

Please note the new partnership on this research as it becomes the RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey. I am privileged to have joined the outstanding faculty at Syracuse. That's the name you'll see on the research from here on ... and that's what you'll see on the painfully long survey questionnaire later this fall.

Bob Papper

## **More Innovation and Better Journalism in Local TV News by Bob Papper**

The latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey found more detailed answers on newsroom innovation than ever before ... and two-thirds (67.9%) of local TV news directors say they did something in the past year that had significantly improved their journalism.

### **News innovation**

This is just the third year that I asked, "What's the most innovative thing your newsroom started doing this year?"

Once again, there were more than 200 answers to the question, and I broke down the answers into three broad (and sometimes overlapping) areas:

Nearly half of the responses involved digital. Dominating the area: streaming and OTT (over the top as opposed to via cable or satellite). Facebook Live moved from a big player in past years to barely mentioned this time around. In the past, there have been plenty of comments about various digital platforms. Not this time. Digital-first, digital-only and reorganizing for digital and producing more digital content generally came up time and again. Augmented reality, too.

In their own words:

- "Digital first" - that is reallocation of human resources from broadcast to digital exclusive
- Development of digital content that is unique and separate from broadcast, developing that kind of content and an increase in amount
- Digital First initiative to make digital our biggest development area
- Digital only stories including long form pieces, launched on digital first.
- Facebook Live newscasts
- Incorporated augmented reality into our news set.
- OTT way more aggressive

- Poured gas on our multi-platform storytelling evolution, bringing more context to the audience in a faster way, and bringing more depth to stories on platforms like our streaming apps
- We're turning our livestream into a "digital channel"

Management issues came up a lot ... again. At least one station adopted the challenges of going from a 5-day, 8-hours a day schedule to 4 days for 10 hours a day. I'd like to hear more detail on how that's working out. Lots of news directors noted reorganizing staff – which mostly involved greater emphasis on digital. Cross-training, adding staff, measuring audience, targeting specific audiences, positive news.

In their own words:

- A bigger emphasis on digital storytelling.
- Adjusting to 4, 10-hour shifts
- Building a team of digital exclusive journalists, completely independent of the broadcast team.
- Complete reorg of staff to address changing consumption habits
- Created a digital desk for quick-turn digital stories
- Created a News Hub for the studio
- Dedicating a minimum of 20% of our staff to digital content generation.
- Doing our OWN version of Facebook live shots, and only using social media to promote them, so we get the revenue from them
- Experimenting with how news content is created - including hiring a FT animator and more aggressively pushing digital content creation
- Hired a reporter from the failed local newspaper to generate content for our digital platform
- Hired retired FBI agent to front safety and security stories.
- Measuring drops in viewership minute-to-minute with a review of the content.
- New e-Gaming initiative
- This year we began the process of completely restructuring how our newsroom is organized, to better support and facilitate high quality local journalism.
- Revamp the assignment desk into the content desk and changing the way information flows from it.
- Utilize technology which allowed our reporters and producers to go live from their phones without the use of a social platform
- We changed the culture/mindset and became a true "one content team" newsroom. Everyone contributes to all screens and platforms throughout the day.
- We have a breaking news digital reporter

Content, of course. Adding newscasts, adding a lifestyle show, special news projects, special things related to sports, weather and traffic.

### In their own words:

- Advocacy reporting
- Double live-shots, live on-air and on social media at the same time
- Exclusive content for our OTT platform
- investigative podcasts associated with investigative series
- Inviting newsmakers over to do Facebook Live shows taking viewer questions live
- Long format story telling over 7 minutes on our 11 PM newscast, Launched a 1 hr political show on Sundays
- Producing original non-news content and long-form news content for our livestreaming channel (OTT)
- Rebuilding newscasts, creating alternate content for different platforms, 360 content delivery plans
- Social media newscast and podcast
- We placed a beehive in our "back yard" and have a webcam on it. It's an innovative way to draw attention to the diminishing bee population and to drive social media.
- Weather puppets on YouTube

Part of what's different this year involves the answers to the question: Has that (most innovative thing) been successful? There were quite a few comments on how some of these things are working ... or not.

