

The Profound Effects of Coronavirus on TV and Radio Newsrooms

by Bob Papper

Only 6.2% of TV news directors in the latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey reported that the coronavirus has had no meaningful effect on their newsroom. At the top of the list, 83.8% report needing to have at least some staff working remotely. 30.7% report budget cutbacks. Nearly as many, at 27.4%, report having fewer newsroom staffers. Ten percent say they've had mandatory furloughs, and 13.3% said there were other changes.

How is the coronavirus affecting your TV newsroom today?

	Still have some staff mostly remote	Budget cutbacks	Fewer newsroom staffers	Mandatory furloughs	Other	No meaningful changes
All Television	83.8%	30.7%	27.4%	10%	13.3%	6.2%
Network Affiliates	85.2	30	25.7	6.7	14.3	4.3
Other commercial	73.1	34.6	46.2	34.6	7.7	19.2
Market size:						
DMA 1-25	91.7	44.4	44.4	27.8	11.1	5.6
DMA 26-50	94.3	42.9	40	14.3	2.9	2.9
DMA 51-100	86.7	30.7	29.3	9.3	18.7	1.3
DMA 101-150	77.2	26.3	17.5	3.5	10.5	12.3
DMA 151+	71.1	13.2	10.5	0	18.4	10.5
Staff size:						
Staff 51+	92.7	34.5	36.4	20	10.9	3.6
Staff 31-50	88.5	29.5	24.4	5.1	14.1	2.6
Staff 21-30	83.3	27.8	19.4	0	11.1	8.3
Staff 11-20	66.7	25.9	33.3	14.8	18.5	11.1
Staff 1-10	50	14.3	0	14.3	21.4	28.6

It's clear in the above chart that the newsroom pain caused by the coronavirus has not been evenly spread around. "Other commercial" stations have been hit much harder than the big four traditional affiliates in terms of fewer newsroom staffers and mandatory furloughs. That also came through in staffing reports in the article on staff size.

Notice that, with few exceptions, the smaller the market size and the smaller the news staff, the lower the percentage of newsroom staffers affected by working remotely. The same is true for mandatory furloughs as you move down by market size but not by staff size.

The smaller the market and, generally, the smaller the staff, the more likely for the newsroom to experience no meaningful changes.

Interestingly, geography, which usually doesn't come into play, made a difference with a number of variables. Stations in the Northeast were noticeably more likely to have fewer newsroom

staffers and mandatory furloughs. Stations in the Midwest were the least likely to have had furloughs and a little less likely than others to still have some staff working remotely.

For whatever reason, Fox affiliates were hit harder than others, and stations in the Midwest were less affected than others.

Other is far more variable. Some noted more detail on remote working, the use of Zoom for interviews, changes during the course of the year, and a number noted the stress that the whole thing has put on the everyone in the newsroom.

In their own words:

- Editorial meetings are done via Teams. We are much more flexible and open to Zoom or Teams interviews and relying on user-generated content for b-roll, in some instances
- Half of staff was working remotely March-April. All are now back in the building
- Mentally and psychologically draining on staff. Lost a few producers and one manager who wanted to 'try something else' and get away from the constant reporting of COVID-19
- Pay freezes for everyone
- Short-staffed throughout the year due to positive testing and close contact resulting in quarantines
- Stress and burnout are at an all-time high. Anxiety is high
- We're limiting OT hours in the newsroom; a small price to pay for not having to cut staff or furlough

70% of TV news directors think that the station will have at least some long-term changes because of the coronavirus. Generally, the bigger the market and the bigger the newsroom, the more likely to expect long-term changes. News directors in the Midwest and South are noticeably less likely to expect long-term changes.

More than half of the answers involved having more staff working remotely on a long-term basis. Not everyone, of course, but news directors talked about having crews working from home and straight out to the field.

Well behind remote work comes continuing to gather news on a virtual basis – the use of Zoom to conduct interviews.

After that comes safety issues. That includes newsroom layouts that separated people more ... more cleaning of equipment ... more Zoom interviews to keep a safe distance.

After that, some news directors expect to maintain a smaller staff, and a number of news directors note continued virtual (Zoom, mostly) newsroom meetings.

In their own words:

- Anticipate more work from home from certain staff now that we know we can pull it off (snow coverage, etc)
- Continued remote/virtual newsgathering
- Don't know if we will ever all be in a newsroom again

