

Business of News

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

Radio Staffing Largely Stable ... As Usual by Bob Papper

The latest RTDNA/Hofstra University Survey shows the typical (median) radio news operation had a full-time news staff of one -- the same as it's been since I started doing these surveys 25 years ago. All told, 80.8% of all multi-station local groups operate with a centralized newsroom. That's down 3 points from last year's 84.1%.

The biggest differences in radio news staffing are between commercial and non-commercial stations. Along with a news director, the average commercial radio station has half a reporter (0.5) while the average non-commercial station has almost 2 (1.9). On the other side, the average commercial station has about a third of a person (0.3) in sports, and the average non-commercial station has zero.

Radio staff size – 2019

	Average full-time	Median full-time	Max full-time	Average part-time	Median part-time	Max part-time	Average total staff	Median total staff	Max total staff
All Radio	3.1	1	50	1.7	1	26	5.1	3	50
Market size:									
Major	9.7	5	50	3	1	26	12.9	9	50
Large	2.9	2	23	1.9	1	13	5.2	4	32
Medium	1.8	1	19	1.4	1	11	3.3	2	25
Small	1.3	1	8	1.2	0	9	2.6	2	10
Commercial	1.7	1	28	1.4	1	18	3.3	2	46
Non-comm	6.4	3	50	2.2	1	26	8.9	5	50

Usually, we go from year to year in radio news staffing with little to no change. Not this year. The median – or typical -- number of radio news people at a station remained at 1. That's the same number it's been for the quarter century that I've been doing this survey. But the average number of radio news people (per station) in this year's survey soared from 2 to 3.1. That's a huge jump. And while we see that jump at its most pronounced at major market stations, every market category went up.

So what happened?

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A couple things. First, the number of really large radio newsrooms participating in the Survey skyrocketed this year. You can see that in the size of the maximum number of staff reported. Every market size went up, with the biggest major market radio newsroom jumping from 30 people a year ago to 50 this time around. The biggest large market radio newsroom was 6 a year ago; this time it's 23. A year ago, the biggest radio newsroom in a medium market was 7. This year's biggest newsroom was 19.

But the difference from a year ago wasn't simply greater participation by bigger newsrooms (usually meaning more all news stations). The real difference involved greater participation by large non-commercial newsrooms – in all market sizes. The average staffing at commercial stations edged up from 1.6 people a year ago to 1.7 this year. But the average at non-commercial stations went from 3.4 last year to 6.4 this time around. The biggest commercial radio newsroom in the Survey was little changed – from 30 a year ago to 28 this year. But the size of the biggest non-commercial radio newsroom soared from 27 last year to 50 this year.

I break down radio numbers in a variety of ways, but the sharpest overall contrast in radio news is between commercial and non-commercial stations. And the differences have become sharper and deeper year after year.

As usual, the larger the market, the larger the news staff was likely to be. The number of stations in a local cluster made no consistent difference in staff size. In fact, stand alone stations had the highest average number of staffers. Stations in the Northeast and West tended to have more average staff ... but the median number of radio news staffers for almost all categories remained at 1.

Changes in radio staff in the last 12 months and planned for the future – 2019

	Increase	Decrease	Same	Not sure
Total news staff the past year (2018)	18.3%	8.4%	72.8%	0.5%
Plan to change amount of staff next year (2019)	13.2	1	74.5	11.3

The percentage of stations increasing staff rose by 6 points in the past year; virtually all of that growth moved over from the “same” category. The percentage decreasing staff remained steady. The bigger the staff, the more likely it was to get even bigger, and market sizes 250,000 and up were almost three times as likely to increase staff as markets smaller than that. But the sharpest difference – as usual – was between commercial and non-commercial stations. Non-commercial stations were almost four times as likely to increase news staff as commercial stations: 37.9% versus 9.9%.

Overall, the staffing plans for the next year are almost identical to the numbers a year ago. Those planned changes have become an increasingly accurate predictor of the coming year. A year ago, non-commercial stations were three times as likely to expect to increase staff as commercial stations. The actual multiplier came out closer to 4. This year, non-commercial stations are more than five times as likely to expect staff growth as commercial stations. As usual, the bigger the staff and the bigger the market, the more likely the station expects news staff to increase.

Major markets are those with 1 million or more potential listeners. Large markets are from 250,000 to 1 million. Medium markets are 50,000 to 250,000. Small markets are fewer than 50,000.

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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.