

OPINION

Tornado and storm warnings invading your phone? Making you numb? Forecasters are worried. | Maria Panaritis

Updated: June 2, 2019 - 5:00 AM



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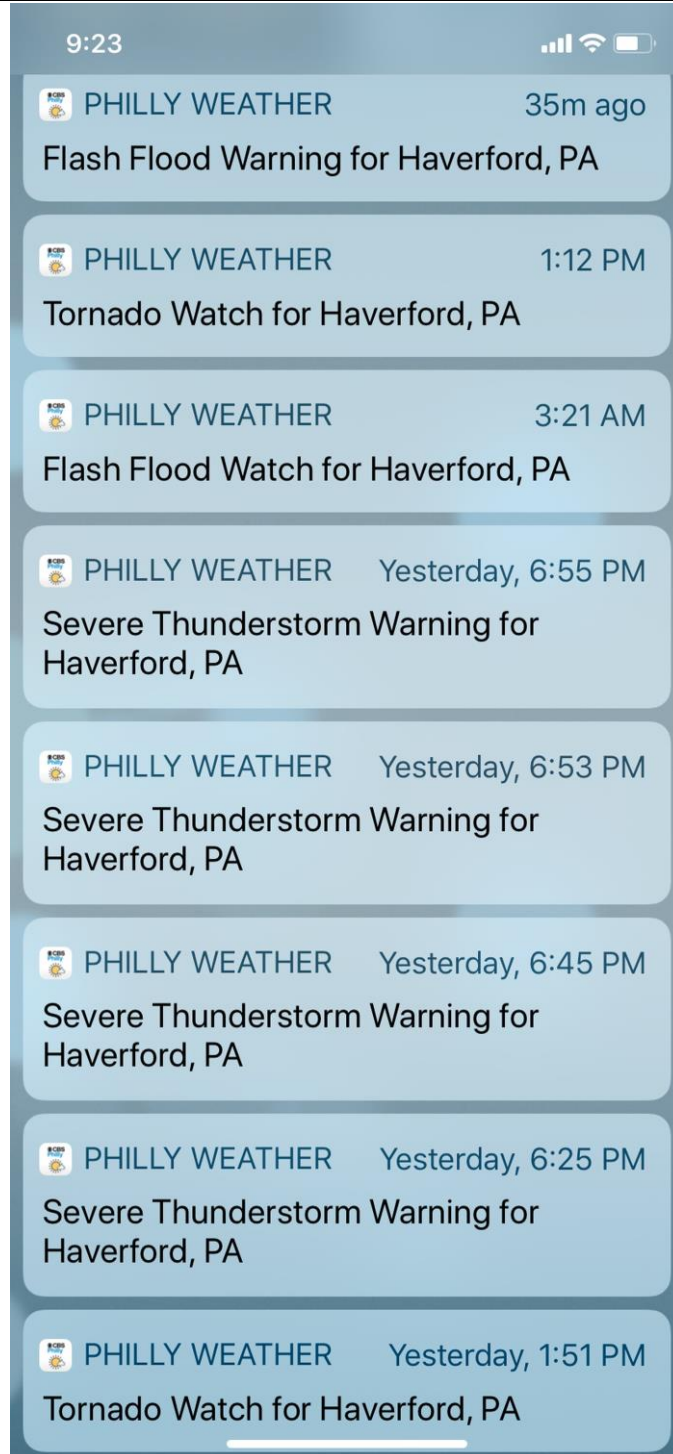
MICHAEL BRYANT / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

For three very dark and dreary days last week, cell phones across the region became the pinging, blaring, digital version of Annoying Man.

They did not, like the famous *Saturday Night Live* character played by Jon Lovitz, swat and whine at us. But they all but dared us to ignore their dings of doom.

