



Newsbreak

RTNDA RESEARCH

On the Road to Recovery

By Bob Papper

The latest RTNDA/Ball State University Survey shows both television and radio recovering from last year's drop in news and staff. While neither category in local television news is back to the all-time highs recorded in the fourth quarter of 2000, both are up enough from last year to stand at their second-highest levels ever. Local TV news employment is up 4 percent from a year ago, and the amount of local TV news edged up to recover some of last year's small loss.

The television staff increases were largely across the board, although a second straight year of losses among independent stations led to a drop in full-time employment in Top 25 markets. Perhaps making up for that loss, the number of part-timers in the largest markets soared—up 25 percent.

Radio consolidation makes it almost impossible to compare numbers over time. Today, more than 95 percent (95.3 percent) of radio news departments handle the news for more than one station. Consolidation also has forced us to change our methodology in collecting data on radio news, and that makes comparisons with past years difficult. In fact, the average news department runs news on three stations; the median number of stations is three. And that's just inside the market. More than four in 10 radio news departments (41.9 percent) say they do news for one or more stations outside their own market.

Additional research is available in the online version of this article, which is free to members and subscribers at www.communicatormag.com.

Planned Staff Changes for 2003–2004

	Increase	Decrease	Same	Not Sure
Radio				
All Radio	13.7%	1.5%	73.3%	11.5%
Television				
All TV News	31.8%	2.9%	56.5%	8.8%
Big Four Affiliates	31.4	2.4	58.6	7.6
Other Commercial	20.0	20.0	30.0	30.0

Historically, news directors tend to be optimists on this question, but they're a lot more optimistic this year than last. There's a 62.2 percent jump in the number of TV news directors who expect staff size to grow this year and a 78.9 percent drop in the number of TV news directors who expect staff decreases—and most of those are at independent stations. Generally, the bigger the current staff, the more likely the news director to expect growth. Fox affiliates and stations in the West were most likely to expect expansion.

Staff Size Changes, 2003 vs. 2002

	Increase	Decrease	Same
Radio			
All Radio	13.7%	14.5%	71.0%
Television			
All TV News	27.3%	23.5%	49.2%
Big Four Affiliates	26.3	22.5	51.2
Other Commercial	33.5	55.5	11.0

This table shows how the staff picture has really turned around from a year ago. The number of TV stations reporting an increase is up 42.2 percent from last year, but even more significantly, the number of TV stations reporting a staff decrease dropped by 56.6 percent. That's despite an increase in the number of independent stations that cut their staff size.

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About the Survey

The RTNDA/Ball State University Survey was conducted in the fourth quarter of 2002 among all 1,421 operating nonsatellite television stations and a random sample of 1,490 radio stations. Valid responses came from 890 television stations (62.6 percent) and 272 radio news directors and general managers representing 445 radio stations. Bob Papper is professor of telecommunications at Ball State University and has worked extensively in radio and TV news. Data entry and tabulation were done by the Bureau of Business Research at Ball State. This research was supported by the Department of Telecommunications at Ball State University and the Radio-Television News Directors Association.

Staff Size

	Average Full-time	Median Full-time	Maximum Full-time	Average Part-time	Median Part-time	Maximum Part-time	Average Total Staff	Median Total Staff	Maximum Total Staff
Radio									
All Radio	3.5	2.0	15	2.3	1.0	16	5.8	4.0	25
Market Size									
Major	6.1	5.0	14	2.8	1.5	12	8.9	7.5	16
Large	3.8	3.0	15	2.5	1.0	11	6.3	5.0	23
Medium	2.7	2.0	12	2.6	1.5	16	5.3	4.0	25
Small	3.1	2.0	12	1.9	1.0	8	5.0	4.0	20
Television									
All TV	32.5	27.0	126	4.1	2.0	65	36.6	32.0	140
Big Four Affiliates	34.6	29.0	126	3.8	2.0	40	38.4	33.0	140
Other Commercial	18.9	11.5	47	3.9	1.0	14	22.8	13.5	61
Market Size									
1-25	50.0	46.0	126	6.5	3.0	40	56.5	53.5	140
26-50	44.9	48.0	85	4.0	3.0	16	48.9	50.0	91
51-100	36.9	36.0	100	4.6	2.0	65	41.5	40.0	100
101-150	24.1	25.0	57	3.9	2.5	17	28.0	28.0	67
151+	19.1	15.0	84	2.1	1.5	10	21.2	19.0	84

Radio: While it appears that the average radio news staff has grown, that really reflects a change in methodology that looks at radio news departments rather than individual stations. What's taking place is that the average news department has grown, but consolidation has meant that the number of stations served by that news department also has grown. The bottom line is that while the typical radio news department is larger, the number of radio news people per station has continued to fall.

TV: The overall staff in local TV news rose 4 percent from a year ago—after a 14.6 percent drop last year. All market sizes rose except the Top 25, where a second year of losses among independent stations resulted in the average staff size falling in the biggest markets. Part-time staff rose in all markets except the smallest, where it remained the same. Generally, the staffs at ABC and Fox affiliates were smaller than those at CBS and NBC stations. News staffs at PBS affiliates—where they exist at all—are tiny. There were no significant geographic variations, although news staffs were a little smaller in the Midwest.

