Broadcasting the Weather in Greece

Welcome to *112, Climate Tone*, a series of podcasts investigating and discussing the phenomenon of climate change in Greece today. A project by NEON for the World Weather Network.

In the second episode in the series, Sakis Arnaoutoglou, veteran weather broadcaster in Greece will present a micro lecture on his experiences reporting the weather on television for a number of decades. This audio-vision information is a crucial indication of developing weather systems, that are relied upon by countless individuals to formulate their daily routines and, increasingly, as our climate rapidly changes to stay out of danger.

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A weather report is not only a communication bulletin for the public. For me, it goes beyond that; it is the result of the daily effort to decode the moods of this thing we call nature.

I have been presenting the weather for the Greek Public Television since 2001.

Strange as it may seem to you, I remember myself being involved with it from a very young age, maybe even from about 5 years old. It all started with my love for snow. My grandfather was a big nature lover. He helped me a lot by teaching me about folk meteorology and how he could apply it in his hometown. For example, in the case of Halkidiki peninsula, in the north point of Greece, the strongest snowfalls occurred during the wintertime with an easterly wind, just as my grandfather had told me.

I consider weather updates to be of utmost importance for the general population and being part of this is a great honour for me.

I broadcast a main weather bulletin every afternoon and evening, and there are also weather reports during the morning and noon news broadcasts. When the weather conditions are of particular interest and considered dangerous, I may need to be informed 24 hours a day. Even on my leave, however, there is not a day that I do not devote a couple of hours to the weather developments.

In Greece, the forecast information comes from the national meteorological service and the National Observatory of Athens.

The choice of where and when to emphasize depends on the forecast intensity and the duration of the phenomena, and in which geographical areas, of course, these are predicted to occur.

Weather forecasting is complex and challenging. The process entails observation, analysis and communication.

Weather forecasters analyse weather-related data, meteorological graphs and atmospheric models to understand and discuss conditions effectively.

The models use information based on observation of the atmosphere, land and ocean to forecast weather. This data assimilation produces an improved forecast since it optimises the forecasters' understanding of the evolving weather systems.

As a last step, just before broadcasting on air, design and editing teams work to develop graphics that convey weather conditions and their potential impact on the audience.

I consider the role of those communicating weather information to the public to be particularly important, as they should inspire confidence and directness in the audience to whom they are addressing. For example, from my side, the key in the case of an impending extreme weather event – something that occurs increasingly often nowadays – is, I think, to stay calm. Forecasting models are very useful tools but often they happen to either overestimate or underestimate a weather situation.

I feel a great responsibility towards the public, so they receive the most accurate information and understand the seriousness of a situation without causing panic.

Climate change to me means exactly what it also means to the entire scientific community. It is the long-term changes in global temperatures and other characteristics of the atmosphere. Climate has changed throughout Earth's long history, but this time is different. Human activity is causing worldwide temperatures to rise higher and faster than at any time we have known so far.

The weather in Greece is no exception, and so, according to the latest climatic data, Greece seems to be following the same course as the rest of the countries on the planet.

The geographical zone associated with the weather in Greece is the temperate zone.

Of course, high mountains, field areas and the sea can make weather conditions differentiate locally sometimes a lot and in close distance proximity.

However, many abroad are unaware that Greece is more than sunny islands. Northern Greece is located at the same latitude as New York, and the Greek mainland has significant snowfalls during the winter, which is why it has 17 ski resorts.

The key words for climate change in Greece are, I would say, more intense rainfall, longer periods of localized drought, and longer periods of higher temperatures during the summer.

Climate change is being experienced steadfastly in the area of Thessaloniki, in Northern Greece where I live. An important consequence I notice, for example, is the significant reduction in the number of snowy days, especially since 2007, after which there have been years with no snow in the city centre. Moreover, I cannot forget the disastrous flood of November 15th 2017 in western Attica where 24 people died.

I can also not forget the super south storm in Halkidiki peninsula during the evening hours of Wednesday July 10th, 2019, accompanied in most areas by fierce winds and in some cases by hail of large dimensions affected regions of central and eastern Macedonia as well. Seven people, six foreign nationals and one Greek were killed. One hundred and twenty people were injured and large devastation occurred.

In recent years, the weather reports in Greece have increased both in duration and in detail which is linked to rapid technological progress.

I think that most people in recent years want more and more to know about the weather conditions that will prevail in their area not only for the next 24 hours but also for the next few days.

Changes in communication patterns, and our ability today to communicate instantaneously, has also changed our consumption of weather forecasts. It is only recent in the past when the audience could communicate only via telephone.

We must also of course be wary of what we see and read in the media, especially on the internet.

As we go through and experience the climate crisis, the presentation of extreme weather events in the media is constantly changing. Certainly, there is much more emphasis on climate change than in the past.

Travelling back to the ancient times now- and this is relevant if only to remind us that the need to understand and communicate the weather phenomena on a daily basis has been a timeless human need - the first meteorological calendars circulating in ancient Greece were called Parapigmata, and date back to the 5th century BC. They are mentioned in the work of Theophrastus. Democritus and Conon are among those who wrote parapigmata.

Parapigma means to set aside and the Parapigmata got their name from the way in which the day to be observed was marked; next to each day was a hole where a small stake was inserted, and they were written on stone or parchment and circulated in the marketplace, informing the citizens about the meteorological and astronomical predictions.

Closer to the present day, during the 1960s and 70s, weather reports were characterised by incomprehensible scientific terms whenever the scientists of the national meteorological service needed to inform about weather phenomena.

I remember the slightly older meteorologists spouting, in an admittedly rather heavy-handed style, the weather reports on the state-run channels and other networks in the early years of private television in Greece.

But weather, as a television product, has its special interest and its commercial value. So, over time, TV weather evolved into a piece of showbiz in order to be able to attract more viewers and a bigger slice of the advertising pie.

The addition of graphics using special effects were incorporated into the weather to stimulate viewer interest and increase ratings. The use of graphics has certainly contributed positively to the communication with the public and it is obvious that simple symbols and information are quickly passed on to the ordinary citizen, who today shows more and more interest for the weather.

Something that I believe is the result of the extreme climate change conditions that we all live.

There are indeed many questions from the public reaching my inbox. Some are general, though others can be more specific and in blue-sky mode. I remember there was one person who once asked me to do a local forecast for only a part of his plot! The thing is that when you have more than 350,000 followers on Facebook it is impossible to be able to answer every single follower individually.

In the end, it all goes back to a consistent repetition of my daily routine.

Waking up early in the morning to ensure I am focused and I have a clear mind. From the moment I get to work, I look at satellite and radar data. After 6 to 7 hours of pouring over data and sending them to the studio to be transformed into visuals and graphics, I am ready for my first appearance on air at quarter to 5 pm. This is my daily attempt to decode the moods of nature in Greece

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