A POSSIBLE TORNADO!
A LIKELY THUNDERSTORM!
ADVERTISEMENT

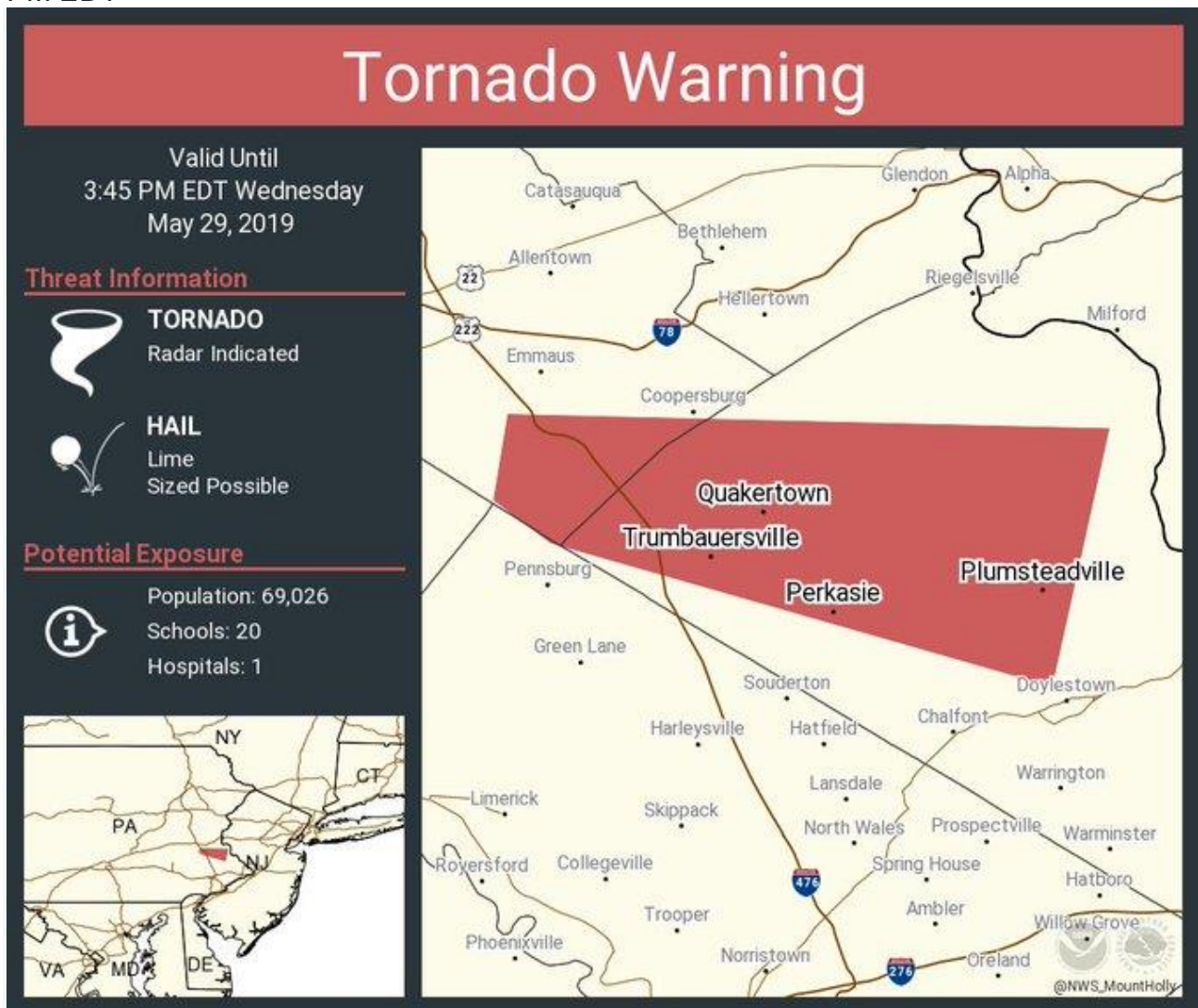
OH MY GOD A FLASH FLOOD!
RUN! RUN! RUN!!!!!!!