Amount of News Changes 2003 vs. 2002

	Increase	Decrease	Same	Not Sure
Radio				
All Radio	24.4%	8.4%	66.4%	0.8%
Television				
All TV News	32.5%	5.4%	61.7%	0.4%
Big Four Affiliates	33.3	4.8	61.4	0.5
Other Commercial	10.0	0	90.0	0
Market Size				
1-25	25.8%	0	74.2%	0
26-50	16.7	5.6	77.7	0
51-100	41.3	6.3	50.8	1.6
101-150	28.0	8.0	64.0	0
151+	48.6	2.9	48.5	0

There was a modest increase in the number of stations saying they increased the amount of news they run—mostly in markets 51-100 and 151+. There was little difference based on staff size, geography or affiliation, other than independents were a lot less likely to have increased the amount of news.

News Profitability, 1998 to 2003

	2003	2002	2001	2000	1999	1998
Radio						
Showing profit	25.2%	15.2%	17.0%	25.0%	19.0%	22.0%
Breaking even	13.8	13.9	17.0	15.0	18.0	14.0
Showing loss	2.4	7.3	0	7.0	6.0	6.0
Don't know	58.6	63.6	66.0	53.0	57.0	58.0
Television						
Showing profit	55.3%	54.9%	56.0%	58.0%	57.0%	63.0%
Breaking even	13.6	11.6	13.0	11.0	9.0	11.0
Showing loss	9.2	11.2	10.0	11.0	11.0	10.0
Don't know	21.9	22.3	21.0	20.0	23.0	16.0

This year was the first since 2000 that a quarter of the radio news departments reported making a profit on news. Half of that growth came from the loss column a year ago, and half came from more news directors who said they knew the answer to the question. The latest TV figures slightly reverse a general downward trend in TV news profitability. That might simply reflect a stronger economy, but note that local TV news profitability hardly suffered—even in the height of the economic downturn.

RTNDF NEWS

The Art of Giving Feedback



Think about this. How often do you let your employees know how they're doing? Chances are, you're not doing it enough.

With constant deadline pressure and fast-paced days, many news managers just don't have time to think about their employees. Are staffers receiving enough training in writing, technology and on-air performance? Do they have an accurate understanding of the station's vision and goals? Do managers even know if staff is performing up to standards?

On July 19, newsroom leaders from all over the country met in Austin, TX, for the National News Leadership Workshop. RTNDF and several sponsoring journalism organizations held a daylong conference for managers to talk about the current issues within the industry. From conflict resolution to coaching skills, participants came away with specific ideas to enhance their leadership roles.

Topping the discussion was the fact that employees want feedback—and plenty of it. In fact, research indicates that newsroom professionals want much more feedback than they typically receive. An annual performance review isn't enough; they want real, ongoing feedback.

Done properly, effective feedback can sharpen skills and motivate even the most veteran employees to do their best. Giving everyone feedback takes

time and effort on your part and can seem daunting even in the smallest newsrooms. Investing the time now, however, will definitely pay off in the future.

Angie Kucharski, news director for KCNC-TV in Denver, believes that feedback is a vital part of her role as a newsroom leader. She suggests these timesaving ways to effectively communicate feedback to employees.

- Don't make feedback a performance review. Give feedback often—every day if you can—so employees know what your expectations are and if they're reaching those expectations, well before a formal review.

- Set up systems in advance to help facilitate feedback. Make a file for every employee. When you send feedback to them, good or bad, make a copy and file it in their folder. Also keep notes about any verbal conversations



Top: The Poynter Institute's Lillian Dunlap (standing) talks with news managers at the National News Leadership Workshop in Austin, TX. **Above:** Schurz Communications vice president Marci Burdick leads a discussion on management challenges.

you've had about employees' work. When it does come time for a performance review, you'll have specific examples of their work and how it fits in with the newsroom's vision.

- Keep your vision in mind. Clearly define the expectations of each employee and how they fit into the direction you want the newsroom to go. Use specific feedback to show if they're meeting that goal.

- Start off by focusing on what went well. Postshow debriefs are a great way to give public feedback to employees. Talk about what was good in the newscast. Again, be very specific. Then, address what needs to improve and how. Bring up what opportunities were missed and focus on those points for the future.

- Take good notes. Staff meetings are another great time to point out individual work; encourage staff members to acknowledge the work of others. A whiteboard where anyone can post feedback is a great

idea that can also boost morale.

Lillian Dunlap, leadership and management faculty member at The Poynter Institute, says that while feedback is vital, the way you deliver feedback is critical to how the person will respond to it.

She has the following suggestions for news managers.

- Avoid "drive-by" praise. Don't just walk by, pat the person on the back and say, "Good work." The feedback needs to be very specific to be effective.

- Have the person critique his or her own work. Ask probing, open-ended questions and then listen and observe verbal and nonverbal responses to feedback.