### In their own words:

- "Digital first" - that is reallocation of human resources from broadcast to digital exclusive. Successful? Probably, as long as diminished broadcast resources don't matter. Still early
- A bigger emphasis on digital storytelling. Successful? Not entirely
- Adjusting to 4, 10-hour shifts. Successful? YES
- Augmented Reality. Successful? Yes
- Becoming a digital first newsroom. Successful? Yes
- Building a team of digital exclusive journalists, completely independent of the broadcast team. Successful? Our digital numbers (specifically the monetized website) have increased dramatically.
- Created a digital desk for quick-turn digital stories. Successful? Very successful
- Dedicating a minimum of 20% of our staff to digital content generation. Successful? Phenomenally successful!
- Development of digital content that is unique and separate from broadcast, developing the kind of content and increase in amount. Successful? Yes
- Digital First initiative to make digital our biggest development area. Successful? Too soon to tell, but the numbers have more than doubled in the past year for digital
- Digital transformation. Successful? still in progress

- Exclusive content for our OTT platform. Successful? Still to be determined
- Experimenting with how news content is created - including hiring a FT animator and more aggressively pushing digital content creation. Successful? Too early to know
- Hired a reporter from the failed local newspaper to generate content for our digital platform. Successful? Extremely. 6 or more pieces daily, including video many times. Translates into readers, maps, VOs and VOSOTs for TV as well.
- Incorporated augmented reality into our news set. Successful? Yes, but thinking in new terms has been difficult for journalists.
- Inviting newsmakers over to do Facebook Live shows taking viewer questions live. Successful? Absolutely
- Launching a podcast. Successful? Jury is still out. Content is great but no revenue stream yet
- More digital first content. Focus on social media live content. Successful? Somewhat. But technological limitations with current web provider have slowed the process of trying new things.
- More digital first storytelling. Successful? Yes, we're now the market leader on social media platforms
- OTT only content. Successful? Not financially, but we're playing in what will likely be a growing space.
- Our own streaming-on-demand service (newscasts and individual stories); new e-Gaming initiative. Successful? digital revenue and video viewership has increased dramatically/exponentially; too soon to tell for e-Gaming
- Using drones to shoot daily stories - even if not a breaking story. Successful? Wildly
- Utilize technology which allowed our reporters and producers to go live from their phones without the use of a social platform. Successful? Incredibly successful
- We have a breaking news digital reporter. Successful? It has been very successful. With such a small staff, this prevents us from moving what few photogs we have or reporters off their stories for something that could be a wild goose chase. Our digital numbers have increased because of live hits via FB and our website; it also often provides content for the newscast. This reporter will also turn web only stories.

## Improving TV journalism

The two-thirds of TV news directors who said they were doing something to improve the station's journalism represents a 5-point increase over a year ago. Markets 51 to 100, at 83%, and stations in the West, at 79%, led the way. Otherwise, market size, staff size, and network affiliation made little difference.

More than 200 news directors answered this question with at least some details on what they were doing. The answers this year are different than last year. Among other things, they tended to be more specific.

The answers broke down into three broad areas – each coming in at around a third of the total.

Many of the responses included the following key words: accountability, advocacy, enterprise and investigative. In fact, almost half of all the responses included one or more of those words.

A third of the responses specifically noted doing more investigative work, creating an investigative team, more enterprise stories, more in-depth, creating news specials.

In their own words:

- "Digging Deeper" franchise
- Changed format of our late newscast to do more in-depth reporting
- Changed our workflow -- producing much more long-form OTT content
- Created an investigative unit, focused more on relevant enterprise reporting and less on commodity news
- Improved our enterprise unit to tell unique stories
- More in-depth interviews, longer stories, focused more on local/state politics
- We hold stories more often - give reporters more time to get "all" sides

There were the strategy/management responses. This is the broadest category, including everything from a change in philosophy, adding resources, adding staff, more focus on digital, creating reporting beats, new technology, creating podcasts, hiring better staff.

In their own words:

- A change in news philosophy. In many ways, a return to the basics...just the facts, ma'am. The mission/objective had become lost.
- Acquired by a larger company that has improved resources
- Actively looking for new audiences underserved on digital platforms with more focus on investigative
- Added experienced digital journalists who had worked at newspapers
- Assigning beats
- Advocacy, writing conversationally, pitching stories, telling people stories, holding our leaders accountable, increased digital presence and content
- Back to basics
- Changed branding to accountability style reporting
- Hired several former newspaper staffers with excellent sources, experience, FOIA, data, digital, social media, and writing skills.
- Podcasting. It allows us to air full interviews to counterbalance against lack of transparency. Podcasting has added depth, context and transparency to our journalism processes.

The third group involved training and reviews. Training included sending people to Carole Kneeland training, Poynter, IRE (the most-often named), RTDNA, Magid, NABJ as well as internal reviews that were mostly one-on-one sessions with staff – but sometimes in groups as well.

In their own words:

- Bi-weekly lunch and learn to review product; IRE

- Bigger ethical discussions in the newsroom
- More storyteller workshops for reporters, photographers, digital journalists, producer workshops, data mining workshops
- Started doing lunch and learns with the staff.
- We teach continuing education courses to our staff about media ethics and laws, plus writing workshops

### **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.