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# Tragedy and Ethics in Storm Chasing

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TRAGEDY AND ETHICS IN STORM CHASING

by

Tony Laubach

B.S., Metropolitan State University, 2009

A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Science

Department of Mass Communication and Media Arts  
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

TRAGEDY AND ETHICS IN STORM CHASING

By

Tony Laubach

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science

in the field of Professional Media & Media Management

Approved by:

William A. Babcock, Chair

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
11/4/2015

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Tim Samaras, Paul Samaras, and Carl Young. Those three were not only colleagues of mine in this passion of storm chasing, but good friends and wonderful teammates. These members of the very successful severe weather and tornado research project, TWISTEX, lost their lives in the May 31, 2013 El Reno, Oklahoma tornado. This tornado was the largest tornado ever recorded in history, reaching a maximum width of 2.6 miles wide and was rated an EF-3. Tim founded TWISTEX, a program to which I was part of from 2007-2011. His son, Paul, rode along with myself and chase partner, Ed Grubb, on countless missions in our mesonet vehicle lovingly called “Tighty Whitey”. Carl, whom we jokingly called “Hollywood”, shared his incredible passion with the group, fueling our thirst to try and answer the questions of severe weather. While they have passed on, their work and passions live through the many who embark on the roads each year to search out and document severe weather. Above all that, they were dear friends of mine, and are greatly missed. Their wisdom, company, and their passion fuel me every mile I ride.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to share a special thanks to Professor William Babcock for not only his time and assistance in helping me put this all together, but for inspiring me to move out of my comfort zone and pursue the ethics angle to which lead to my thesis work. In what I otherwise had just thought as a chance to produce a documentary piece turned into a though-provoking journey into an area of storm chasing I otherwise may not have deeply considered. His time and inspiration made my time at SIU much more fulfilling than I had thought going into the program.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Storm chasing has been around since the late 1950s, but only within the last 10-15 years has it become mainstream. Storm chasing's popularity came in three major spurts in the late 1990s. The first coming in the late 70s with the first documentary project covering storm chasing called "In Search of". In 1985, one of the more well-known pieces on storm chasing aired on PBS in the Nova series. Finally in 1996, the Hollywood blockbuster film, "Twister", gave storm chasing its largest public viewing and forever changed the landscape of storm chasing.

Over the course of the last decade or so, the playing field is different, and the average chaser was much more successful in this era than ten years ago. This was due largely to the technology available to people and the affordability of those technologies. Mobile internet and social media created a wealth of information, not only in the forecasting realm, but in the area of nowcasting where chasers could now be followed online and in real life, almost ridding of the need of having any Meteorological background.

With this mainstream exposure, the interest in chasing has increased enough to where TV shows came about, putting certain storm chasers into the spotlight and showing a much wider audience the dramatic and action-packed side of storm chasing. The biggest catalyst for storm chasing was the Discovery Channel's hit TV show, "Storm Chasers" which was the final big push of popularity for storm chasing.

The increased technology combined with the media exposure created a much more permanent influx of chasers. The Discovery show's popularity kept it going for five seasons, each year adding more chasers to the roads, and the successes of those chasers kept the new chasers in the field more so than the Twister-era chasers.

In the present era, any given event can have hundreds of vehicles and thousands of eyes on any one storm. The crowds have become a focus in the media as much as the science did in the early days. The clogging of roads combined with the growing increase in more extreme activities have made the dangers of storm chasing extend well beyond the hazardous weather. And the continued increase of technologies makes it easy for anyone to go out and see a tornado, and thus the popularity of chasing remains more so now than ever before.

That has had an adverse effect on the side of selling storm media. Before storm chasing became mainstream, there were only a handful of chasers doing any work for media organizations and were often paid very well for their efforts. As more chasing grew and more people with cameras came out, the competition grew immensely and created an oversaturated market for weather video. Technology and social media leveled the playing field for anyone trying to see dramatic weather as it made it just as easy for a person on their first chase to see a tornado as someone with a deep background of meteorology. The need for experts to succeed went away as anyone with a camera had the technology and ability to go out and see the same stuff as those with years of experience. Even the general public got their hands into the pot with backyard tornado videos, often giving them away for free.



As the playing field has changed so dramatically in the last ten years, so has the ethics behind chasing. With so few video sales to be spread among the increasing number of chasers, many started to push the limits of safety to get more extreme, close-up video. And others spent less time editing quality videos in exchange for speed to get their videos to network producers quickly.

