

How Broadcast Companies and TV News Directors See the Future by Bob Papper

The latest RTDNA/Hofstra University Annual Survey found that broadcast companies and TV news directors are overwhelmingly optimistic about the future of the business. But they're clearly less optimistic than when I first asked this question five years ago.

Based on your discussions with station and corporate management, how would you describe the company's outlook on the future of local television?

Extremely optimistic	39.5%
Cautiously optimistic	48.6
Neutral	6.3
Somewhat pessimistic	4
Extremely pessimistic	0.4
Don't know	1.2

But the numbers represent a small – but clear – drop from five years ago. Extremely optimistic is down three and a half points; cautiously optimistic is down nearly two ... while neutral is up 2; somewhat pessimistic is up almost three and a half; extremely pessimistic is barely there in the survey, but it had zero votes five years ago.

Top 25 market news directors are the least optimistic ... closely followed by those in markets 101 to 150. The most optimistic group is in markets 26 to 50. That was true 5 years ago, too.

News directors in the smallest newsrooms – 1 to 10 staffers – are way more pessimistic than all the others. At 16.7% pessimistic, they're about four times more pessimistic than any other group.

News directors at network affiliates were decidedly more optimistic than those at other commercial stations or non-commercial stations. Non-commercial news directors were the most pessimistic.

News directors in the West were less optimistic than other areas.

Note that the first question asked about the future of local television, while the second question asked news directors about their outlook on the future of local TV news.

How would you describe your own outlook on the future of local TV news? And why?

Extremely optimistic	28.5%
Cautiously optimistic	52.7
Neutral	7
Somewhat pessimistic	10.9
Extremely pessimistic	0.8

As was the case five years ago, news directors were not as optimistic as their companies. These numbers also represent a small, but clear drop from five years ago. The optimistic side fell almost 5 points, and the pessimistic side picked up just over 5.

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Once again, news directors in markets 26 to 50 were the most optimistic, closely followed by market 1 to 25. News directors in markets 151+ and then 51 to 100 were the most pessimistic.

Those in the two smallest newsrooms were more pessimistic than the others.

News directors at non-commercial stations, followed by those at Fox affiliates, were far more pessimistic than any of the others.

Why?

Almost 200 news directors answered this question. A surprising number just said how they and their company felt but skipped the why part.

Three areas accounted for more than 80% of the responses.

First came conceptual answers, at 29.6%. Half those talked about the importance of local news. Some noted that local TV was either doing it better than the alternatives or in a better position to do it. Quite a few noted the trust people had in local TV news. Some contrasted that with a lack of trust in national news; some said that presidential attacks on the media didn't help. The theme was, "what we do matters."

- Because all of the other internet/mobile options that are growing have a national/international focus, and you can't replace local content with those options, and the primary local option (newspapers) are struggling
- Because truth and facts will prevail
- Because while people lose trust in national media, they still turn to their local stations and outlets. We're also innovating and changing as a newsroom and as a company, staying relevant and letting audience need/want guide more of our decisions
- I see the good work that can come out of quality newsrooms, and I see the reaction from the community and viewers. What we do still matters. And it matters in a big way
- Local TV news so far has maintained a level of trust not enjoyed by other media. If we can survive the current technology revolution and find a way to continue to connect our content with the public in a financially sustainable way, we should be able to remain relevant

Just behind, at 26.5% came answers relating to the approach that stations are taking toward TV news. Most of those talked about the need to adapt and change and about the fact that they were doing so. Most of these answers came from those optimistic about adapting to needed changes in approach to the business.

- We still have many good years left, but we have to diversify
- We're transitioning to continue to be strong on TV while also being at the forefront on digital
- Whether it's traditional delivery, on our websites/apps, or streaming services, television stations continue to lead in LOCAL video news production and distribution
- I believe it's an amazing time to be in television because there are so many ways to produce content outside of a newscast. There are great opportunities to take advantage of on digital, streaming etc. that can take broadcast to the next level. It's very exciting

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- I believe the technology, particularly OTT and streaming, will continue to force changes in our media but I think the format and value of the content we provide will always be in demand - even if the platform forces some changes
- The demand for information has never been higher, our challenge is getting it to people where they are, but they want the info we provide
- There is uncertainty about how many people will watch traditional broadcast news in the future, but, hopefully, news organizations will continue to adapt to the shift to social and digital platforms that viewers are using
- TV is adapting as newspaper didn't. There is a LOT of distrust for the media and much of it is national/cable-based. LOCAL has a LOT of trust still
- We are a station of innovators. We work hard every day to find creative ways to continue to serve our audiences where THEY want and need us to be. We don't wait for the sky to fall, we figure out a better way to prepare for the rain - using data, research and building on our strength in our community. Local TV will continue, even as we see more and more people turning to digital properties for news and information. But, the connection people have with the people who they see on TV doesn't change. At the end of the day, it's all about relationships, and TV helps build those lasting relationships, and it serves as a connector of groups of people to one another

Right behind that, at 25.3%, came comments about the business itself. Almost half noted declining advertising revenue. Some went on to note that was resulting in cutbacks that were hurting the news operation. A few noted that digital dollars were not replacing lost ad revenue. Quite a few news directors had concerns about consolidation and what that might mean. A number talked about changing ownership at their station. Most were optimistic; some pessimistic; some just uncertain. Some said they were already getting (or promised) more resources.

