

## **TV News Innovation in the Time of COVID**

### **by Bob Papper**

Over the last few years, the RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey has asked about the most innovative thing a newsroom started doing this (past) year. The most apt response probably came from this news director: "You mean besides 90% remote working in the time of COVID?" Fair point.

In fact, of the well over 200 responses to the question, nearly half, 42%, were about coping with COVID.

Among the answers:

- Change news workflow and rundown system to a fully cloud-based platform
- In response to COVID, we launched a daily (later moved to weekly) webcast in Spanish.
- No-contact storytelling
- Operationally, moving three-quarters of our entire workforce from "in-house" to "remote." That was an enormous logistical challenge that had to be done in a very short period of time
- Surviving and covering COVID

### **News innovation**

But stations did more than survive. 26% noted special content that they started/produced this past year, often influenced by what they could and couldn't do because of COVID:

- Did several virtual town halls - one on race and another on back to school
- Live virtual town hall meetings on the COVID virus and race relations
- Political debates via Zoom because of the pandemic
- Weekly special on race and injustice; producers working remotely

And sometimes the content efforts took place despite COVID:

- We also devoted a news program once a week to good news called "Feel Good Friday"
- "Nightcast" -- Different approach to late news broadcast focusing on storytelling with single, rotating anchor
- 7-minute daily segment dealing with issues of social justice
- Digital, long-form interviews. NO time constraints
- Embedded a team inside an elementary school for a year-long reporting project
- Editorially, as we scrutinized police use-of-force, we partnered with a local digital newspaper to share resources and the mammoth expense of Open Records Requests

- Renewed emphasis on data driven journalism
- Started a new 4:30 pm newscast that's conversation driven

Just behind content, at 25%, came digital and streaming. That included establishing a digital desk, getting into or more OTT, changing staff assignments (or changing staff) to expand digital efforts, operationalizing digital first, and so on:

- Launched an OTT desk. A one-man studio that allows one person to go on live across all digital platforms
- Live streaming events and collaborating on content with other stations in the region owned by our company

At 3%, people came next. That included special assignments, but my favorite answers involved strategy and training:

- Hired multicultural reporter
- Our new digital EP has led innovation in the last six months. She's changed our social media practices and found ways to embed live video from various social media sources straight into our web pages
- Two news managers now directly coach and mentor reporters
- Use of an editorial calendar; staff development and structured on-boarding of new talent

At 1% each: social media, technical, software and outreach (newsletters, mostly):

- Expanded our use of Instastories to give COVID stats and resources
- Picture-In-Picture segment within the newscast

The follow-up question was, is what you're trying working?

Those answers were more variable. In many cases, the efforts were too new to know the answer, but, in most cases, the signs were positive. Let's save the COVID responses for the end.

Content innovations:

- "Nightcast" -- Different approach to late news broadcast focusing on storytelling with single, rotating anchor. Is it working? Yes, increased sampling of our newscast by viewers and ratings growth
- Segment dealing with issues of social justice. Is it working? Remains to be seen
- Digital Exclusive long-form pieces that become TV specials. Is it working? Yes, it has increased our digital traffic and allowed us to put some of these together into TV 30-minute specials
- Digital First team/producing digital exclusive content. Is it working? Yes - greatly improved our digital stats
- Digital, long-form interviews. NO time constraints. Is it working? VERY. People call us begging to be on

OTT/OTT Desk/streaming:

- Launched an OTT desk. a one-man studio that allows one person to go on live across all digital platforms. Is it working? Yes, recent start but numbers are good
- Created a 6-member Digital News Team. Is it working? Improved focus on digital priorities, increased amount and breadth of digital coverage, increased all key metric measurements
- Digital Anchor Desk. Is it working? Very much so. We are able to have an anchor front breaking news and digital-first content across all platforms without the need for a studio or production team
- Digital First approach. Took 18% of our current staff and moved them into digital-only roles. Is it working? Yes. Our page views, users and time on site have seen tremendous growth
- More content produced for OTT. Is it working? We are finding there is little to no local audience for it
- More focus on digital - repurposed another position to add to digital team. More stories/streaming/in-depth reporting. Is it working? yes, numbers have skyrocketed
- OTT Desk. Is it working? It's a work in progress.

#### People changes:

- Changed anchors. Is it working? No. Everyone just wants a pretty face to tell them it's going to be alright

#### Outreach:

- Daily email news roundup. Is it working? Yes, 5000+ people have signed up for it

#### Remote working/changes to cope with COVID:

- The MoJo workflow gives them more time to work on stories and has proven invaluable during the pandemic
- COVID-19 response. Is it working? Barely
- Letting crews work from home. Is it working? Not really - quality of journalism suffered
- More virtual interviews and digital content. Is it working? Somewhat. It's just been to get through the pandemic
- Remote work - a mobile newsroom. Is it working? It's been a survival tactic that has been fine. Some benefits mean less commute time, more production. Quality has suffered
- Using more video conferencing interviews due to pandemic. Is it working? Yes and no. Interviews are easier to set up and accomplish. No travel time. Quality can be lacking at times
- Dealing with COVID and keeping staff safe through remote work places.. Is it working? Yes, but we lose collaboration and the communication can suffer when compared to having staff in newsroom
- Working from home. Is it working? We made do because we had to

Most news directors felt that the changes they had made to cope with COVID were successful. Quite a few mentioned that they hadn't missed a newscast and, more importantly, most of their people had remained healthy. As a longtime news person and former manager, I think those two criteria (in reverse order) determine success.

Having crews work remotely can make them more efficient, and Zoom calls should, mercifully, mark the end of telephone interviews on TV. But, as someone who watches five local and

network newscasts a day, let's not kid ourselves that remote working is a reasonable or long-term alternative to in-person interviews and studio production. In a pandemic, the audience will tolerate what seem like interminable pauses between anchors or anchor and reporters, and they may tolerate the poor audio quality of people being interviewed (including, surprisingly, people on station and network payrolls). But when normality returns – as it eventually will – so will the expectation of the higher technical quality that broadcasts used to contain.

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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.