This study will focus on several aspects that have brought storm chasing ethics into question. First will be how storm chasing has become more mainstream through the media as well as how the technological advances have leveled the playing field for anyone to go out and chase. Second, several pieces of media will be reviewed and tied in to the modern day storm chasing. Third, several high-profile incidents from storm chasing that have made the news in recent years will be discussed. Those incidents bring to light several ethical concerns stemming from the events themselves.

## CHAPTER 2

### STORM CHASING AND MEDIA COVERAGE

The first recognized storm chaser is David Hoadley, who began chasing near his home in Bismark, North Dakota in 1956. He is often referred to as the pioneer in storm chasing. It is estimated that Hoadley over the course of this career chased over 750,000 miles across the United States and saw over 200 tornadoes in his 50-plus years of chasing. Hoadley's interest stemmed from a straight-line wind event near his home in June of 1956 that caused damage to trees and power lines throughout his hometown. While he spent a couple of his first seasons chasing near his home, he eventually started embarking on journeys to the Great Plains of Kansas and Oklahoma to pursue storms.

It wasn't long before chasing for research came onto the scene. Neil Ward partnered with the Oklahoma Highway Patrol to monitor severe weather and was a key part in developing modern day storm spotting and really paved the way for organized storm chasing.

This new organization of storm chasing lead to the first severe weather research project, The Tornado Intercept Project, a joint effort between the University of Oklahoma (OU) and the National Severe Storms Laboratory (NSSL) which culminated in the first successful intercept of the Union City, Oklahoma tornado on May 24, 1973. This F-4 tornado was documented from various angles by the various storm chasers and was the first time a tornado lifecycle was fully documented on film.

It took several years before this research was brought into the public eye. During the third season of “In Search of”, a documentary carrying the title of “In Search of Tornadoes” aired. This was the first broadcast of storm chasing, and brought to light what was otherwise a very closed off activity.

The reaching of chasing increased the awareness of storm chasing and how it was contributing to public safety and research. Organized groups became to form in small numbers across Tornado Alley, an area defined as the central Plains of the United States from the Dakotas south to Texas, and the Rockies east to the Mississippi. These spotter groups were used on storm days to document and report severe weather.

Research continued through the early-to-mid 1980s with smaller groups conducting research with not only video, but sophisticated mobile weather instrumentation. A second major documentary was created and aired on PBS in late 1985. This one was titled “Tornado!”, and was one of the most successful programs in the very large collection of NOVA specials, a program that continues to run today.

The airing of “Tornado!” prompted another generation of storm enthusiasts. Those chasers would work with the veterans of the 60s and 70s and that eventually lead to the biggest research project to-date. The Verification of the Origins of Rotation in Tornadoes Experiment (VORTEX) launched in 1994 and continued into 1995. This project not only focused on the tornado itself, but the weather around a tornado and the interactions between the tornado and its surrounding environment.

This research project got the attention of Hollywood film makers and was partially the inspiration behind the movie, Twister, which brought an immediate and immense popularity to storm chasing that had never before been seen. Now the activity had

reached beyond the science and introduced thrill seekers to a new activity. The storm chasing population grew immensely over the next two years as people from high school age to seniors took to the roads in pursuit of severe weather.

Throughout the rest of the 1990s into the early 2000s, the popularity of storm chasing waned a bit, mostly due to the reality of how difficult storm chasing was. Without a background in Meteorology or forecasting, storm chasing was largely unsuccessful and expensive. Only a small fraction of the “Twister-era” chasers stuck around through the early 2000s as many were weeded out due to lack of success.

Many more TV documentaries were launched after Twister, detailing the art of chasing, but none really carried the weight that those did before the movie. National Geographic was one of the largest supporters of the scientific endeavor of storm chasing, creating and airing several TV pieces in addition to coverage in its magazine. But the biggest show of all would come from rival network, The Discovery Channel in 2007 when it aired the first of five seasons of the TV series, “Storm Chasers”. The success of this show was due largely in part to its combination of scientific, thrill-seeking, and media aspects of chasing. Each of those components attracted a different genre of chaser and brought storm chasing to a level of popularity beyond anything it had seen in its history.

## CHAPTER 3

### SOCIAL MEDIA AND STORM CHASING

As mobile internet took off, so did social media. And of course, a chaser was not limited to just downloading radar products to their computers and phones. They had the whole World Wide Web at their disposal. In their down time, chasers would surf the internet on their laptops from cornfields in Kansas just as if they were sitting in their home offices. But another game-changing tool was social media.

