

News Innovation

An introductory note, if you will. 2019 marks my 25th year conducting the RTDNA (before that, RTNDA) Annual Survey. First at Ball State University and now at Hofstra University. It has been my privilege to do this, and I want to thank RTDNA, Ball State and Hofstra for the support and opportunity to keep this going. Most of all, I want to thank all of you who spend what I know is way too much time poring over the way too many questions that I ask on this survey. Thank you.
- Bob Papper

Local TV News Working to Improve, Become More Innovative by Bob Papper

The latest RTDNA/Hofstra University Survey found that almost two-thirds (62.4%) of local TV news directors say they have done something in the past year that had significantly improved their journalism. A year ago, the bigger the market, the more likely that the station had done something. This year, while the very smallest markets were lower than the others, otherwise, the numbers were pretty similar. That was also true for staff size – except for the very smallest newsrooms, which were lower than all the others. ABC and CBS stations were higher than NBC with Fox trailing all others.

Almost 300 news directors answered this new question, and I broke down their answers into five categories:

As it did a year ago, content came out on top with 43% of the responses. Within content, an emphasis on investigative reporting – including legal fights for public records -- led the way. Close behind came more and better content ... including better storytelling. Right behind that came beat, enterprise and long-term reporting. Fact check reporting, more live reporting, continuous disaster coverage.

- Pushing for more in-depth, issue related reporting as opposed to surface level "breaking news" only
- We have increased our production of out-of-newscast specials. We've done 12 this year, storytelling that we can't do in 1:30 bites. These specials have dealt with everything from school shootings to horse farms in our area
- We've placed an impetus on the entire news team to seek investigative and not just our lead investigative journalists
- Challenge more public record request denials

Again this year, in second place, came training at 30.4%. That included, most often, IRE and then webinars. Then a smattering of specifics: corporate training, AR&D, Carole Kneeland, Poynter, NPPA. I also included specific plans for staff feedback and critiques.

- Cross-trained more of our digital journalists to learn TV skills. More multi-platform-skilled managers in senior positions

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- Many staffers have attended conferences and brought back presentations for the staff, brought in experts for monthly Q&A sessions, placed a more senior manager in charge of investigative team
- Monthly training seminars for staff. this is done with guest speakers and webinars
- More group trainings, leaders attending Carol Kneeland training, NBC Leadership Training -- advising more employees to get MBA and law degrees

Repeat third place as well: management/oversight/planning at 12%. That included establishing or enforcing a coverage plan or news philosophy or standards of practice. I also include here some sort of plan or practice for audience engagement or advocacy on behalf of the audience.

- Changed the types of stories we tell and how we tell them
- Assigning franchise beats to anchors
- Changed newsroom to reporter-driven for story ideas and mandated increased output
- Dramatic investment in tools for visual presentation -- cinematic feel to compete with non-news competitors
- Every MMJ has a manager/point-of-contact assigned to them
- Incorporated more oversight of field reports
- Investment in keeping staff, providing time and energy to do in-depth stories
- Recently we have started being much more intentional in reviewing and re-engaging with commenters on our website, and that has helped build our community of highly-engaged users, who have in turn helped drive additional story ideas to foster more bottom-up journalism
- Re-directed focus on local stories and local issues, cutting national news almost completely
- Weekly content review meetings
- Work days for reporters to cultivate sources & community contacts

Staffing came next at 9.5%. Staffing broke into two groups: better and/or more.

- Added new staffers with more experience who've helped me manage the product and give even more feedback to younger reporters
- Held reporters and producers accountable to add more depth to coverage and stories
- Hire the star reporter from the local paper.
- Hired 2 reporters from local newspaper - one is a Pulitzer Prize winner

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Digital came next at 4.4%. Some said digital first – which is more like planning and management, but some just said digital, so I included both together.

Other finished off the last 0.6%.

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This is just the second year that I asked, “What’s the most innovative thing your newsroom started doing this year?”

Once again, there were more than 200 answers to the question, and I broke down the answers into three broad (and sometimes overlapping) areas:

Nearly half, 45.3% of the responses, involved digital. Dominating the area: streaming and OTT (over the top as opposed to via cable or satellite). Facebook Live was a big factor here. Lots of comments about newscasts, specials, mini-docs, breaking news and audience chats with anchors. Plenty of comments about various digital platforms, digital first, digital only and various programming specific for the digital platforms: sports, weather, breaking news, etc. A variety of software came up but among the newer entries getting mentions were Alexa and AR (augmented reality). And there were more general comments like social listening.

- A 2:00 newscast for emerging social platforms like Instagram and Snapchat
- 18-hour day live OTT/web only news coverage live from the newsroom
- Added images to app pushes and revamped push strategy, began experimenting in OTT
- Alexa weather and news updates
- Augmented reality for weather
- Created more OTT (streaming) programming/unique content
- Created an OTT Center that gets us live on all platforms simultaneously
- Devoted an entire position to digital news instead of field reporting, something this station has never done before
- First Alert Desk during all evening newscasts/Digital Updates at 9A, 11A, 3P, and 9P daily
- Live streaming local election coverage as an alternative to on-air broadcast since the broadcast time was all network

Next came management at 35.8%. The biggest groups within this category included drones, staffing and technical issues. Most of the comments on drones just said drones. Staffing included more or better or specialized ... and quite a few involved the digital side, undoubtedly tipping the digital answer over the halfway mark. I included in this area new buildings, new studios, new sets, new newscast opens, new branding ... you get the idea.

