

The Complex Picture of Social Media in TV News -- 2021

by Bob Papper

A total of 57.2% of TV news directors said they were doing something new in social media in the latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey. That's up just 1 point from a year ago, but it reversed a 3-year downward trend.

Generally, the bigger the market the more likely the station started something new in social media in 2020. Staff size and geography were inconsistent, but network affiliation mattered. ABC and NBC affiliates easily led the way with CBS stations not too far behind. For whatever reason, Fox affiliates came in at about one-third the level as the others in doing something new.

What's the most important new thing you started doing with social media this past year?

Four years ago, it was all about Facebook Live. Three years ago, it was mostly about Facebook Live. Less so two years ago and not much last year or this time around.

For the third year in a row, strategic moves, at 48%, are on top of the list. At the same time, nothing specific dominated the collection of strategic moves. Focusing more on Instagram led the list, but 23 different items were part of the collection. Working to engage more (which you wouldn't think was new) made the list. So did assigning specific responsibilities or tasks to managers, reporters and talent. Better targeting was there, along with more monitoring, deleting trolls and adding more click bait.

In their own words:

- Advertising overnight to encourage people to submit story ideas
- Assigning specific social media responsibilities to reporters
- Connecting on air talent to station accounts
- Consistency and blocking trolls
- More coordinated strategy on posting frequency and times
- Strategically sharing/tagging. We've optimized our click-through and engagement by making sure content gets to the right audience at the right time
- We set up auto-retweets for our staff, so when they use a specific hashtag, the station account auto retweets them

At 34%, streaming was an easy number 2 on the list. That included mentions of more Facebook Live, but it included nearly as many mentions of *less* Facebook Live. More streaming, OTT, YouTube and Tik Tok all made the list.

In their own words:

- Facebook Live Forums – 1-hour forums on specific topics using the app StreamYard
- Facebook Live roundtables
- Live streaming debates on YouTube
- Less content on Facebook. We want to be less dependent on social media

Content came in at 17%. Mostly, that involved more, better or more local content. COVID and political, especially local politics, got mentions.

In their own words:

- Actually, not posting as many national political stories. Since we can't control comments, we are focusing on local and state articles over controversial national stories that everyone else has
- Adding more local and state content
- Adding more content, promote more often

And that just leaves 1% for Other.

Facebook

The Survey didn't ask whether the TV station had a Facebook page. It's been six years since any TV station said it didn't have one. Every TV station (that runs local news) uses Facebook; the issue is how they use it and how much they get out of it.

Number of social media engagements in the most recent month

	Avg. No. (in thousands)	Median No. (in thousands)	Minimum	Maximum (in thousands)
Overall TV	1,074	455	0	6,540
Market size				
1 – 25	1,236	355	0	6,540
26 – 50	1,188	690	38	4,490
51 – 100	1,366	640	0	6,000
101 – 150	1,210	632	0	5,000
151+	373	118	0	2,380

This is the fourth year for this question, and there are still comparatively few news directors who know the answer. Both average and median numbers are up – especially average. And almost all the numbers are up except for the smallest markets. Fox stations lagged all others, but very few Fox news directors knew the numbers, so there's a good chance that it's not a representative sample.

The percent of station web traffic that came from social media:

	Average	Median	Minimum	Maximum
Overall TV	44.4%	40.4%	0	90%
Market size				
1 – 25	36.1	31	0	80
26 – 50	54.6	55	32	85

51 – 100	43.9	40.2	0	90
101 – 150	44.9	47	0	90
151+	48.5	40.5	20	89

Again, just the fourth year for this question, and the number of news directors who know the answer is fairly small. The average dropped about four and a half points from last year, and the median dropped by 11. Numbers varied erratically by subgroup – a consequence of too few answers to the question.

Twitter

Is the TV newsroom actively involved with Twitter? 2021

	Constantly	Daily	Periodically	No
All TV	46.6%	42.6%	9.4%	1.3%
Market				
1 - 25	54.5	27.3	18.2	0
26 - 50	65.6	28.1	6.2	0
51 - 100	54.5	42.4	0	3
101 - 150	37.7	47.2	15.1	0
151+	23.1	61.5	12.8	2.6
Staff size				
51+	64	28	4	4
31 - 50	48.6	41.4	10	0
21 - 30	33.3	52.8	13.9	0
11 - 20	25	54.2	16.7	4.2
1 - 10	6.7	73.3	20	0

After four years of declining Twitter use, the numbers stabilized this time around. Overall figures are little different this year from a year ago. Subgroup numbers vary enough that trends are hard to come by. The bigger the newsroom, the more likely that Twitter use is constant. Daily use goes up steadily as market size and staff size shrinks. There are no consistent differences by network affiliation, but station use in the Northeast is higher than all other regions. That was true a year ago as well.

Other software programs in use

More than 200 news directors answered the question: What software are you using beyond Facebook and Twitter? A total of 82.9% said they were using some other software. That's down slightly from last year.

Again, staff size made the biggest and most consistent difference. The bigger the staff, the more likely the station used social media beyond Facebook and Twitter

An astonishing 95.6% (of the 82.9%) said they were using Instagram – and only Instagram – beyond Facebook and Twitter. That means that 79% of TV newsrooms use Instagram.

What were they doing? In their own words:

- IG - Talent showcasing

- Content promotion
- Still photos and video from news stories, socially-engaging stories
- To post behind-the-scenes or promotional content
- User-generated content and building anchors' individual brands
- Instagram for fun behind-the-scenes stuff
- Instagram to break stories and drive younger viewers to our website
- Instagram, for posting pictures and InstaStories
- Reporters post links to their stories. We also promote breaking news

YouTube came in a distant, but clear second, followed by SnapChat and Tik Tok ... and one mention for Reddit:

In their own words:

- Archive video
- Instagram/marketing, YouTube/Storytelling/Live Streams & shows, Reddit/community conversation

It wasn't too many years ago that there were two dozen social media software choices that stations were using. That wide range of options has narrowed dramatically -- at the same time the focus and purpose of social media has been steadily shifting from an end in itself to a means to an end: moving people to the station website where making money is possible.

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

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

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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.