The first “social media” of storm chasing was the online forum, “Storm Track”, that was heavily moderated and only accepted chasers through an application process. New chasers were allowed to a limited number of areas within the forum, but could read the advanced topics posted by veteran chasers. This created a learning environment for new chasers, but limited them on where they were allowed to post. It made it so new chasers had to learn from the veterans before the more advanced areas of the forum were opened up.

It wasn't long before MySpace was created, and the individual pages of this social media site allowed any chaser to create their own pages online and connect with other chasers. Facebook came out shortly thereafter and really opened up the world of social media. While MySpace eventually fell to Facebook, it started out as the place to exchange forecasts. But as Facebook took over the social media arena and chasers gathered to this site, a new age of information sharing began. As storm chasing reached new heights in popularity due to the number of shows out on the activity, social media allowed for this reach to expand well beyond anyone with an interest in weather.

Videos being shared combined with experienced chasers sharing their forecasts in blogs allowed for anyone to read forecasts and learn. The goal of this, of course, was to help better educate up and coming weather enthusiasts to better know how to forecast. But what ended up coming about was people were using this information to leech on to other chasers. With GPS technology being plotted, and sites like Facebook and Twitter sharing locations, anyone following these chasers on social media could virtually follow a chaser to a target location and then just follow them. Now, a person with no chasing experience just needed to know how to drive a car and follow social media sites and they were now seeing tornadoes with as much regularity as the veterans of dozens of years.

Egos played a role in social media because veterans began to clash with newbies who were touting their success. Now everyone was posting forecasts as a way to prove themselves and be accepted by their veteran peers. This created even more information and snowballed with more and more people going out, and experiencing success fast enough to not be deterred away from chasing. The waves in popularity seen earlier were now more permanent, and those numbers, while have leveled out in recent years, did not see the declines of past years.

Facebook ultimately replaced StormTrack as the main way to connect with chasers. Storm chasing “teams” popped up everywhere as small groups of people combined in regional areas to chase together. Websites and blogs shifted to status updates and tweets, and became more and more real time. Followers would receive instant notifications when chasers they followed posted an update. The race to get the

quickest videos and pictures up became the main goal for people to generate more “likes” and followers on their site.

These instant notifications allowed for immediate actions for those using social media to chase. In some cases, followers who were actively chasing another storm nearby would see images of tornadoes from another storm, and race off to get on that storm. So many times, reports now include chasers abandoning storms they are pursuing to latch onto a storm that has been shown to produce. Even radar analysis has fallen behind because of the instant feed of imagery to social media, and a chaser can literally sit and wait until confirmation is presented in social media, then just drive to where the storm is.

Of course, this doesn't always bode for success as the atmosphere doesn't always work for those arriving late to the party. But the lack of experience shows in these instances when a rookie chaser gets impatient and races off to a producing storm, and abandons a developing storm that would later produce. This has partially changed the definition of a bust from not seeing a storm, to missing tornadoes because a chaser who knew little about the processes of supercells relied too heavily on social media and would leave a storm that would produce after they left, but then would arrive too late to the storm they saw postings for.

Only ten years ago, the general average of tornadoes per chase for any given chaser was roughly seeing tornadoes on one out of every 10-15 chases, or having two to three tornado days in a calendar year. A tornado day is defined as seeing at least one tornado, regardless of intensity, on a chase day. Now, that average is less than one in five chases leading to a successful intercept. And this is even with the number of

chasing days expanding to beyond the typical March through July chasing season. Because of these technologies, chasers are covering areas well beyond Tornado Alley, including areas east of the Mississippi River where the technology gives chasers an edge in areas where the terrain is not as conducive for visual chasing.



## CHAPTER 4

### CULMINATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY

Social media and the advances in technology dramatically leveled the playing field for storm chasers. With access to the social media pages, everyone could post forecasts and even see the thoughts of the veterans. Social media also gave a face to new chasers, and when added to Twitter, could immediately update followers on happenings in real time.

The technologies included better radar, forecast models, and mobile access. They ridded of the need to have a meteorology background and made the new chasers as successful as the veterans. What has happened as a result is that the video market has become oversaturated since such a large number of chasers are now on the same events.

In the early 2000s before social media and mobile technology, a very small number of chasers would see a tornado, and only a small fraction of those chasers would take video of the event. Now, with sometimes upwards of a couple hundred vehicles surrounding a tornadic storm, the number of videos that try to get sold number in the dozens and flood the video market even before the event is over. This has not only plummeted the price of the video, but it has created a race amongst chasers to get that video out as fast as possible. This is another area where social media has become so key, they can tweet or status-update a post alerting news agencies to incoming video even as the event is ongoing. There is no longer the need for connections, or even having expert status. Get the video immediately and get it to the networks immediately, which is the new game.

