

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

Local Radio News Working at Innovation and Improvement by Bob Papper

The latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey found that nearly half (49%) of radio news directors and general managers reported that they were doing something innovative in radio news, and nearly 40% (37.3%) said they had done something in the past year that they believed had significantly improved their journalism.

News innovation

That 49% on innovation is down about 5 points from a year ago.

Non-commercial stations were almost twice as likely to say they did something innovative compared to commercial stations. The bigger the news staff and the bigger the market, the more likely to have done something. Ownership, number of stations in the local cluster and geography made no difference.

The nearly 200 responses this year really fell into three broad categories.

The overwhelming #1, at 48%, was improved, better and more online. That's way up from last year. Video came up frequently. So did podcasts, social media posting, apps and smart speakers.

In their own words:

- A concerted effort to distribute news via our mobile app, resulting in significant audience growth.
- Added a daily morning news podcast
- Adding descriptions of each news story to the data in our streaming app.
- Adding more audio content from programs on our stations to our website through Futuri platform
- Adding video to our website and increasing podcasts
- Cameras in studio
- Every on-air personality blogs at least 2 times a day, whether news or entertainment content

- Weekly podcast, "The Staff Meeting," about stories we're working on.
- Launch web/social media portal linking all three stations and our newsroom
- Produced an eight-month podcast looking at the Iowa caucuses. Created a small production unit to do this (in addition to usual work), team worked with development and marketing for fundraising and promotion around the podcast
- Producing a daily, "all-local" short newscast that can stream through Alexa, online and our smartphone app.
- Quick new stories on Instagram.
- Texting the news to subscribing listeners
- We started a daily news brief that is emailed to our database each day. That includes the top 5 LOCAL stories and the local weather forecast
- We started a digital-only magazine about adapting to climate change.

Strategic efforts came in at 27%. That included new and more staff, partnering with others. Technical changes and even outsourcing news production.

In their own words:

- Apply to be a Report for America newsroom
- Airing Local Pledge of Allegiance by elementary schools during the morning show and posting about it on social media with pictures
- Collaborations with outside partners, community engagement events, more video
- Community outreach "listening tours" where the newsroom goes out into underserved community and talks with them
- Increased collaboration with a broader network of community partners -- including the newly re-invigorated Oral History Department of our largest local university
- Partnering with other content creators so we have more content at a lower cost
- Started a monthly publication
- Using more analytics/data to better understand audience.
- Utilizing resources of news people/newsrooms in other markets owned by our company to file reports for us, just as we now do them for the other markets.
- We have made an effort to infuse our newscasts with sound effects and a more effervescent approach to the delivery.
- We have made the decision to stop airing negative and controversial news. The only news on our station will come from service clubs, churches, and other groups that make our communities stronger ... not news that incites hate
- We've built and launched The Texas Newsroom, a first of its kind collaboration between the four biggest public radio stations in Texas. We've also looped most of the small public radio news stations in the state and are building the prototype regional news hub for NPR's Collaborative Journalism Network.

25% dealt with content. Special series, better local news, more local news, more actualities.

In their own words:

- After years of being tied to recorded or network content, we launched a live talk show, and it has been well received.
- Constant live coverage with unlimited call-ins during last year's devastating fire
- News nuggets - sound bites with bullet points of stories until full ones can be produced
- News once a week with the High School Marketing Class to cover the local schools
- Taking political candidates to play mini-golf, rather than using a staid debate format
- We are focusing more stories on people affected by news as opposed to "experts," whether that is politicians, professors, etc.

Improving radio journalism

The 37.3% who said they had done something in the past year to improve their journalism represents a 4-point drop from a year ago. Non-commercial stations were twice as likely to say they had done something. That's been true the last couple years as well. The very largest newsrooms and the biggest markets were more likely than the others to have done something. As usual.

The nearly 150 answers broke down into five areas ... with the most extensive responses I've ever received on this question.

The top category, at 29%, involved more – but mostly better -- news. That's almost exactly the same as a year ago. The biggest difference involved the detail and volume in the answers.

In their own words:

- Added more stories with local sound
- Approaching organizations that never get a minute of air to talk about the good they are doing has made for a more positive environment in our office. Not one person in any of the groups or any of the residents of the county have thought this vision was a bad idea.
- Attended more meetings and events. Responded to fires and accidents.
- Beat reporting allowed journalists in the newsroom to focus more on basic storytelling. We got away from the churn of the day, cutting down on spot news and focusing more on important issues in the community. Such content can also be tailored to different media so, for example, an online story can link to other resources, include longer or raw audio, etc.
- Big emphasis on LOCAL, LOCAL, LOCAL
- Getting different voices from the community on the air
- More in-depth and on-location reporting

- More soundbites. More events like the county fairs.
- Put more focus on covering communities/populations we hadn't before
- Started prioritizing investigative work, new CEO has pushed us to own certain topics with hourlong specials

At 25%, next came training and staff reviews. Training came in second last year as well, but it's up 4 points this time around. Conferences mentioned: RTDNA, PRNDI, Third Coast, American Press Institute Deep Listening Project, NPR, Columbia, Poynter, bringing in professionals in residence, webinars and just in-house training.

In their own words:

- Additional training at conferences, digital training, new digital tools
- Brought in a Professional-in-Residence to work with our news staff.
- I have worked to get out and meet community members and leaders. I also continue to augment my own skill set by reading about our profession as broadcasters, attended radio conferences, and continue to seek out social media groups or conversations relevant to my profession.
- Participated in citizens academy to learn more about my community government
- ND started biweekly, one-on-one meetings with all reporters, providing better and more focused feedback year-round to help make their reporting better.
- Took courses in college.
- We have added two stringers, one to cover our secondary market area and the other focused on state government coverage; Have instituted "quick-hit" informal seminars with individual news staffers on such things as improving technical quality of news production, better anchoring techniques, etc.

Hiring again came in third at 18% -- almost exactly the same as a year ago. Last year, the focus was on more staff. This time, it was evenly split between more staff and better staff. More experienced, beat reporters, more diverse staff and specialty training.

In their own words:

- Added a highly experienced news person with better connections and news sense
- Added a little diversity in the newsroom
- Hired a former reporter from the local newspaper as our Digital Managing Editor.
- More people and younger -- more energy
- Replaced the slackers

Strategy and management issues came in next at 15%. That's up 6 points and one position from a year ago.

In their own words:

- Divided our news department into a newscast unit and a special projects unit.
- Started a news strategic planning process
- Narrowed our focus on what we cover.
- News director has gone through a public media leadership program -- resulting in evaluation of station content, new production expectations, creation of a breaking news plan, and a social media policy for staff.
- Started working with local papers and focusing on local everything
- Wrote a strategic plan to lay out our goals for diversity and stories and hold ourselves accountable to that by tracking it

At 13% came online and social media improvements. That's new in this area.

In their own words:

- Integrating social media and website with on-air reporting of news
- More focus on digital storytelling.
- We doubled the size of our digital team from 2 people to 4 people. We now daily produce digital only journalism content that does not air on broadcasts

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.