

## Local TV News May Never Be the Same

by Bob Papper

The human toll first. Five percent of local TV stations report that they have staffers out with the virus ... or out being tested and awaiting results ... or out for quarantine or because they're considered high risk. One reports the death of a close relative. Those numbers will all grow.

In a special RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey conducted last week, 92% of stations report that "a lot of our staff are working from home or working in a different way." More than half (54%) say "news gathering is much more of a challenge now." Probably a lot more news directors thought that answer was too obvious. Compare that with 3% who report that "there has been no meaningful change in their operation."

It doesn't matter where the station is located. Those were the numbers from hard hit coronavirus areas like New York, California, Washington and Illinois. But the same was true for stations in the only states where Covid-19 cases haven't hit triple digits yet: South Dakota, North Dakota, Wyoming.

There's also an economic toll. Three percent of newsrooms report that they have either let staffers go or are not filling vacant positions. That's pretty low, but the real economic price will likely come down the road.

"This is the biggest story of our lifetime," said a top 25 news director. "I've covered Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, 9-11 and 4 hurricanes to cross central Florida."

"I grew up in the AIDS scare, covered SARS, H1N1, Gulf War, Flood of 1993, 9/11," noted a Western news director from a top 100 market. "This is on par with those stories. Each day is its own crisis it seems. I come in worried, but good coverage means I go home hopeful. This should be a case study in stress/trauma for news folks, especially the kids just out of school versus the veterans."

"Totally has changed the way we work, the way we think, and how we get on the air," according to another top 25 news director. But the sentiment was echoed by almost everyone. Almost all managers reported that most of the staff was now working remotely – seldom or never coming into the office. For a lot of stations, that applied to producers, editors, anchors and even a growing number of meteorologists.

"Working remotely" was easily the most common phrase used to describe how the newsroom was coping with the coronavirus threat. Meetings were conducted via phone or email or other software. Splashtop allows remote operation of desktop computers no longer accessible. Interviews are put together at a "safe" distance. "Thank goodness for cheap brooms!" noted one small market news director at a station where broom handles have been converted into improvised mic poles. Stations achieve even safer interview distances using Zoom or Skype or Facetime ... or just a phone. Editing is done remotely and the LiveU app means any phone can go on the air live.

More and more otherwise competing stations are setting up pool video agreements for stories that everyone routinely covers.

“This is a brainstorming time in local news, and I suspect it will fuel great innovation to follow,” according to a small market news director.

### **How are stations handling news on coronavirus?**

A lot of stations said that these days, most of their newscasts were “all coronavirus, all the time.” Plus weather.

“We’ve really repositioned our staff to be more focused on what’s important,” notes a top 100 news director. “Sports? What’s that? I have both sports anchors reporting news daily. Traffic in the morning? What’s that? Very little traffic to report. I’ve put our morning traffic reporter on the ‘Coronavirus Desk’ reporting the latest local, state national and international developments.”

- 86% reported having a special coronavirus page on their website and/or social media.
- 76% said they run special segments in most or many newscasts.
- 73% said they’re doing special reporting on coronavirus on their digital assets.
- 35% said they’ve run one or more specials outside prime time.
- 21% report periodic special segments in some newscasts.
- 16% said they’ve run one or more specials on coronavirus in prime time.
- 11% said they cover coronavirus just as they cover any subject in the news.

Quite a few stations reported airing most or all of the frequent or daily press conferences held by state health officials or the state governor. Some stations reported putting out daily e-newsletters on the latest coronavirus information; some put out regular updates on partner radio stations; some ran Q&As during certain newscasts (especially the 5:30 p.m.); a number of stations reported expanding their total news time – by as much as 2.5 hours per day.