## CHAPTER 5

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Chuck Doswell wrote an essay on responsible chasing in 2001 in response to the increase in popularity in storm chasing after the movie “Twister” put the activity in the limelight. The flood of new chasers leads to a variety of dangerous actions from people with little experience interacting with storm environments. In addition, the number of the vehicles on the road increased enough where two-lane rural roads become clogged with vehicles, sometimes leaving many stuck in the path of oncoming storms.

Doswell, one of the pioneers of storm chasing and a well-respected storm researcher, wrote this essay to give new chasers a basic guide to responsible chasing. Doswell has been chasing storms for decades, having published over 100 refereed papers on severe weather, as well as was one of the lead forecasters for Project Vortex in the mid-1990s. His contributions have extended from the American Meteorological Society to several books and encyclopedias.

His essay titled “Storm Chasing with Safety, Courtesy, and Responsibility” has been cited hundreds of times in countless storm spotter guides across the world. It continues to this day to be heavily referenced in forums, social media, and just about anywhere else a up-and-coming storm chaser can go for information. The paper came out before the advanced in mobile technology and social media created even more publicity to chasing, but continues to offer sound guidelines to new chasers.

The essay is divided into several sections, discussing safety around storms and lightning, as well as general safety rules. However the guidelines under the section

titled “Responsible Chasing” are the ones to which remain ageless. Many of those guidelines remain as pertinent today as they did in the early 2000s. The advice includes tips such as not endangering one’s self or others, staying out of damage areas, and keeping enthusiasm for violent weather in check.

Doswell’s guidelines have been long embraced as the standard in chasing ethics, however the playing field has changed dramatically as the younger generation of chasers has many more tools going in, and as such, goes in thinking they’re much more experienced, and lack the need to go over educational literature. What was once required reading for those new to storm chasing, Doswell’s essay almost has to be forced into the public light.

Doswell’s guidelines are the foundation for this study, but when adding the component of video sales into the equation, do these values still hold up? Can they still be the foundation for storm chasing in the present when the motives behind chasing have shifted from a passion for weather to earning the paycheck or getting the fame?

Other pieces of literature discuss the current technologies in chasing and how they’ve evolved the activity. New forecast models and how they have become more advanced and more precise. The evolution of these models have not only increased the resolution, able to depict individual storms within a certain county, but also give more confidence in the forecast several days beyond what was considered reliable only ten years ago. Faster, more powerful computers and larger datasets have contributed to the increase in weather prediction computer models.

Specific to one of the storm chaser incidents talked about later in the study are many reports from online news publications covering the Pilger, Nebraska tornado and

the aftermath of the photo of a dying girl photographed by a chaser who was in the area immediately after two tornadoes decimated the town. One of the interviews in the paper serves to bring some insight from an ethics perspective into the on-scene behavior and whether it violated journalistic ethic code.

## CHAPTER 6

### STORM CHASER INCIDENTS – GENERAL

The underlying reason behind chasing for nearly all storm chasers is a love for the weather. Many experienced some sort of weather event early in their lives that lead them to seek out the weather as adults. Many go on in school to become Meteorologists, or to take weather-related classes as part of another major. Others are just passionate about the weather and want to see storms in person.

This passion is what drives people to drive hundreds if not thousands of miles to see storms. And when those storms occur, there is an excitement felt among the chasers. Many of those chasers let loose on camera, capturing those moments of excitement, then later posting them to social media websites without thinking about how that excitement translates to those seriously affected by those events.

The public often criticizes storm chasers for taking joy in the suffering of others when they see these types of videos. Chasers behind the camera are cheering, celebrating back and forth with others in the vehicle. Meanwhile the video is capturing the destruction of a tornado as it tears through an urban area. The excitement of seeing a tornado is hard to contain, but should be left to a time and place that isn't in the eyes of those who may have lost everything in that event.

Another area of ethical consideration is the usage of rental cars in chasing. It's not uncommon for a storm chaser, particularly those from overseas or those that live a long way from the Great Plains, to rent a vehicle for an extended period of time for storm chasing. Tour groups also tend to rent large vans to haul around their paying clients.