- I anticipate the workflow will change substantially moving forward, now that we've proved having some work remotely works. Also, our methods of gathering will change now that we know viewers accept interviews that have been done via zoom. I do not anticipate we will continue having anchors work from home once the danger of the pandemic has passed
- I expect there to be some number of people who work from home. Not everyone but some positions. I also suspect that, at many stations, photographers, reporters and MMJs will likely not come to the station as "home base" every single day. Dispatching them from home has been quite successful
- I expect we'll continue to offer work from home alternatives for staff. We'll continue to launch our field crews from home, rather than have them start their days in the newsroom. Editorial meetings will remain virtual
- I really believe that many of our work at home options, the adaptability we've had in the newsroom and in the field, and shifting how we gather content and work together will outlive the pandemic. We are more efficient and creative. For example, we are saving time by not being on the road gathering xyz across the area. We are more strategic about what we cover personally and what we ask users to send us. I think our viewers are more open to sending us user-generated content, and they know how to! And, hopefully, NO MORE PHONERS! Everyone knows how to Zoom now, and we are adept at taking it live to air if needed
- Interviews will remain virtual. Newsroom will be permanently blocked off so staff isn't next to each other, any cold/flu symptoms will be considered a potential COVID case
- Many more Zoom, rather than live meetings; Many more people working from home; Much more use of personal equipment (e.g. cell phones, laptop editing)
- Meetings will continue to be conducted by Zoom
- Mobile newsroom
- More remote workflows. No in-person job candidates, even after COVID
- The budget will be tighter for the next two years, at least. On the positive side, with our remote tools, we have a great reach and flexibility to gather and produce our broadcast and digital products. I think remote work spaces and telecommuting, will not go away entirely
- We are able to cover a larger area of the DMA through virtual interviews. They have become a needed and necessary resource for us

Coronavirus has killed some local radio news

The latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey found that, overall, 8% of radio stations reported that the coronavirus and the economic disruption that it caused led to cancelling local news.

The carnage hit across all kinds and sizes of radio stations ... in all market sizes, in all regions. Non-commercial stations were hit a little harder than commercial ones; major markets harder than other sizes; stations in the Northeast harder than other regions.

Has the coronavirus/economic disruption led to cancelling local news?

	Yes	No
Overall Radio	8%	92%
Market Size:		
Major	10.7	89.3
Large	7.7	92.3
Medium	7.6	92.4
Small	7.1	92.9

Commercial	7.5	92.5
Non-Commercial	9.5	90.5

In contrast, a surprisingly high 41.5% of radio newsrooms report that the coronavirus has had no meaningful effect on their newsroom. That compares to just 6.2% of all TV newsrooms. At the top of the list, 39.1% report having at least some staff working remotely; 22.4% report budget cutbacks; 8.7% report having fewer newsroom staffers; 8.3% say they've had mandatory furloughs; and 12.2% said there were other changes.

How is the coronavirus affecting your radio newsroom today?

	Still have some staff mostly remote	Budget cutbacks	Fewer newsroom staffers	Mandatory furloughs	Considering eliminating news dept	Other	No meaningful changes
All Radio	39.1%	22.4%	8.7%	8.3%	1.7%	12.2%	41.5%
Market size:							
Major	72.4	35.5	14.5	10.5	1.3	14.5	11.8
Large	51	19.8	9.4	10.4	1	8.3	35.4
Medium	30.2	21	8	9.3	0.6	14.8	45.7
Small	21.4	18.3	5.6	4	4	10.3	58.7
Commercial	27.2	21.3	7.8	9.3	1.8	10.5	50.6
Non-Commercial	70.6	25.4	11.1	5.6	1.6	16.7	17.5

Note that another 1.7% of radio stations are still considering eliminating local news. Evenly split between commercial and non-commercial stations, they're most likely to be AM/FM combos in small markets in the Northeast or Midwest.

It's clear in the above chart that the newsroom pain caused by the coronavirus has not been evenly spread around. Major market stations have clearly been most-affected. That group leads in almost all categories. The larger the news staff, the more likely the station has been affected by – and continues to be affected by – COVID.

In their own words:

- Advertisers want only happy news - they boycott COVID-19 numbers coverage
- All staff working remotely
- Doubled local news content
- Holding our own
- Imminent pay reduction
- Masked and Lysoled
- Staggered shifts to keep employees separate
- We have incorporated layoffs and pay cuts, but our third party news service still remains intact

- Will be mostly eliminating local news

While 70% of TV news directors thought that the station will have at least some long-term changes because of coronavirus, the opposite is true for radio news directors and general managers, where 70.6% think there will be no meaningful long-term changes.

Generally, the bigger the market and the bigger the newsroom, the more likely to expect long-term changes.

What long term effects?

More than anything, at 59%, comes working remotely. Many expect that to continue beyond the crisis because station personnel showed that they could make it work.

- Working remotely, which allows freelance reporters to produce work for us because previously space in the office was an issue. Now, people are set up to work from home

At 16%, many expect cutbacks. More cutbacks, cutbacks that have already been imposed to continue. Cutbacks that haven't happened yet but surely will.

Nine percent, each, include a continuation of safety protocols, in terms of cleaning and distancing, ... tied with news coverage issues. Mostly that involves local news coverage cutbacks, but sometimes it was more emphasis on local news.

- Certain safety/health precautions will likely remain in place, and employees will be allowed to work remotely as long as there is a real threat of infection
- Combine news reporting efforts with sister station

At 7%, a continuation of new technology in interviewing and meetings – Zoom and other software in place of in-person meetings or interviews.

- Conduct more interviews on Zoom versus in-person or over-the-telephone
- Fewer group meetings; more Zoom meetings; better strategy for breaking news with remote broadcasting now an option
- I'll attend fewer meetings in person
- Sticking with phone interviews for our live programming and streaming some meetings rather than covering them in person

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About the Survey

The RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey was conducted in the fourth quarter of 2020 among all 1,762 operating, non-satellite television stations and a random sample of 3,379 radio stations. Valid responses came from as many as 1,358 television stations (77.1%) and 765 radio news directors and general managers representing 2,310 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.