

2019 RTDNA/Hofstra University Newsroom Survey

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

The Business of News: TV by Bob Papper

The past year was a good one for local TV news. The latest RTDNA/Hofstra University Annual Survey found that local television in the past year again rose past the 60% mark in profitability. Note that radio profitability is handled in a separate release.

TV news profitability ... 2000 - 2019

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Showing profit	58%	44.5%	47.8%	60.8%	59.6%	65.7%	59.3%	61.5%
Breaking even	11	24.2	14.6	6.8	8.2	7.1	6.6	8.5
Showing loss	11	12.1	8.3	4.6	3.7	4.3	4.9	3.8
Don't know	20	19.2	29.2	25.5	25.5	20.1	28	23.9

Profitability in 1996 hit 72%, the highest level I've ever recorded in 25 years of doing the Survey. Missing percentages are non-commercial stations. If you recalculate to eliminate the effect of non-profit newsrooms, the profitability percentage moves up to 62.9%.

TV news profitability ... by size and affiliation – 2019

	Showing profit	Breaking even	Showing loss	Don't know
Market size:				
1-25	48.5%	15.2%	6.1%	27.3%
26-50	82.4	2.9	0	14.7
51-100	66.7	11.1	3.2	15.9
101-150	56.9	8.6	5.2	27.6
151+	54.3	4.3	4.3	34.8
Staff size:				
51+	71.2	10.2	1.7	16.9
31-50	64.7	11.8	1.5	19.1
21-30	54.5	6.8	6.8	31.8
11-20	62.1	6.9	3.4	27.6
1-10	6.7	6.7	20	53.3
Affiliation:				
ABC	73	6.3	3.2	17.5
CBS	63.9	11.5	4.9	19.7
Fox	57.1	0	4.8	38.1
NBC	57.4	8.2	1.6	29.5

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Big four affiliates	64.1	7.8	3.4	23.8
Other commercial	54.5	13.6	4.5	27.3

Elections are good news for local TV, and an historic amount flowed into last year's midterms (depending, of course, on where you're located). Every category in the list went up in profitability except two: markets 1 – 25 and NBC affiliates. The top 25 markets fell because of the effect of smaller newsrooms not affiliated with one of the big four networks. I don't know why NBC affiliates dropped, but all of the variance went into break even or don't know. Missing percentages are non-commercial stations.

Percentage of TV station revenue produced by news – 2019

	Average	Median	Minimum	Maximum	Not sure
All TV news	51.3%	55%	10%	90%	72.6%
Market size:					
1-25	49.7	41	30	90	67.7
26-50	48.2	45	17	80	70
51-100	57.2	55	35	80	69.6
101-150	45.5	53.5	10	70	80.8
151+	51.9	58.6	10	80	72.1
Staff size:					
51+	50.7	48.5	28	80	62.5
31-50	48.1	52	27	80	75.8
21-30	62.5	65	25	75	75
11-20	51	50	30	70	79.2
1-10	12.3	10	10	17	80
Affiliation:					
ABC	54.1	54.6	27	90	74.1
CBS	53.2	55	28	80	71.1
Fox	57.4	70	27	70	72.2
NBC	48.4	51.5	10	80	75.4
Big four affiliates	52.5	55	10	90	74.3
Other commercial	45.7	50	10	80	50

These numbers are very close to a year ago, although average profit is down less than a point (again) but median profit is up 3 – exactly the amount it had been down a year ago. All network affiliates went up except NBC, and that kept the overall big four affiliates even with a year ago. There's a caution in the numbers. As I always point out, a high percentage of news directors say they don't know the answer to this question.

A decidedly so-so year for local TV news budgets. The percentage going up rose by three and a half points while the percentage going down was virtually unchanged. The percentage of budgets going up would have been a bit higher had it not been for the non-commercial stations in the survey. There aren't many of them, but not a single one reported a budget increase in the past year, and a third of them had budget cut-backs.

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TV news budget ... the past year

	Increase	Decrease	Same	Don't know
All TV news	39.3%	13.2%	41.9%	5.6%
Big four affiliates	40.1	13	41.5	5.3
Other commercial	42.9	9.5	42.9	4.8
Market size:				
1-25	41.2	14.7	44.1	0
26-50	26.5	17.6	47.1	8.8
51-100	39.7	11.1	42.9	6.3
101-150	43.9	15.8	35.1	5.3
151+	41.3	8.7	43.5	6.5

This is the fifth year in a row when budget increases fell below the 50% mark. Patterns were hard to come by, but the biggest budget cutbacks came in the very largest and very smallest newsrooms. Both groups were about double the rate as all the others.

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.