MARIA PANARITIS / STAFF

In the Philadelphia area and its sleepy suburbs? Our worst weather in these parts is heat and humidity. How were we suddenly Ground Zero for Climate End Times? Our iPhones last week hit us with a hailstorm of hysteria. Alerts from weather apps sounded through pants pockets and handbags, desks and car consoles. So did a more ominous-sounding siren sound coming straight from cell-phone towers in the form of Wireless Emergency Alerts. Recall how, in mid-April, our phones were all the chatter after our cell providers awakened us in the middle of the night with a Weather Service tornado warning that maybe half of us took seriously. Now this. I called the Chief Warning Guy at the National Weather Service. What's the deal? I asked.

Tornado Warning including Quakertown PA, Perkasie PA, Plumsteadville PA until 3:45 PM EDT

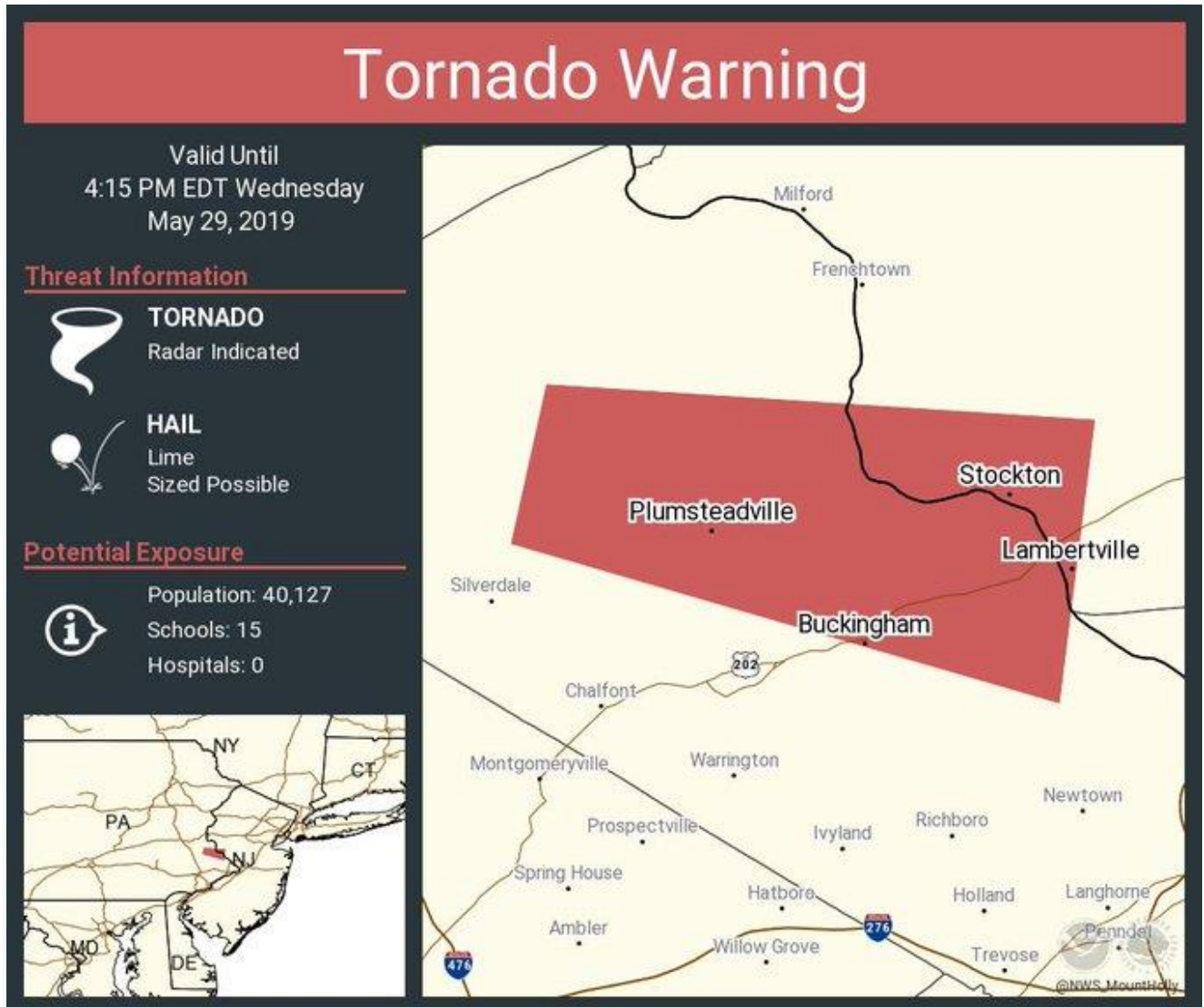


The weather, it turns out, isn't much worse than usual, he said. Nor are we getting more alerts than any other year, more or less. It's just that we now have smartphones — and access to the kind of real-time weather risk data that we previously lived without in mostly blissful ignorance.

