmed dead, caused property destruction in the millions of dollars, resulted in power outages and has prompted responders to conduct rescues by boat and helicopter. It appears the electronic media journalists covering Florence would not need to embellish any of their reports or images. However, that has apparently become of the storm's more provocative sidebar stories. Social media users have widely circulated a video of a meteorologist from The Weather Channel who appears to be struggling in a wind gust as he relays to viewers the severity of the storm. We've seen this shot before. What's different about this one are some pedestrians in the background who appear to have no trouble staying vertical and moving forward. The familiar cries of "fake news" are coming from everywhere. The shaky report was delivered in Wilmington, NC Friday afternoon, Sept. 14.

The meteorologist is Mike Seidel, a 61-year-old broadcast veteran who is from Salisbury, MD. A spokesman for The Weather Channel is quoted on Facebook as stating, "it's important to note that the two individuals in the background are walking on concrete and Mike Seidel is trying to maintain his footing on wet grass, after reporting on-air until 1 a.m. this morning and is undoubtedly exhausted."

Not all The Weather Channel's viewers are buying management's spin.

TheBayNet.com spoke to some news people who have covered storms and continue to follow the stories and the people who report them.

"I knew Mike Seidel when he worked in Salisbury and have followed his career on The Weather Channel," said Dave Statter, who worked for many years as a police/emergency responders reporter for WUSA-TV. Prior to his television career, Statter worked for two Southern Maryland radio stations (WSMD and WMJS) during the 1970s before moving to WTOP-AM. Today he manages a web page (STATter911) that reports on a variety of first responder incidents and issues. "Before passing judgment, I want to hear what Mike has to say and not just the words of a PR [public relations] person for The Weather Channel. Videos alone, without such context, can be misleading."

Statter told TheBayNet.com that the on-scene reporting of major storms "began with Dan Rather standing in the flood waters of Hurricane Carla in Galveston [Texas] in 1961 for KHOU-TV. I did my share of storm reporting beginning in 1985 with Hurricane Gloria. In the latter part of my TV career, I finally came to the conclusion doing it this way had become cliché. In addition, the whole idea of screaming into a microphone, where you can barely hear the person over the noise from the wind, goes against what you should be doing as a reporter—sharing information in a calm and clear manner. It seems apparent the goal of news management today—and maybe some reporters and anchors—isn't about finding the best way to share important information. Instead they are seeking the viral moment. It has all become pretty silly and I can't completely fault those who mock it."

"Nothing is more important than reporting truthfully," said Charles County Commissioner Ken Robinson, who worked for 12 years with the United Press International Radio Network as a producer and correspondent. Robinson's Facebook page is evidence that he takes weather seriously and how it can adversely affect a community. Robinson indicated to TheBayNet.com that he believes Seidel was over-dramatizing the strength of the wind gusts in his live report. "Hyping the story wasn't necessary," said Robinson. "With the media being criticized for 'fake news' it's important it not get caught in any silly staging. Keep it serious, keep it real." Robinson added that Florence has proven to be much more of a 'water event' as opposed to a storm that wreaks havoc with high winds.

Having a veteran meteorologist called out by so many—novices and pros alike—could prompt The Weather Channel and other news organizations to rethink some their on-the-scene reporting strategy. "My biggest worry is that it's going to take a reporter getting seriously injured while on the air to get news management to rethink this a little bit," said Statter.

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