On several occasions through the years, chasers take additional risks in these vehicles they would otherwise avoid in their own. This would commonly include driving into a hail core where hailstones as big as softballs would do severe damage to a car. Large dents, busted headlights, and smashed windows would often result from such intercepts. But what started happening was the video of these incidents became media gold to networks and started resulting in not only news sales immediately after an event, but stock agencies doing weather productions would license this footage at a per-second cost.

Chasers will often claim the damage is unintentional, but trends seem to support this to be untrue. Many of the videos seen of hailstorms on TV that are destroying cars are done so in rental vehicles. Some of those chasers are even going as far as to brag about their encounters on social media. Most of the chasers tend to pay for the optional damage waiver, which would release them of financial responsibility for the vehicle in the event of loss or damage. When they return the damaged car, they plead

There are many chasers who use their own vehicle, but still make damage claims on their vehicle in the event of severe weather damage. While this practice is largely fairly common, several incidents have occurred where a chaser who has captured this damage and sold the footage was declined for coverage under the basis of operating a business.

## CHAPTER 7

### STORM CHASER INCIDENTS – OVERPASS VIDEO

Several tornadoes hit the state of Oklahoma on March 25, 2015, in a regional outbreak of severe weather. One of the tornadoes impacted the area near Tulsa in the northeast part of the state and was documented by several storm chasers that were in the area. One storm chaser, Scott Peake, documented this tornado from beneath a highway overpass, then almost immediately after the event, released the video publically as well as sells it to various national news media outlets.

While Peake demonstrated dangerous choices in regards to his own safety, saying that he was out of options as the tornado got too close, the ethics in question was whether or not the part of the video that shows the chaser beneath the over pass should have been released. The long version of this event was posted to YouTube within a couple of days and contained enough footage around the overpass to make an adequate video package to sell to networks.

Peake went on The Weather Channel the following morning to discuss the video, and contradicted his own actions by reminding the public how dangerous it is to use highway overpasses as tornado shelters. He justified his actions by saying it was his only option, resulting from playing the tornado too close and not allowing enough time to escape.

It was questioned whether the public would receive that message, especially having seen an experienced and well-known storm chaser use this as an option. The interview on The Weather Channel was likely seen by a fraction of those that saw the

original video. It fueled concerns that this would lead the public to think this is a safer option than what has been proven. Did Peake choose the sale over the public safety?

The most notorious overpass video captured came in April 1991 when two photojournalists attempted to outrun a tornado along the Kansas Turnpike and eventually sought shelter beneath a highway overpass. The tornado made a glancing blow of the structure, and none of the nearly dozen people hiding there were injured, including a family with several children. This video gave the impression to the public that overpasses are safe. This was brought to light in a big way during the May 3 tornado outbreak in 1999 where several deaths occurred in overpasses along the F-5 tornado that would decimate parts of Moore, Oklahoma.

Since then, it has been hammered into tornado safety talks, booklets and webpages that overpasses are not safe. Not hiding under overpasses are the second-highest mentioned tip behind get into a basement in terms of safety information conveyed to the public. This is not only for the dangers to the people beneath the overpass, but to the traffic that may get blocked as a result of so many vehicles parking under the structure. This situation can lead to a variety of dangerous issues, particularly in low-visibility situations where those stuck in the traffic backup may not be fully aware of the danger approaching them.

Less than a month after the Tulsa tornado event, another significant tornado was documented in northern Illinois by a non-storm chaser named Sam Smith who was on his way to Minnesota from Indiana and happened across the tornado. The driver used a highway overpass as shelter and shot was arguably one of the most dramatic



tornado videos of all time on his iPhone as the tornado passed within feet of him and the overpass.

Meteorologists were quick to point out how incredibly lucky he was to have survived that and come away uninjured. Several experts say that escaping the tornado's path is the much safer option when trapped in a vehicle while driving. This was a rural area, and while it was a divided highway, the median was open and he could've flipped directions and driven away from the tornado as he saw it coming with plenty of time to react. Smith says he received an earful from people criticizing his decision, but said in his defense, "I'm not stupid, but who the heck knows what to do in that situation?"

This is an example of the confusion these types of videos generate, particularly to people who may not be as familiar with tornadoes as those in the central part of the country. Smith lives in North Carolina and had never seen a tornado prior to this experience in Illinois. While he never attributed his decision to any video in particular, it is worth questioning whether such videos weighed on his decision to sit beneath the overpass as opposed to turning around and getting away from the tornado.

