

## Surprise: Local TV News Employment Hits All-Time High by Bob Papper

Until March 2021, total local TV news employment was at an all-time high. In early March, Sinclair announced a 5% cut in workforce – resulting in about 460 people losing their jobs. Not all are in news, but enough news people have been let go to force an adjustment in the overall news employment numbers.

Sinclair was responding to a 7% revenue drop in the fourth quarter of 2020 versus 2019. Compare that to revenue gains of 25% to 43% reported by Nexstar, Scripps, Tegna, Gray and Graham for the same period. Revenue from Sinclair stations actually rose, but revenue from the recently-purchased regional sports networks tanked, and local news people (and others) are paying the price.

Until then, and contrary to all expectations, the latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey showed total local TV news employment up to a new, all-time record. After losing 300 jobs in 2019, local TV news added 500 jobs in 2020. That put total local full time TV news employment up 1.8% at 28,000, eclipsing the previous high of 27,900 set in 2009.

The growth in total newsroom employment was at least partially fueled by a growth in TV newsrooms. While the long-term trend has been consolidation and a shrinking of separate TV newsrooms, the latest count put the total at 710 – up from last year’s 705. In fairness, a few of those newsrooms actually came on line a year ago, and it just took me a while to locate them.

### TV staff size – 2021

	Average full-time	Median full-time	Max full-time	Average part-time	Median part-time	Max part-time	Average total staff	Median total staff	Max total staff
All TV	42.9	38	156	2.9	1	30	45.5	40	163
Big four affiliates	45	40	156	2.8	1	30	47.5	41	163
Other commercial	31.9	30	71	3.3	1	27	35.2	31	98
Non-commercial	12.8	8	38	4.6	4	13	17.4	14	51
Market size:									
1 - 25	70.2	69	150	5.5	2	30	74.8	76	163
26 - 50	60.7	63	113	4	2	14	65	70.5	115
51 - 100	46.8	45	156	2.2	1	13	48.9	47	156
101 - 150	30.1	30	60	2.7	1	15	32.7	34	60
151+	21.2	22	47	1.7	0	29	22.9	22	64

Although more stations cut staff than added staff, the overall increases are consistent across almost all demographics. Every market size except 26 to 50 went up. Stations in every region of the country went up. While specific network affiliate groups varied, overall, the big four net affiliates were up markedly. That more than made up for the drop in employment at stations not affiliated with ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC.

### TV staff size changes ... the past year (2020)

	Increase	Decrease	Same	Don't Know
All TV news	22.9%	30.2%	46.5%	0.4%
Big four affiliates	21.9	29	48.7	0.4
Other commercial	27.6	44.8	27.6	0

On a station by station basis, the percentage of stations that cut staff hit nearly a third of all stations: 30.2%. That's the highest level of staff cuts that I can remember seeing in my 27 years of doing the Survey. Still, more than one in five stations managed to increase staff. And the number of stations adding local news more than offset the cuts.

The bigger the market, the more likely that the station cut staff. But the results were not consistent by staff size. Stations not affiliated with one of the big four networks were much more likely to cut staff; stations in the Northeast were far more likely to cut staff than stations elsewhere.

### TV planned staff changes ... the next year (2021)

	Increase	Decrease	Same	Not sure
All TV news	26.1%	3.8%	59.4%	10.7%
Big four affiliates	24.2	3.5	62.1	10.1
Other commercial	41.4	6.9	41.4	10.3

Clearly, TV news directors who got hit with layoffs or furloughs in 2020 are expecting better in 2021. The percentage expecting to increase is slightly below average, but all of that difference went into the "not sure" category.

Interestingly, there's almost no difference in the view of news directors in markets 1 through 150. The smallest markets are markedly less likely to expect to increase staff.

Other commercial stations, which took the biggest hit in 2020, are the most likely to expect to increase staff in 2021. Stations in the Northeast were the most pessimistic of the group.

### TV digital staffing up

The latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey found that, overall, full time TV digital news staffing rose half a person from a year ago. That's the second year in a row for that size increase. After slipping a bit last year, top 25 markets led the increase, but markets 51 to 100 and 101 to 150 also went up, and the other market sizes only slipped slightly. Part time was almost identical to a year ago.

### How many people work on the digital side? 2021

	Full-time	Part-time	Total
<b>All TV</b>	3.7	1.1	4.4
Markets 1-25	5.2	1.8	8.1
Markets 26-50	5.3	0.7	5.9
Markets 51-100	4.1	1.1	4.4
Markets 101-150	2.7	1.3	3.3
Markets 151+	1.9	0.7	2.7

In TV, same station comparison puts digital staffing up a little less than half a person, but every market size and staff size went up. Generally, the bigger the market and the bigger the overall staff, the more digital news staff. There are no consistent differences by network affiliation or geography.

