

Most of What's New in TV is Online in 2020 by Bob Papper

Once again, the RTDNA/Lawrence Herbert School of Communication - Hofstra University Survey received well over 200 responses to the question, "What's the most important new thing the station is doing online?"

All told, 75.8% of news directors said they were doing something new in digital. That number has been little changed in the last four years.

Content was king this year with 44% of the responses. Most often, that involved the creation of (or more) digital-only content. That included new pages, special enterprise reporting, new franchises, shows, documentaries, long form material, special coverage of hurricanes, weather, flooding, etc. More local news online. Townhall meetings. More livestreams. A lot more livestreams. Special material for OTT (over the top) streaming. Regional and hyperlocal weather. New podcasts and a couple new blogs.

In their own words:

- "Digital Town Hall" meetings. These are in-depth discussions on a community-related topic. They feature experts and everyday people discussing a topic. Viewers are able to engage by asking questions and making comments through the digital platforms.
- Daily, regional, hyper-local weather forecasts
- Digital team started creating special high-interest digital-first "extra" pieces - long form pieces meant mostly for digital.
- Long-form interviews
- Zip code specific alerts in news and weather

Last year's number one answer slipped to number two this year: Strategy came in at 30%. Most often, that involved the hiring or reallocation of staff to digital only. Just "digital first" got quite a few mentions along with notes on a changed strategy including things like more user-generated content and posting quotes for staff. Also mentioned: a new app alert strategy. Mostly, that meant sending more alerts, but I know some stations have intentionally cut back the number of alerts. Also noted: zip code specific alerts. Cross-training the staff also received a few mentions.

In their own words:

- Created digital first mentality with a structured workflow to ensure stories make the website first
- Created the role of a digital-first breaking news anchor, who posts 5-10 new, local, developing stories during key morning hours -- and also produces TV segments for the morning show
- Educated our newsroom as to the importance of digital and engaging them to become a part of it by producing stories on topics of interest and importance to them. This got everyone more active in our digital production and increased the output and variety of content.

- Getting more personally involved. Setting higher goals and benchmarks.
- May seem small but we start our news meetings every day with digital update (what is doing well for us online, etc.) and we put up monitors around our new newsroom showing how many people are on our site at that very moment. Keeps digital front & center of our focus.
- More corporate cooperation between our sister stations, boosting page reads and social media.
- Relentlessly posting stories online and increasing app push alerts
- Reshaping our approach to digital, treating it like an independently trusted news source.
- Setting daily story quotas for staff
- We created a digital team instead of just a web producer
- We have put a strong Digital Specific plan into place with vital resources in respect to Digital producers and Digital reporters.
- We have web buddies so our reporters and photographers can communicate back to the digital team and get stories up in real time.

Social media came in at 16%, although that's really a separate question. Most often that involved doing more Facebook Live, although quite a few stations are trying to re-direct people to the station website for streaming rather than on Facebook or Instagram. TikTok got a mention along with the concept of microtargeting on social media.

Technical issues, like a new CMS (content management system) came in at 6%, creating new or more apps at 3% and other at 1%.

Note that there's a fine line between online and social media ... so be sure to check the social media article.

I didn't ask whether a TV station has a website this year because it's been 9 years since the last time a TV station that runs local news didn't have one.

I've also stopped asking whether a station website had certain online elements like video, stills, calendars, etc. As websites matured, changes had become few and mostly inconsequential. Starting last year, I just asked if stations had "added or eliminated anything meaningful" from the station website. Almost 78% said no. That's up three points from a year ago.

So what did the 22% add or cut?

First, a stipulation. Little of what was new was new to local TV news websites; it was simply new to that station's website.

Overwhelmingly, stations added content. Overwhelmingly as in 63.6% of the answers. Digital-only content or series, including surprise medical bills, hiking, assorted new (but un-named) franchises. "Good news" and "top picks" sections. Special station projects, especially education-related. Obituaries, entertainment, calendars, local history, station archives, flood recovery, road conditions, closures and delays. A new blog. And, of course, just more content.

And that 63.6% doesn't include streaming, which came in at 10.6%. Newscasts, stories, specials and just more.

Tied at 10.6%, staffing – either added (mostly) or re-directed.

At 6.1%, technical issues like a new CMS or special software.

Miscellany filled in the rest at 9.1%. These were one or two mentions of assorted changes. Stopping user comments. Digital newsletters. One station cut a Spanish section because it lost the newsroom staffer who could translate the material. Another station added a Spanish section.

Interestingly, the biggest markets and stations in the West were more likely to add or cut material than others. Otherwise, market size, staff size and geography made no difference.

Percentage of web content that's only on the web - 2020

All TV	24.9%
Markets 1-25	28.8
Markets 26-50	26
Markets 51-100	23.7
Markets 101-150	27.5
Markets 151+	19.9
Staff size	
51+	29.1
31 - 50	27.3
21 - 30	21.4
11 - 20	22.8
1 - 10	17.8

Overall, web content that's only on the web remained exactly the same as a year ago. Exactly. Almost all subgroups held steady as well.

Percentage of web content that's user-generated - 2020

All TV	8%
Markets 1-25	9.5
Markets 26-50	8.5
Markets 51-100	8.5
Markets 101-150	7
Markets 151+	7.3
Staff size	
51+	10.9
31 - 50	9
21 - 30	7.6
11 - 20	4.5
1 - 10	2.5

User-generated content on the web dropped by three and a half points from last year. Every market and staff size went down.

Web traffic

TV station website traffic during the past 30 days - 2020

	Page Views (in thousands)	Unique Visitors (in thousands)
All TV	4,705	1,058
Market Size		
1-25	8,540	2,409
26-50	7,096	1,536
51-100	4,936	999
101-150	4,070	579
151+	1,676	551

Both page views and unique visitors are down a bit from last year – especially from top 25 markets. Fox affiliates and non-commercial stations lagged all others. More and more news directors know the answers to these questions. Two years ago, nearly half the news directors (49%) said they didn't know. Last year, 42% said they didn't know. This time around, the number dropped to 31%.

Web staffing numbers and newsroom participation in working on the web are included in the staffing article. Web profitability and paywalls are discussed in the business of news articles.

Podcasts

Podcasts are getting more and more attention in media trade journals, but they're not getting nearly as much attention at TV stations. The median (typical) number of podcasts at a TV newsroom is zero, and the average is less than half.

How many different podcasts do you run per week?

	Average Number	Median Number
All TV	0.4	0
Market Size		
1-25	0.4	0
26-50	1	0
51-100	0.6	0
101-150	0.1	0
151+	0.1	0
Staff Size		
51+	0.8	0
31-50	0.5	0
21-30	0.1	0
11-20	<0.1	0
1-10	0.3	0

Overwhelmingly – at 82.7% -- stations report that they're running the same number of podcasts this year compared to last year. Mostly, of course, that's zero. 15.2% say they're running more, and 2.2% say fewer. The bigger the staff, the more likely the answer is more.

About the Survey

The RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey, funded in part by the Lawrence Herbert School of Communication at Hofstra University, was conducted in the fourth quarter of 2019 among all 1,702 operating, non-satellite television stations and a random sample of 3,427 radio stations. Valid responses came from 1,313 television stations (77.1%) and 673 radio news directors and general managers representing 1,996 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.

About Bob Papper

Bob Papper is Adjunct Professor of Broadcast and Digital Journalism at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University and has worked extensively in radio and TV news.