It is essential that storm chasers demonstrate safe practices during severe weather because their footage is what is distributed to the masses. Public awareness of tornado chasing has increased tenfold in the last decade due to popular TV shows and media coverage. This has inspired the public to become involved in their own chasing endeavors using the chasers' videos as a guide to "how to chase", even if the practices are not safe. And as was the case in Illinois, it may be the only thing a person knows to do, not knowing any better about the danger.

Peake agrees that storm chasers should do more to demonstrate safety practices, but points out that the reach of his video is so limited that its effects would be minimal. While the Illinois tornado proved that the video was seen, the chaser replied by saying, “well, he survived, didn’t he?” He stated in an interview that while his video did show an action that is deemed very dangerous and highly encouraged against, that it would not have enough reach to make any changes to the current public behavior.

Human nature in intense situations is often one to seek shelter, and an overpass does provide that option to those who may have no other place to hide in a tornado. The instinct of human beings will likely never be swayed, and Peake’s video may have limited reach. He says there isn’t enough media out there to sway the public from using overpasses and states that as unless there is something or someone there to prevent people from using overpasses, they will continue to do so, no matter what video may be out there.

Tim Marshall, an engineer with an expertise in storm damage, states that the overpass thing is likely blows way out of proportion. While it is preached endlessly among safety advocates to not use the overpasses as shelter, Tim says that such incidents of people dying under overpasses are extremely isolated at best. However, he does not discount the dangers associated with using overpasses as shelter. He states that the dangers come from traffic hazards, where cars and people may block traffic flow, thus putting more people in a position where they may not be able to escape or seek shelter and could be caught in their vehicles because the roads are blocked.

## CHAPTER 8

### STORM CHASER INCIDENTS – PILGER PHOTOGRAPH

June 16, 2014 was a historic day for tornadoes in Nebraska. A total of four EF-4 tornadoes were spawned from a single supercell thunderstorm, including two which were on the ground at the same time in and near the town of Pilger in the northeast part of the state. One of those tornadoes made a direct impact on the town of Pilger, damaging or destroying 75% of the town.

Videos of the very rare twin tornadoes were shown over every major news organization in the world as the dramatic imagery was being seen largely for the first time in the modern day. But it was a single photo that was shot in the immediate aftermath of the storm and the story surrounding the chaser who took the photo that sparked one of the biggest controversies.

Mark Farnik was in the town of Pilger immediately after the tornadoes struck and was taking pictures of the aftermath. One of the pictures he took was of the five year old little girl, Calista Dixon, who was one of the two who lost their lives in that tornado. Farnik took a photograph of her being carried from the rubble on a stretcher as she looked lifeless. Dixon was found crushed beneath her mobile home and died due to her injuries.

It has been reported that the fire fighters on scene asked Farnik to stop shooting photos, but he did not comply. Several called him a vulture, and the paramedic whom Farnik photographed came out several days later saying how Farnik hid behind a car while taking the photos and expressed great anger in Farnik's behavior while on-scene.

Farnik claimed on his social media pages that he helped out in Pilger, searching through the rubble for survivors and lending a hand. This claim has not been backed up by others, including those on scene or other storm chasers who were in Pilger. In fact, the claim has been refuted by emergency personnel that were on-scene immediately after the tornado.

Billy Hallowell wrote an article on the Farnik and the photograph and brought in a photojournalist who teaches visual journalism at the Poynter Institute to talk about whether or not Farnik violated any ethics code in his actions surrounding the photograph. Kenny Irby states in the article that Farnik didn't cross any professional lines. One of the roles of a journalist is to show the tragedies and horrors of life as sometimes they serve the greater good to capture an individual's injuries of a dire situation.

This is an argument long used for war photography, when the dire situations are a result of mankind. This situation involving a tornado is about Mother Nature, and doesn't involve violence against humans by other human beings. Many question whether the need to show a girl in her final moments is needed to tell the story of the tornado's power. Some argue that her being found in a mobile home may lead to better construction for manufactured homes. It's hard to tell in the photo exactly where the girl came from in terms of the damage, so it lessens the point of that argument as without context in the image, one cannot determine whether the girl came from a mobile home or any other place.

Going back to Farnik's actions, there is no evidence against Farnik saying that he impeded the emergency crews' ability to get to people in need, or block anyone else

actively trying to help out at the scene. Had that been the case, Farnik would have been violating professional ethics codes.

Irby went on to say that he urges journalists to consider and set personal standards on difficult moral and philosophical questions. And that leads to the motives behind the actions of the journalist on scene. While Farnik claims to have offered help, it was what he did two week prior to the event that raised a lot of questions in regards to Farnik.