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- Equipping all ENG cameras with LiveU chips
- Put two GoPro's in a news car with one facing the road and the other a reporter. MobileTrak - for weather, traffic coverage
- Regular single-topic newscasts with different presentation style during normal news times
- Removed producers from broadcast and digital silos
- Created in house innovation lab using existing employees to help transform local news
- Using billboards to update the community on the news
- We are combining our assignment desk with our digital editors to increase the # of people working on digital
- 2 photographers became licensed drone pilots. We look every day for drone opportunities
- Drone program now has five drones and 8 pilots
- Drone usage - we now have 6 - use to turn social content and news. Also podcasting
- We implemented a polished casual look in our wardrobe
- Fired the news director
- Thinking

The remainder, at 18.9% involved content. Mostly that related to beat reporting and a focus on investigative (most often) along with other areas. New features, new newscasts, more and/or better news.

- Advocacy reporting
- Higher focus on enterprise and a franchise topic to dominate in the market
- Single focus investigative unit - Operation Crime & Justice

Once again, most of the innovations listed involved the newer digital side of the operation rather than innovation on air.

What's different this year is that I also asked whether the innovation was working.

A fair number of news directors skipped that part of the question, and even more just said "good" or "great." But that really doesn't mean much, so let's see if I can draw any more concrete conclusions on some of the areas.

Let's start with the digital innovations. How are they going?

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Digital first or only:

- It's a learning process
- Still a work in progress. The deadline for TV is a strong pull to break

There were mixed but mostly positive results on some of the OTT and streaming efforts:

- Making money via sponsors
- Growing audience
- Clicks have increased with app push strategy, not sure yet on the OTT approach
- Great. We're finding new ways to add revenue on platforms that have been underutilized, steadily growing audience on OTT
- It's giving us a new platform to try new types of storytelling & editing, and it's warming up our digital audience, particularly cord-cutters who still want local news & are turning with more and more frequency to streaming sticks (Roku, Apple TV, Amazon Fire Stick) for local
- It has worked well creating a more robust, younger audience of fans as well as boosting clicks to the website

And there was a similar range of comments relating to general streaming:

- We are getting good feedback and good traffic. Facebook audience larger than web
- OK. We are still trying to determine if the effort is worth the results
- Sports online videos and FB Lives doing very well! Election night digital special did OK
- Highly successful but require time and personnel we really don't have

Most stations seemed to feel that they were getting out of digital what they put into it:

- Digital numbers are up dramatically from one year ago.

Specifics by area:

Facebook Live:

- Show is sponsored and drawing a steady viewership

Augmented reality:

- Still Early

Webcasts:

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- To be determined

First Alert plan (above):

- It has increased the level of urgency in our newscasts and the amount of engagement with our digital viewers

Alexa:

- Still too early to tell
- Not sure yet

How did the management innovations go?

Most comments on increased digital staffing were positive:

- Just started but seeing uptick in online hits and social hits
- Digital numbers on average are 400% stronger than the previous year
- It's difficult to abandon long-held broadcast priorities

Integrating various platforms:

- Ratings are up, and social traffic is up. Website traffic not affected as much

Facebook Live teases:

- Hard to measure but isn't hurting us

Newspaper hires:

- Fantastic! These folks know how to develop sources, work beats, and have a sophisticated knowledge of digital & social media content and metrics

Live desk:

- Work in progress

Social listening:

- Helping us to grow audience among the younger demographic

Training:

- We just started the process. We are very encouraged

Fired the news director:

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- As the new ND, I'm hoping well

Thinking:

- The news director who offered this innovation didn't say how it was going for him

Content

Franchise reporting beats:

- It has helped morale, not ratings

Lukewarm comments on new podcasts:

- Okay, not a huge audience
- Some good response, but we need to grow it

Single topic newscasts:

- Working well. Averaging about one per month

Focus more on investigative:

- 10pm show is now #1 in late news

Bob Papper is Emeritus Distinguished Professor of Journalism at Hofstra University and has worked extensively in radio and TV news. This research was supported by the Lawrence Herbert School of Communication at Hofstra University and the Radio Television Digital News Association.

About the Survey

The RTDNA/Hofstra University Survey was conducted in the fourth quarter of 2018 among all 1,685 operating, non-satellite television stations and a random sample of 3,481 radio stations. Valid responses came from 1,310 television stations (77.7%) and 645 radio news directors and general managers representing 1,938 radio stations. Some data sets (e.g. the number of TV stations originating local news, getting it from others and women TV news directors) are based on a complete census and are not projected from a smaller sample.