“The world’s not coming to an end,” said Joe Miketta, whose actual title is warning coordination meteorologist for the National Weather Service in Mount Holly. Spring is, however, the busy time for really bad thunderstorms and possible tornado-like winds (though we’ve had only one deadly tornado here in decades).

Years ago the only way to get National Weather Service alerts in real time was to be so geeky (I know one of these people — veteran Inquirer scribe [Anthony R. Wood](#)) as to have a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration radio.

Tornado Warning including Lambertville NJ, Plumsteadville PA, New Hope PA until 4:15 PM EDT



Now, though, you buy a smartphone, and the most severe warnings — for tornadoes, flash floods, tsunamis, and blizzards only — come right to your phone from the Weather Service (with an assist from your cell carrier).

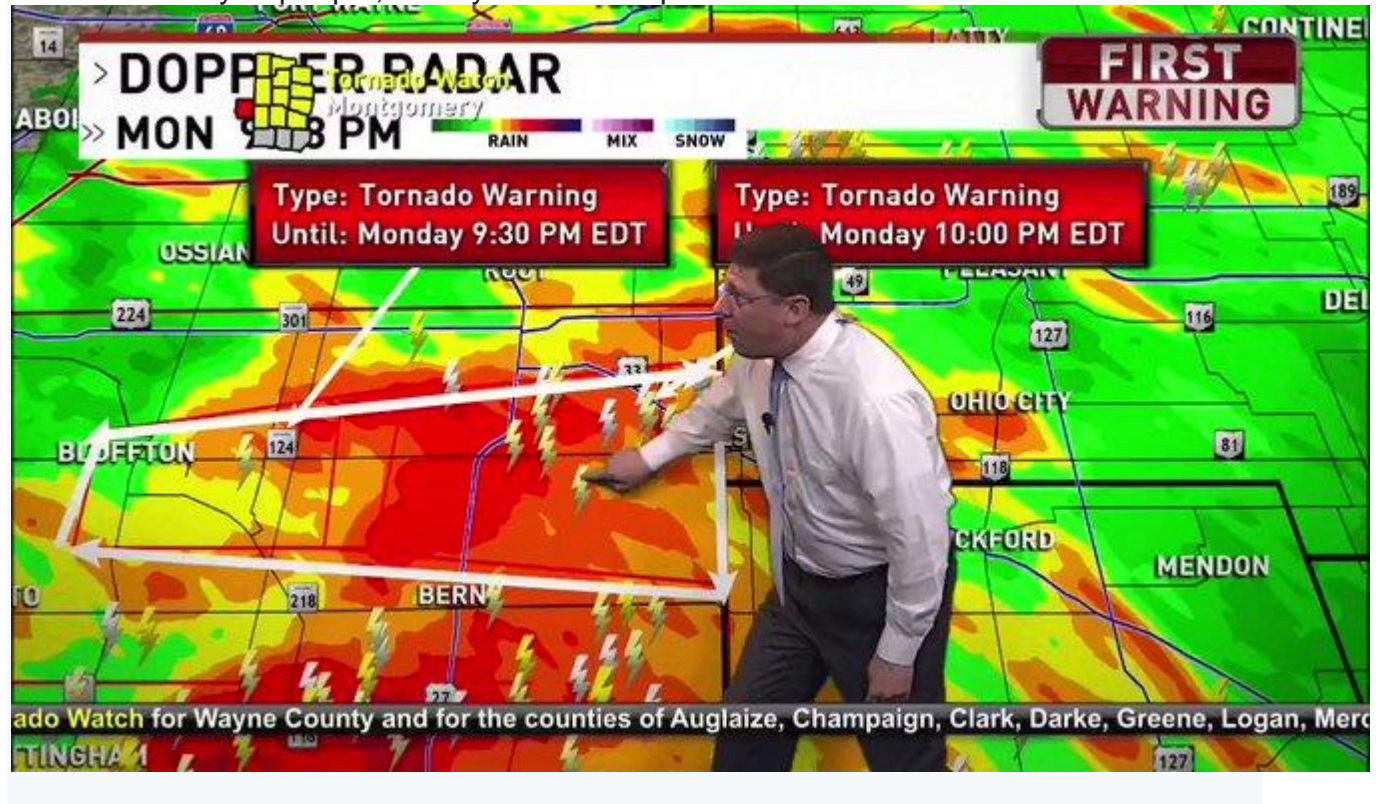
Other alerts — including thunderstorm watches, tornado watches, flood watches — are what news and weather app providers decide to push out to us on their own. Let's call that the discretionary *noise*, shall we?

