

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 Radio News Working at Improving and Getting More Innovative by Bob Papper

The latest RTDNA/Hofstra University Survey found that more than 40% (41.5) of radio news directors and general managers said they had done something in the past year that they believed had significantly improved their journalism. That's up about 8 points from a year ago. Non-commercial stations were twice as likely to say they had done something. The very largest newsrooms and the biggest markets were more likely than the others.

The top category, at 30.5%, involved stations saying they're getting better. Seems a bit nebulous and self-contained, but I'm not sure how else to describe it. The category includes comments like "better internet news gathering" and "better political balance" and "quality interviews, better audio stories."

More concrete is number two: training ... at 20.7%. Sending people to conferences like IRE, PRNDI, Midwest Journalism Conference, Ohio Bar Association Media Law Forum, or bringing in people from NPR, Poynter or local universities and doing training online.

At 18.9%, staffing came next. Mostly that was more staff – although much of that was part time. Still, having more people helps. About a third of this group noted bringing in better, more experienced staff. A couple noted hiring former newspaper people (and there are a lot of them available). One person noted bringing in interns, but that's actually supposed to benefit the interns more than the station.

Next came content issues at 15.2%. Almost half of that group included new efforts or emphasis on investigative or in-depth reporting. Most of the rest involved beat reporting. Some of that was a return to beat coverage, some an expansion of beat coverage and some just moving into specialty coverage for the first time.

9.2% noted some sort of management structure geared toward improvement. New news guidelines were part of this, concrete plans at mentoring reporters, regular airchecks, "always reviewing our products and coverage," "instituting more rigorous journalistic standards."

The rest, 5.5%, were hard to place. Things like, "done more work with it" and "got new glasses ... can read better."

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I also asked (for just the second time) about the most innovative thing the newsroom started doing this year. Just over half (54.7%) said there was something. That's almost exactly the same as a year ago.

Bigger newsrooms, bigger markets and non-commercial stations were the most likely to say they started something new and innovative. Also, stations in the West and Northeast were much higher than stations in the South or Midwest.

Categorizing the innovations listed is harder this year because the 200+ responses covered such a wide range of activity.

Almost 20% noted social media. That included more social media or more attention to social media. Quite a few noted either starting to use or ramping up use of Facebook Live, but Hearken, Twitter and Dropbox were also mentioned (albeit not much in comparison to Facebook). I assume "Instastories" involved Instagram.

- Developed daily e-newsletter to drive digital traffic (it has been quite successful)
- Live local morning show is posted in full on YouTube. And is now in a podcast
- We began working with Hearken to incorporate our audience in our reporting methods. We have also been focused on getting out into the community to better report on our area of the border

Just a hair behind social media came some form of specialty or beat reporting. This included special efforts in covering education, elections, guns, history, immigration, Native Americans, Hispanics and crime. I also included notes about better, more thorough coverage, which seemed to tie in here.

- We hired an innovation reporter, who covers science, medicine, research and business. We also expanded our use of the Hearken tool and began using GroundSource, both of which help us connect with our audience
- A series called, "I Respectfully Disagree," where a group of people debate differences on issues
- A statewide voters guide with personalized ballot capability
- Live community conversations centering on an issue
- Tracking the gender and ethnicity of our news voices -- seeking out diversity for our coverage

Well behind those two areas came better digital. That included things like digital first or doing a better job on the station website. It also included starting to put local news on the station website and one note on just getting started:

- Getting a real website and updating it

Those were the only three areas that hit double digits, but all together they didn't quite hit 50%.

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At 8.2%, news directors and general managers noted podcasts. Starting up, mostly, but expanding as well.

Right behind that is a three-way tie.

In-depth, investigative, data-driven reporting. Sometimes that involved specific issues, sometimes just a new emphasis or even a new team. Sometimes those efforts aired on social media or in podcasts.

- More in-depth, online stories to go with all original local stories that are closer to newspaper length and style and heavily posted on social media to a growing audience
- A year-long reporting project on the after-effects of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico and in Connecticut
- Adding what we call Community Connections programming which are longer conversations with leaders in the community which people can listen to live or listen back via our website
- We launched a Politifact Bureau, fact-checking the statements of politicians and interest groups on a weekly basis

Collaborative efforts in coverage. With a sister radio station, a sister TV station, a group of stations or a university (or two, in one case). Some of those collaborations involved specific projects and sometimes it was more ongoing to enhance regular news coverage.

- We're collaborating with an investigative reporter and two university journalism departments to beef up our reporting chops and the stories we're able to undertake

Technical stuff. That might be new newsroom computers or field gear or new software to integrate (or just allow) various activities. Items dealing with live coverage were common here.

Just behind those three came a two-way tie:

Comments relating to more local news ... or just starting local news (which certainly qualifies as more).

- "Microphone into the streets" -- asking random citizens a question of the week pertaining to local events
- Began hosting public events in an effort to humanize reporters in the face of "fake news" and "enemy of the people" rhetoric

More people. Sometimes those hires were for specific efforts and sometimes it was just to help with the overall product.

Under 5% we have videos and pictures ... followed by miscellaneous comments (some of which were hard to interpret).

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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.