Earlier in the month, Farnik posted on his Facebook page, saying “I need some highly photogenic and destructive tornadoes to make it rain for me financially.” Farnik removed the comment when it came into light after the Pilger photograph was released, saying that he was frustrated and admitted the comment was off-color. Irby says the post might speak to motive, however calls it circumstantial, stating again how no ethics were violated.

Farnik’s motives have been called into question many times over his career, and many of his incidents have been documented on his own page as he often publishes a lot of his controversial decisions. Often times he will post on Facebook, but later remove the post after taking a backlash of criticism from other chasers on his decision making.

On May 30, 2013, the day before the El Reno, Oklahoma tornado killed three very experienced storm chasers, Farnik posted on his facebook page how he was stuck in a construction zone roadblock on I-35 north of Oklahoma City. He stated that he drove on the shoulder for several miles to get to the end of the road block to alert the cops to open the way for traffic as they were in the path of developing severe weather.

Meteorologists in the storm chasing community were quick to call Farnik out, stating that he was located in an area that was not going to be effected, and essentially would have put those in traffic in danger by allowing them to move south where the threatening weather was actually set to cross.

Farnik had posted through the week leading up to this event how frustrated he was with the lack of success he was having trying to sell media. Frustration again seems to have played a role in his decision making. However it was later brought to light by other chasers stuck in the same road block that the event Farnik described never happened. Later in the day, Farnik would document a tornado near Tulsa, Oklahoma that never sold to media outlets. He later posted more frustration over the lack of sales of that event.

Farnik has posted many stories that have been called into question. Not only for his lack of ethical behavior, but for his own safety. At least once every season, Farnik posts a harrowing story of a close call he has, but seldom is able to post any media supporting his story. Farnik's credibility has been called into question numerous times, and many network producers decline to use Farnik or his imagery because they are unable to verify Farnik's claims.

It is hard to argue with Irby saying that Farnik didn't violate any ethical codes in Pilger, his motives lead him to make unethical decisions as he is driven by the sale and will make choices based upon that. In the case of photographing at Pilger, Farnik wasted no time in selling that picture to the Associate Press and later entered that photo for a Pulitzer Prize. Farnik claimed on his Facebook in January that the photo was

accepted and he was a finalist, however the April 20 announcements showed he didn't win, nor was he a finalist for the award.

The mindset of needing disaster, or hoping for such a disaster, separates chasers who operate ethically versus those who do not. Many have stated that if you're storm chasing for the disaster and to capitalize off that, then you should have no business being out there. People who are out there with a sense of ethics are chasing because they are passionate about weather, not wanting to capitalize off those who are innocent victims.

## CHAPTER 9

### STORM CHASER MINDSETS

The general consensus of storm chasers is that those who are out trying to sell video are doing so to fund a highly expensive activity. As the survey mentioned, most chasers do not make a majority of their income chasing. But between the costs of fuel, lodging, vehicle maintenance, equipment, and general traveling, selling video is the easiest way to try and offset those costs. Most chasers are able to recoup about half of their overall expenses in video sales, even as most will state they're hoping to break even.

Typical chaser seasons run during a set amount of time between April and June, typically dubbed as a "chasecation" among those who venture out. Those three months are often the ones chasers are trying to fund as they take extra time from work, most not having paid compensation from current employment for most if not that entire time. Those that do work normal jobs often use up their annual vacation to

However, there are a few chasers whose goal is to become famous. As television shows became popular and drew others into the activity, many of them came in with the idea that they could get rich or famous storm chasing. Most of those people know little about the weather or have any real desire to educate themselves. They are often fueled by the adrenalin rush of storms and their sole purpose isn't to experience the weather, but to capitalize from it.

Farnik is an extreme example of this type who are trying to capitalize from the weather and the destruction it causes. His public comments regarding the need for damage and destruction to make it rain for him financially are a clear example of



chasing for the wrong reasons. Doug Kiesling in his interview condemns that type of behavior, saying that anyone with those types of intentions do not belong out there. He went as far as to call the behavior “creepy”, saying that you’re not judged by what you do, but your intentions behind it.

When chasing moved into the “post-Twister era”, its popularity saw the spike in people thanks to the Hollywood portrayal of chasing in the box office smash. However, making money at the activity was rarely an issue as an extremely small number of people were doing anything business-related for this.

