

Ankle-deep in danger: Staged news

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 29, 2005](#) issue

In October NBC's *Today* show covered the floods in New Jersey with a live shot of correspondent Michelle Kosinski, who was paddling a canoe. As she was paddling, "two men walked between her and the camera—making it appear the water where she was floating was barely ankle-deep" (as was noted by the Associated Press). *Today* host "Matt Lauer struggled to keep a straight face, joking about the 'holy men' who were walking on water." Co-host Katie Couric asked, "Have you run aground yet?" Kosinski herself "stayed with the discourse, asking, 'Why walk when you can ride?'" AP quoted an NBC spokeswoman who assured us that Kosinski had earlier been riding in deeper water.

Not wanting to take away from the real danger some reporters face in Iraq or when hurricanes take surprising turns, we join the company of those who are weary of the staged footage of intrepid, wind-blown correspondents.

Hurricane season brings to mind a parable I drew from hurricanologists some years ago. They point out that flying in the eye of the hurricane only looks dangerous. We've never lost a C-130 weather craft. The people at risk are on the ground: bridge-tenders, firefighters, police—along with chaplains and pastors and medics. The ones really at risk are those who, despite precautions taken, see their whole house blown down.

I came upon this imagery when reading John Murray Cuddihy, a sociologist who wrote that modern sociologists could "theorize from within the eye of the hurricane of modernization," the safest place to be. Instruments protect them, "where all is calm and intelligible." They cannot shield the people whose figurative huts are being blown away by the forces monitored by safe and distant professionals.

Historians of theological education tell us how at various times professors and church leaders have sent idealistic young ministers out to be "prophetic" voices in middle-class parishes where the ministers meet massive resistance to even the mildest "prophetic" critiques. "You people back there in the faculty clubs are pretty safe," the young ministers complained, "and you send us to the trenches."

In professorial studies and libraries we may pose as being at risk, but we have the instruments to measure the winds and virtual jet engines to help us get out of the storms' paths. In shallow waters you only have to *look* endangered, knowing that at end of day a not-bad hotel room awaits.

I could write a defense of "embedding" reporters in war or of having them lean into the wind on camera, just as I could write a defense of academic tenure, the shield professors have against the hurricanes of modernization and other changes. But I have to remember that those who are off camera and not riding in the C-130s are the ones who take the real risk.