- Great company that gives us the tools we need to compete, from staffing to equipment, etc
- I think people want more local news coverage but the challenge for me, as it's always been, is how to do it with fewer resources and less experience. I fear viewers will grow tired of the inexperience and revolving door of faces, if they're not already. Would love to be able to invest in training, more experienced reporters and long-term anchors/reporters who are a part of the community

Audience came in at 14.8%. Two-thirds of those responses were concerns with a steadily shrinking audience – especially young people. A third of the responses noted that local TV news still reaches a large audience. Comments about audience came from both those optimistic and pessimistic. Both are certainly accurate.

Other filled out the remaining 3.7%. That included a concern about the future workforce and one commenting on the “imminent demise” of local TV news. Of course, I've heard that before.

How Broadcast Companies and Radio News Directors See the Future

The latest RTDNA/Hofstra University Annual Survey found that broadcast companies and radio news directors are overwhelmingly optimistic about the future of the business. But this is the second time I've asked the question, and, compared to five years ago when I first asked, there are some decided differences in the answers.

Based on your discussions with station and corporate management, how would you describe the company's outlook on the future of local radio?

Extremely optimistic	37.7%
Cautiously optimistic	42.5
Neutral	10.7
Somewhat pessimistic	4.7
Extremely pessimistic	2.5
Don't know	1.9

The biggest change in the outlook between now and 5 years ago when I first asked this question is an increase in polarization. The neutral category dropped by 6 points. Interestingly, half of that went to the optimistic side (the cautious group) and half went to the pessimistic side (a little more on the extreme side). Still, overall, the optimistic side came in at 80.2% and the pessimistic side at 7.2%. Non-commercial stations, overall, are more optimistic about the future of local radio: 84.4% versus 78%. The biggest stations tended to be more optimistic. Market size didn't make any difference except for the smallest markets which were noticeably less optimistic.

That was on the company's outlook toward the future of local radio. The follow-up question asked for that person's view on the future of local radio news:

How would you describe your own outlook on the future of local radio news? And why?

Extremely optimistic	33.8%
Cautiously optimistic	42.5
Neutral	14.7
Somewhat pessimistic	6.9
Extremely pessimistic	2.2

Optimistic wins again: 76.3% versus 14.7% neutral and 9.1% pessimistic. But that's clearly less optimistic than the outlook on local radio generally.

Again, non-commercial news directors and general managers were more optimistic than their commercial counterparts. Non-commercial was 82.8% optimistic and 6.3% pessimistic versus commercial's 72.7% optimistic and 10.6% pessimistic.

Bigger stations tended to be more optimistic, and news directors and general managers in the smallest markets were almost 10 points higher in extremely optimistic than any other group.

Why?

When I asked this question five years ago, I got about 140 responses. This time, it's over 200 although the answers are largely the same:

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- I'm in public media. Non-profit journalism is safer, seeing larger growth opportunities, and increase in use
- In our area, local radio is still the main source of local information & entertainment
- In our public station, we are the only game left in town for radio news
- In smaller markets without local TV affiliates radio news fills a need
- Local content (news, sports, weather, events) is something we can deliver that satellite radio, Pandora, Spotify, and TV either can't deliver profitably, or doesn't care because we are small
- Local news is content that listeners want but usually can't consume anywhere else. We have a plan when it comes to news – that it be local, concise and personal when appropriate
- Local news/info is the only thing that sets us apart from audio apps, etc.
- More people are listening and reading our content online and have become more engaged on our social media platforms
- Newspapers are dying left and right, and the newspapers left are cutting way back on content
- Stations that are locally focused and provide local VALUE to the listener will be able to survive. Those that rely on generic national news can easily be replaced by national platforms that could provide more compelling, professional content
- There are many new technologies, but in a small market, local is the key. If we can stay big on local events, we should be ok
- This is a new era for audio content. New and emerging technology is making what was once traditional radio even more accessible to younger, more diverse audiences while also capturing the shifting consumption patterns of longtime listeners. Audio search is emerging through smart devices. This is radio's renaissance even if it might look a little different than it has in the past
- We only have weekly newspapers in our rural area. Radio is the only good source of daily local news here
- We're seeing enough growth digitally to make us think that we are not just staying relevant, but can continue to see that growth
- We've seen growth in our newsroom as local newspapers have experienced cuts/shrinkage
- Web, social media, gives us new venues to reach the audience beyond our traditional over-the-air
- When local radio stations play to their strengths of service to the local community they do well. My station is proof
- I don't see an expansion of news, but a re-focus to be as relevant as possible. Might include fewer stories but more in depth and more digital delivery

Those on the pessimistic side had different answers:

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- Just so many other options - and - with a president who calls us the ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE - I'm concerned for not only the future of free news - but - for my LIFE!!!!!!!
- Technology is changing many industries at a rapid pace. Radio is vulnerable to internet delivered music and information
- Those in management need to realize that only stations who value local content will survive
- We're a public radio station which has a strong base of listeners and supporters, but many young people don't own radios. I'm not sure if they'll pick up listening habits, which include our station in years to come
- Most people get news from social media
- The economics are broken
- Commercial stations seem to be getting away from news; some stations still active but with limited staff, time
- Fewer resources and more competition, especially from digital
- Look around, layoffs and buy-outs ruining the business; too many non-radio greedy people in ownership
- More automation, more corporate consolidation, low starting salaries for new personnel out of college, higher paying jobs elsewhere in media

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.

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

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.