- Be honest and specific about what worked or didn't work. Demonstrate your interest in helping the person improve.

- Plan for the future. Ask the person for ideas about how he or she would improve the work in the future.

With patience and a little planning, feedback can easily become one of the most valuable tools in newsroom management. Your employees will thank you for it.—Jodi Gregg is a former TV producer who is currently a member of the open government task force for the Texas Association of Broadcasters.

About the Workshop

The National News Leadership Workshop is a joint initiative of the Radio and Television News Directors Foundation and other media groups. RTNDF's News Leadership project is sponsored by a grant from the McCormick Tribune Foundation. For more information, contact Kathleen Graham at 202.467.5216 or kathyg@rtndf.org.

TRADE SECRETS

Covering Off-Hour Radio News With Minimal Staff

Breaking news in off-hours can be an organizational nightmare in today's lightly staffed radio newsrooms. In the good old days, there was at least a lone jock and maybe some interns keeping the station running, but in today's world of automated radio, many stations with news departments are empty when big news breaks.

To the listeners, though, that's no excuse when news breaks. Here are a few tips to help make sure news gets covered 24/7.

Be self-sufficient. The first rule of covering news during off-hours is to be prepared to do it yourself. This means keeping an ear on a scanner, and having lots of friends within local police, fire, EMS and government.

This approach works for Phil Mueller, station manager at KCYN-FM in Moab, UT. "Since I do pretty much everything around the station, I carry a scanner with me everywhere I go," Mueller says. "If we have a weather alert, the weather bureau and local law enforcement people all know where to reach me. So if I don't hear about it one way, I hear about it another."

Does this cut into personal time? Certainly. For instance, "Last week I was leaving with my kid at lunchtime, and we got a report of black smoke coming from the downtown area," says Joe LeCompte, managing editor for WILM-AM in Wilmington, DE. "It turns out

that someone was grilling on the roof of a recently renovated apartment building and managed to set the third and fourth floors ablaze. Me and my kid were on scene reporting until 7 p.m."

Share the job.

Don't be bashful; share the off-hour news load with anyone willing to help: sales, promotions, programming—anyone!

"At our station, everyone knows that the first person who hears of breaking news has to get on the ball and get it to air," says Dennis Green, station manager of KCCK-FM in Cedar City, IA. "It doesn't matter when."

If you've got the news staff, create an off-hours schedule for breaking news coverage. At KRMG-AM in Tulsa, OK, "we have a different reporter/anchor on call each week," says news director John Durkee. "It rotates through our entire full-time staff of seven."

"We're fortunate at WHO in that we have a five-person staff which rotates an on-call schedule for overnights on a weekly basis," says Jim Boyd, news director for WHO Radio in Des Moines, IA. "We also have a relationship with the overnight security guard, who monitors scanner traffic for us and will either leave information for the morning crew to check on when they arrive or will at least pass it on to our overnight

technical director, who then notifies the person on call."

Share the News. "We have a nice tip exchange with a local TV station," says KRMG's Durkee. "During our off-hours,

primarily the weekend nights /overnights, their assignment desk will page our on-call editor if something is breaking. We are staffed early Saturday and Sunday mornings and will likewise page their on-call photog. Also, during non-news staff hours, the board

operator is listening to the scanners and the ABC Network Cue Channel. They notify the on-call editor about a major story."

Be prepared. In the old days, sneaking some airtime in for breaking news was tough enough, but automated systems are even tougher. Unless you plan your cut-in procedures ahead of time, you could end up talking to yourself while the downtown burns.

At KCCK, "someone has got to get into the studio to turn off the automation system," says Green. "That's just the way it works."

KCYN's Mueller, however, has found a way to make automation work for him. "I have my home computer set up with an Electrovoice 635A microphone, CoolEdit, and pcAnywhere software," he says. "This lets me record broadcast-

quality voice reports at home, and then insert these reports via DSL into the station's Scott Studio System automation system for playback."

Tulsa's KRMG is not automated, so cutting into regular programming isn't a problem. Getting severe weather watches to air quickly, however, is. "Storms pop up rapidly in Oklahoma and then quickly die out; warnings usually last only 30 to 45 minutes," explains Durkee. "When it would happen in the middle of a weekend night, it was difficult to get out of bed, get dressed and drive to the station before the warning expired."

Durkee's answer? "Last spring, I started taking home a Vector unit (a device that boosts a regular telephone line to broadcast quality) and can now go live from home with info gathered from the weather service website," he says.

Even the smallest of radio stations can provide effective off-hours news coverage—it is simply a matter of planning for the unexpected beforehand, so that someone is available to cover it when it occurs. And effective off-hours news coverage is a great way for small stations to set themselves apart from the competition, and it helps convince management that the newsroom is worth the cost.—James Careless, a freelance writer in Ottawa, is an experienced radio/TV reporter who has spent many, many off-hours trying to get breaking news to air.



KCCK-FM station manager Dennis Green says all station personnel pitch in when news breaks.