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Hurricane Irene hype: over the top media coverage or justified?

By *Jason Samenow*

A Category 5 intensity debate is swirling around a category 1 storm: was Irene overhyped by media or were the media prudently sounding the alarm in the spirit of public safety?

First, let's consider what the storm did and didn't do:

It DID:

Highway 12 along the Outer Banks of North Carolina taken out by Irene's raging sea. (Al Roker via Twitter) * Result in at least 5 million power outages from North Carolina to Maine
* Cause at least 29 fatalities in 10 states
* Generate estimated property damages ranging from $7 to $13 billion (a record 10th billion dollar weather disaster in the U.S. during 2011).
* Produce the worst flooding in Vermont in 80 years - "full-blown flooding catastrophe"according to Vermont Governor Peter Shulmin with 260 roads under water.
* Drop some stunning amounts of rain: e.g. 20 inches in Virginia Beach, Va. and Jacksonville, NC; a single-day record of 8.92" in Newark, NJ; and 12" in Ocean City, Md. (full list of totals by state)
* Cut through a barrier island (video) on North Carolina's Outer Banks. It breached Pea Island in two places according to Wunderground.
Yahoo photo gallery: Hurricane Irene's aftermath
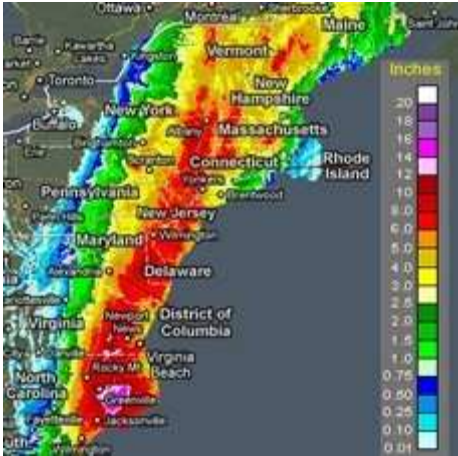
Doppler estimated rainfall from Irene along the East Coast. (National Weather Service) It did NOT:

* Make landfall as a major hurricane; in fact, it was category 1 along the North Carolina Outer Banks
* Produce overwhelming storm surge flooding along the Delmarva and New Jersey coast
* Reach New England as a hurricane (it weakened to a tropical storm)
* Produce a devastating storm surge and flooding in New York City
* Produce large-scale wind damage in New York City

Viewpoints on hype

Let's take a look at some different views on whether Irene was overhyped.

Overhyped

Before the storm hit, the Post's Erik Wemple, took notice of some remarkably dramatic statements from the Weather Channel (TWC). On its website, TWC warned:

Irene is a hurricane that poses an extraordinary threat and is one that no one has yet experienced in North Carolina to the mid-Atlantic to the Northeast and New England. This includes Norfolk, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York City, Hartford, and Boston.

Wemple collected reactions to the Weather Channel's message from WJLA meteorologist Bob Ryan and Capital Weather Gang's very own Dan Stillman:

While expressing great admiration for Weather Channel hurricane expert Bryan Norcross, [Bob] Ryan calls "pretty apocalyptic" his vision for the course of Irene.

Weather watchers with the Washington Post's Capital Weather Gang pronounce a similar skepticism. Gang member Dan Stillman: "It's not going to be unprecedented for North Carolina or even the mid-Atlantic. And given that it will probably be no worse than a low-to-mid-end Category 1 when it gets to New York City, it's not going to be their Katrina — even though significant flooding and damaging winds are possible, both inland and especially toward the coast, in both the mid-Atlantic and the Northeast."

Howard Kurtz at the Daily Beast wrote a scathing commentary on the media hysterics :

... the tsunami of hype on this story was relentless, a Category 5 performance that was driven in large measure by ratings. ...

The fact that New York, home to the nation's top news outlets, was directly in the storm's path clearly fed this story-on-steroids. Does anyone seriously believe the hurricane would have drawn the same level of coverage if it had been bearing down on, say, Ft. Lauderdale?

Hype justified

Confronted about its sensational coverage by Erik Wemple, the Weather Channel defended itself:

Irene was one of the largest (size-wise) hurricanes ever, which, when combined with its long and slow track through the heavily populated Northeast U.S., put an extraordinarily large number of people at risk from its effects. One of our primary missions is to keep people informed of severe weather and all its potential threats. We did that with this storm and based all of our decisions on the facts available to us from our team of over 200 meterologists and scientists.

TWC's (and NBC's) Al Roker was adamant the network took the right approach. He tweeted last night:

Since when is covering a storm that kills 16 people and counting, causes massive flooding and millions in damage hype?

And on the Today Show this morning, Roker added:

Think about this: This is a minimal Category 1 storm. Twenty-three people have lost their lives. How many more people would have died or could have died if this had been a stronger storm?

Bolstering Roker's case, New York Times presents data and analysis suggesting Irene ranks among the worst U.S. hurricanes since 1980 given its economic cost and toll on human life:

Estimates in an ABC News article are of property losses of between $7 billion and $13 billion — and the rule of thumb is that total economic losses are equal to about twice property losses, which would imply a total price-tag of between $14 billion and $26 billion.

Using the low end of that range — $14 billion in total losses — would rank Irene as the 8th-most destructive storm since 1980, adjusted for inflation and the growth in wealth and population.

The 29 fatalities (these numbers range from 23-29 depending on the source) from Irene would rank 5th among Atlantic hurricanes since 1980 (according to data the NY Times presents), ahead of notable storms like hurricanes Ike, Andrew, and Isabel.

The consequences of overhype

At Forbes, Cato Institute senior fellow Pat Michaels wonders if Irene's relatively anemic performance (in some places) will make people take future storms less seriously, and with disastrous consequences:

...there's another tropical depression out in the Atlantic, and a couple more on the way in the very near future. Suppose one of these takes a similar path, except that it improbably threads the needle of the Mid-Atlantic and makes landfall immediately to the west of

New York City as a Category 3 storm. How many people will the hyping of Irene have killed?

Michaels' notion that false alarms, even if "near-misses" can backfire seems supported by a recent Georgetown University [study](#) "Why Near-Miss Events Can Decrease an Individual's Protective Response to Hurricanes" published in the academic journal Risk Analysis. The study finds:

A near-miss occurs when a good outcome happens but only because of chance. Although the chance-dependent nature of near-misses may be acknowledged, these good outcomes may come to be seen as more of a sure thing. People with near-miss information are more likely to choose a riskier option than people without near-miss information, and this observation has important implications for risk communication.

Some concluding thoughts...

It is possible to strike a balance between overhyping, overwarning and responsibly communicating risk. As I told the Philadelphia Inquirer [in a story that ran today](#), the news media and meteorologists can and should communicate the worst case scenario so the public is ready. But they should also clearly and calmly explain the full range of possibilities, the limitations of the science and what's most likely so the public is fully informed. That's what we strive to do at Capital Weather Gang.

Related: [The 6 criteria for hype & why Hurricane Irene coverage does not meet them](#) (Poynter)

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