"You can turn it off," Miketta said, but "we hope people don't do that. ... With something really quick or swift like a flash flood or tornado, you've got to take action now."

Problem is, I told Joe, it's starting to feel as if these warnings are much ado about not so much, and people may soon lose patience in our All-Weather-All-The-Time media age. I reminded him about the viral video a few days ago of an Ohio weather forecaster who freaked out at viewers. Lounge lizards were complaining that the news broadcast had interrupted *The Bachelorette* to share that tornadoes were bearing down on the region.

WATCH: Weatherman @JamieFOX45Now in Dayton, Ohio snapped at viewers complaining on social media about the network's decision to cut into *The Bachelorette* Monday evening with emergency tornado warning coverage

"I'm done with you people, I really am. This is pathetic"



"I'm done with you people, I really am," Dayton meteorologist [Jamie Simpson](#) said during a Fox TV broadcast. "This is pathetic."

The problem, or at least part of it, is that there is a lot of weather drama in our lives now. It's all over TV news, and now it's all over our phones. And if just about everything is billed as a Scary Weather Event, only to turn out that it isn't, the human mind ignores it next time.

This is becoming enough of a problem, Miketta told me, that it has caught the attention of environmental researchers in Easton, Pa., whose job is to help forecasters figure out how to get people to act when severe weather is imminent.

I called the woman in charge of that effort, Rachel Hogan Carr of Nurture Nature Center, and just as a potential tornado-and-thunderstorm system was rolling out of Bucks County on Thursday and barreling toward her. Twitter was blowing up with alerts as we spoke. So was my phone in suburban Philly.

“First of all,” I asked Hogan Carr, perhaps half-seriously and half-jokingly, “are you OK? Are you safe?”

“I’ve got everything set to ding and dong,” she said, “so if anything happens I’ll let you know.” Even before our phones became an instant-anxiety-inducing agent, people were turning numb to alerts, she said. When it happened in Joplin, Mo., in 2011, this proved devastating.

“Weather forecasts went out forecasting the tornado in advance. But people took that warning info and did things other than prepare for that tornado,” she said. “That was one of the most deadly tornadoes on record [158 people died, more than 1,000 people were hurt]. There were sirens that went off in the community that they had heard too many times and that they started to ignore.”

As she said this, Hogan Carr’s phone was blowing up with weather warnings. She’d already taken her kids out of school and come home. And as I joked, she soberly added that weather warnings, even if just more noise in a noisy digital age, are no joke.

“We know,” she said, “that the forecaster who pulled that trigger has a very serious sense that there is an actual imminent threat.”



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