

2019 RTDNA/Hofstra University Newsroom Survey

Local News Numbers

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

Changing Coverage in Local News by Bob Papper

Are local radio and TV newsrooms changing what they cover? Four years ago, I asked if stations were putting more, less or the same emphasis on a series of topic areas. This year, I looked to update those numbers to see what, if anything, had changed.

Most of the questions in the RTDNA/Hofstra University Survey of radio and TV news have historically involved a quantification of the industry. How many stations? How much news? Salary numbers. But I frequently get asked content-related questions ... questions about the changing emphasis or direction in local news. And the survey has increasingly asked questions about content and the direction of the industry. This is one of the first times I'm able to update such a question. And there are key changes from four years ago and more detail on those changes.

TV : Compared to a year ago, are you placing more, less or the same emphasis or resources on:

| | More | Less | Same |
|--------------------------|-------|------|-------|
| Investigative reporting | 54.3% | 5% | 40.8% |
| Live reporting | 47.2 | 2.1 | 50.7 |
| Weather | 47.7 | 1.4 | 50.9 |
| Politics/government | 43.3 | 2.5 | 54.3 |
| Beat reporting generally | 31.8 | 5.4 | 62.8 |
| Consumer issues | 28.5 | 3.6 | 68 |
| Education | 15.1 | 5.4 | 79.6 |
| Sports | 16.7 | 23.1 | 60.1 |
| Traffic | 17.2 | 10.6 | 72.2 |

Investigative reporting remains the number 1 area where stations are putting additional emphasis ... although the percentage is down 6 points from four years ago. But that's a bit deceptive. It's about 60% or more in the top 100 markets ... dropping to the low 50s in markets 101 to 150 and plunging to 34.5% in markets 151+. Some of the issue appears to revolve around staffing, with staff sizes of 31 and larger markedly higher than smaller staffs.

Weather lost 5 points from four years ago, but still moved up a notch into #2. Here, it was hard to find any patterns. The smallest markets were less likely to place more emphasis on weather than any other market size, but otherwise there was no correlation by market. The smallest two

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newsroom groups were less likely to increase emphasis on weather, but emphasis didn't grow with size. Other commercial was lower than the big 4 affiliates. Stations in the West were markedly lower than all other areas, which is a little surprising given that the Camp Fire, for instance, took place on the early side of data gathering.

Live reporting dropped 8 points from four years ago and slid from second to third place. Live reporting would have dropped even more had it not been for strong increases among the smallest markets and the smallest newsrooms.

Politics/government rose almost 7 points from four years ago but remained in fourth place. There was a lot more interest in the midterms this time around than four years ago. The smallest newsrooms, other commercial and non-commercial led the way this time around.

Beat reporting generally dropped three points but stayed in fifth place. Patterns here were erratic, but, curiously, Fox affiliates were way less likely to place greater emphasis on beat reporting than any other group in any other category.

Consumer issues dropped 6 points and stayed in sixth place. Top 50 markets were much more likely to emphasize consumer issues than smaller markets. Emphasis generally decreased with staff size, and stations in the Midwest were markedly lower than all others.

Traffic dropped 4 points but moved up to seventh place as other categories dropped even more. Interestingly, market size made little difference here, but stations with smaller staffs were less likely to emphasize traffic. Stations in the South were much more likely to increase emphasis on traffic and stations in the Midwest were less likely.

Sports dropped 6 points and remained in eighth place. More significantly, however, sports was the area most likely to see a decrease in emphasis – by a more than two to one margin. And those high marks for de-emphasis were pretty much across the board: market size, staff size, affiliation and geography. The one exception was at stations with news staffs of 1 to 10 people.

Education dropped by more than 7 points and fell from seventh to ninth (last) place. There was no particular pattern here, although stations in the Midwest were much less likely to increase emphasis on education, and stations in the Northeast weren't far behind that.

News directors could add other topic areas to the list, but few did so. Of the handful of other topics, only immigration has more than 2 votes.

The takeaway is that, overall, other than more investigative, if stations are experimenting with new approaches in local news, those efforts don't include significant changes in the subject areas that they cover.

I don't get asked about changing emphasis of coverage among radio stations, but since I asked it for TV, I decided to ask and update the same question in radio.

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Radio: 2019 - Compared to a year ago, are you placing more, less or the same emphasis or resources on:

| | More | Less | Same |
|--------------------------|-------|------|-------|
| Politics/government | 32.3% | 3% | 64.7% |
| Beat reporting generally | 21 | 6.5 | 72.5 |
| Education | 19.8 | 2.4 | 77.7 |
| Sports | 18.1 | 8.1 | 73.9 |
| Live reporting | 18 | 6.8 | 75.1 |
| Investigative reporting | 16.6 | 8.6 | 74.9 |
| Weather | 13.5 | 4.9 | 81.6 |
| Consumer issues | 9.5 | 5.2 | 85.3 |
| Traffic | 8.6 | 10.5 | 80.9 |

So what changed in the last four years? In both cases, we were coming off an election year – albeit midterm elections, but that may have helped keep politics and government in first place for greater emphasis. Beat reporting jumped from #5 to #2. Education held steady at #3 – although it slid slightly in percentage compared to four years ago. Sports dropped from #2 to #4 – and had the biggest hit in percentage -- down almost 7 points from last time. Live reporting edged up 1 point and moved up a place to #5. Investigative reporting did much the same at #6. Weather took the second-biggest hit, dropping 5.4 points to seventh place. Consumer issues and traffic came in the last two slots – with consumer dropping from four years ago and traffic edging up.

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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.