**Do other staffers help on the web? 2021**

<b>All TV</b>	72.3%
Markets 1-25	57.5
Markets 26-50	70
Markets 51-100	70.5
Markets 101-150	75.5
Markets 151+	84.1

TV news staff participation in the web slid by nearly 8 points, and that drop was seen pretty much across the board, suggesting that stations may be moving a bit more toward specialization of job tasks. I'll keep an eye out for that.

**What does the staffing look like for an “average” TV station?**

In real life -- or even in a TV newsroom -- it's not easy to divide people into fractions. Thankfully, it's no problem on paper. This is what the latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey says the “average” local TV news department of 42.9 people looks like:

News Director	1
Assistant News Director	0.6
Managing Editor	0.3
Executive Producer	1.3
News Anchor	5.5
Weathercaster	3.4
Sports Anchor	1.5
News Reporter	3
MMJ	5
Sports Reporter	0.6
Assignment Editor	1.3
News Producer	5.9
News Writer	0.3
News Assistant/AP	0.3
Photographer	6.1
Video Editor	2.1
Graphics Specialist	0.3
Digital Content Manager	0.8
Social Media Producer/Editor	0.6
Web/Mobile Writer/Producer	1.5
Other	1.5

Nearly a third of the list remained unchanged from last year: news director, assistant news director, managing editor, sports anchor, news reporter and graphics.

The big winners were photographer, up 0.6; other, up 0.4; news producer, video editor and social media producer/editor, all up 0.3; news anchor and weathercaster were each up 0.2; and edging up 0.1 were executive producer, sports reporter, assignment editor, news writer, news assistant, digital content manager and web writer/producer.

The only position that went down was MMJ, which dropped by 0.2

“Other” positions are mostly technical (e.g. director, technical director) and then various one-off positions.

### MMJ use mostly stable

They’re called one-man-bands, multimedia (MMJ), backpack journalists and other names, and I’ve tracked their growth through the RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey for a dozen years. After years of steady increases in the use of MMJs, the last few years have seen the numbers wander up and down. Two years ago, usage dropped; last year it went up; this year it’s about even or slightly down again.

“Mostly use” dropped more than 3 points “Some” and “not much” went up, but “do not use” dropped by a point

By market size, the biggest change came among markets 26 to 50, where “mostly use” dropped by more than 8 points. The “yes, but not much” category went up for top 50 markets.

### Percentage of TV newsrooms reporting using MMJs - 2021

	Yes, Mostly Use MMJ	Yes, Use Some MMJ	Yes, But Not Use Much	No, Do Not Use
All TV	60.3%	23.7%	10.9%	5.1%
Market size:				
1-25	36.8	26.3	23.7	13.2
26-50	17.1	42.9	28.6	11.4
51-100	62.8	26.9	7.7	2.6
101-150	76.7	20	0	3.3
151+	87	6.5	6.5	0
Staff size:				
51+	24.6	38.6	26.3	10.5
31-50	66.3	25.3	6	2.4
21-30	95.3	4.7	0	0
11-20	86.2	3.4	6.9	3.4
1-10	80	13.3	0	6.7

The tipping point for news reporter vs. MMJ is in markets 51 to 100. Bigger markets have more news reporters than MMJs, and markets smaller than that are overwhelmingly MMJs. In 51 to 100, the margin is 74% to 26% in favor of MMJs. That’s up 9 points from a year ago, which was up 9 points from the year before.

### New and replacement hiring

The latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey found that the average TV station hired 5.2 replacements during 2020 and 1.1 new, additional positions. Replacements

are down 1.7 from a year ago, but new positions are up 0.2. Stations in the South again hired the most replacements, but stations in the West led in new hires.

Who got hired? These are the top TV replacement hires:

1. MMJs ... 23.2% ... up nearly 2 points and still in first place
2. Producers ... 21.3% ... up nearly 1 point and still in second place
3. Reporters ... 11.9% up 2 points from last year and up from fourth place
4. Anchors and anchor/reporters ... 10.5% ... down a point from last year and down from third place last year
5. Photographers ... 8.8% ... down 0.3 but still in 5<sup>th</sup> place
6. Digital ... 6.4% ... including a variety of digital positions ... down 2.3 from a year ago but still in sixth place
7. Weather ... 5.9% ... down 0.3 but still in seventh place
8. Sports ... 2.7% ... down 2 but still in eighth place
9. Editor ... 2.5% ... new to the top 10 replacement positions
10. Managers ... 2% ... down half a point and down from ninth place a year ago

All other positions totaled 4.8%.

More than three-quarters of all new TV hires were among just four positions:

1. MMJs ... 24.7% ... more than double a year ago and up from third place
2. Digital ... 21.3% ... half of last year's percentage and down from first place last year
3. Producers ... 20.2% ... up more than 7 points from last year but down from second place a year ago
4. Reporters ... 12.4% ... up 4.4 but remaining in fourth place
5. Weather ... 5.6% ... same as a year ago
6. Photographer ... 4.5% ... down slightly from a year ago
7. Tie ... Assignment Editor and Anchor ... 3.4%

All else totaled 4.5%.

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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.