Doug Kiesling was the first to mainstream the idea of selling video to networks. He was a photojournalist and a pilot, but had a love for the weather. His knowledge of technology helped create the first system to beam video over an internet connection, basically ridding the need to meet with satellite trucks in the field or go to a station to hand over the footage. Kiesling pioneered the video business, and eventually brought on a team of videographers to cover severe weather all over the country, starting a successful business that has been going strong for nearly two decades.

He states that he wanted to create a better way to get video from the field, which combined well with his passion to storm chase. His inspiration was because of this difficulties in with a station he was working for where he would have to cut a chase short to get back on time to deliver video. This new system allowed him to stay in the field longer, go further away, and expand his coverage. Also with this system, it opened up the possibilities to sell video to national media outlets, giving him reason to expand his territory.

Storm chasers have a variety of reasons for being in the field, but the general mindset behind those that try and make money is just to allow them to chase more, offset the costs to go out so they can experience more weather. A select few take it beyond that, trying to make a living from it, but generally, the passion to see the weather is the foundation for all the reasons to chase.

## CHAPTER 10

### CONCLUSIONS

It seems pretty easy to pinpoint the foundation for some of the unethical behavior of storm chasers. The increased popularity of storm chasing combined with the exposure from social media has created an extremely oversaturated market for anyone trying to make money. Storm chasing remains a very expensive activity, even with the decline in gas prices, and the still growing popularity makes it a very attractive activity for people.

But to stand out, to be faster, chasers are often forced to make tough choices in the name of money. Chasers have to get closer, more extreme footage of tornadoes and then get that video out as fast as possible which leads to less editing time to sift through and trim out parts that may otherwise be harmful or show dangerous behavior.

The dynamic of chasing makes these incidents come and go very quickly. And the saturation of video that is posted can wash out incriminating pieces of media that get posted. A chaser these days only has to ride out the backlash for a short amount of time before the next thing takes center stage and makes everyone forget what this chaser did as now the next chaser has done something.

The end goal is the same in most cases, a media sale and gas money in the wallet. Most chasers are not in for the long haul, are not out to make a living. They simply want to offset their expenses so they can afford to participate in the activity. Their credibility means little compared to the need to make that sale. Most chasers only participate in storm chasing for a few weeks of the year and have normal jobs and lives outside of chasing.

But those few who stick it out all year, who chase weather of all seasons, and regularly submit video, they are the ones that rank credibility higher. The remainder of the seasonal video seller's biggest goal was to offset their expenses. Most chasers don't care enough to put the effort in given the low return and expectations.

The focus then shifts to the notable chasers, those with the experience and know-how to get the exposure, regularly make sales, and are more visible. While the general principals set by the Society of Professional Journalists are a solid foundation for journalists, an additional set of guidelines should be utilized by storm chasers who have any kind of media exposure for their work.

The first and most important guideline is recognizing public safety. This not only means practicing safe chase behaviors, but in how they expose their work in public. The weather is unpredictable, and thus it is impossible to remain safe 100% of the time, it is possible to keep those mistakes from the public eye. When a chaser gets lucky and that gets out into the mainstream media, the public, who doesn't know better, may see this risky behavior and emulate it, thus putting themselves in danger. Storm chasers preach that they are out for public safety, but part of that extends beyond the actual chase into what the public sees of storm chasers after the fact. And while providing realtime warnings and verification of ongoing severe events, chasers taking unsafe risks and sharing that with the public ultimately gives the wrong idea of safety and may lead to dangers presenting themselves later on.

Secondly, keep the motives and excitement private. It is no secret that storm chasers make money off their videos after an event, but remember that those events, while good for the wallet, are inflicting bad things to others. And while it is exciting to

see this weather, there is a time and place to express that excitement. Professionalism is a huge thing, and that includes keeping emotions in check when in the public eye.

With both of those, selective editing is also highly encouraged. Take that extra minute to trim out pieces of video that may contain risky behaviors or excessive excitement at the sight of destructive forces. Speed is the key for getting video sold, but taking a little extra time to clean up the videos will go a long way into the perception of storm chasers.

Basically the code of ethics goes back to Doswell's essay on chasing responsibly. Those guidelines set forth in that 2001 publication remain the foundation for ethics today, even as those guidelines are often pushed aside. Chasers are endangering themselves and as a result, others, in the quest to get the most extreme video. They've shown exuberant enthusiasm in videos, often trying to draw attention to themselves through posting those clips to social media. Chasers go into damage areas not to help, but to get that dramatic footage to put out and show the world later. The guidelines have been there for years, and the foundation set by those guidelines remains just as true today as it did back then. The changes in chasing, particularly in the areas of technology and media exposure have created a new obsession for those going out.

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