### **What’s the most innovative thing you’ve done in covering or coping with the coronavirus outbreak?**

After the widespread answer on working remotely, there were all sorts of ideas:

- Pair same reporter and photographer every day – and they never come into the station. (major market station)
- Created a Facebook group for parents coping with having kids at home since schools are on hiatus. Parents share what’s working and what’s not. Selected Skype follow-up interviews go on the air and are posted on Facebook. (top 25 market)
- Collaboration with the largest school district in the DMA to air curricular lessons for school-at-home. Aired on Antenna TV channel during school hours, perhaps overnight/weekend airing on the main channel. (small market)
- Burst page for viewers to submit photos of how they’re spending time in quarantine. (small market)
- Live segments every morning about local businesses that are being impacted, to help people understand that these places are still open but struggling. (top 100)
- Open4Biz page on the website so local businesses can let the public know they’re still open with limited hours. (small market)

- End each newscast with, “A Message of Hope” from someone in our community.” (market 100 to 150)
- Post on social media collecting recipes in the hopes of putting together a crowd-sourced cookbook.” (small market)
- At least 2 stations noted changing breaking news graphics base color from red to a different color after complaints from viewers about the message being sent by using red.

### **Is station management/corporate ownership worried about a loss of business because of coronavirus?**

76% said yes; 13% said no; 11% didn’t answer.

“It is not a worry,” said one top 100 news director. “It is happening.”

“Because our state primary was delayed, all candidates pulled political ad money,” noted a news director in market 100 to 150. “Who knows if that will come back and enable us to achieve our high political revenue budget.”

“They would be committing business malpractice if they did not worry,” said one top 25 news director. “The key is that at our station, spending on covering the virus has increased. My station managers and corporate leaders understand that we serve the public, and we can’t cut coverage to save money and also serve the public.”

A small market news director said their corporate owner invested in more technology to help them make adjustments in order to cover the coronavirus.

### **What about the long-term effects?**

“This is uncharted territory for all of us,” said a top 25 news director. “I think how we operate and how we build out newsrooms will be forever changed.”

“Even for long-time, old guys like me, this is something new, and every day seems to bring different issues to light,” noted a news director in a 100 to 150 market.

That’s not a singular view. 83% of TV news directors thought that what’s taking place right now will have “meaningful” long-term effects on local TV news. 9% said no; 8% didn’t answer.

Those long-term effects covered a lot of positive and negative ground.

The bad news first ... and you’ll see a singular theme here:

- “Probably job losses” (small market news director)
- “I just hope it doesn’t mean fewer people and more news down the line.” (top 25 news director)
- “I’m just worried that, again, we will get used to doing more with less [like after the 2008 recession]” (another top 25 news director)
- “Planning layoffs.” (a 100+ news director says he knows what the company is going to do)

- “I sincerely worry about layoffs in the future. My staff is working so hard right now. I’m concerned we will eventually ‘come out on the other side of this’ only to have the company announce a reduction in force.” (top 50 news director)
- “I worry when the storm ends, we could see layoffs.” (100 to 150 news director)
- “We’ll probably be all right, but I can’t imagine newspapers, small radio, weaker TV stations getting through it ok.” (small market news director)

All told, 7% of TV news directors expect or fear future staff cutbacks. That could be overly optimistic.

Then the neutral:

- “I think the new normal will incorporate some of the efficiencies we’re now creating in this climate (different workflows and remote operations).” (top 25 news director)
- “I think in many ways we may never go back exactly to how it was before. This experience has proven we can do a lot more remotely without people ever coming into the building.” (top 50 news director)

And the positive ... some with cautions:

Quite a few news directors noted that they have seen substantial increases in TV viewing -- along with skyrocketing digital numbers. Increases not only in the typically older, base audience, but jumps in viewing by younger people as well.

- “This is also quickly teaching the younger generation how important our role is. They are feeling the gravity big time.” (100 to 150 news director)
- “We are learning so many unique ways to do the news that we would never have done or even tried under normal circumstances. We have a number of new weapons in our arsenal moving forward.” (100 to 150 market news director)
- “Perhaps it helps slow the ‘fake news’ narrative as viewers rely on local news outlets for updated, vital information.” (top 25 news director)
- “I also hope this renews people’s hope in journalism, particularly on the local level. We are not the enemy. We are members of our beloved communities, putting our own health at risk to make sure we keep people informed and safe. Our community, in particular, has been incredibly encouraging and supportive of our work. They are sending ideas and kind feedback. They are sharing their stories with us. They are asking questions and pushing us to explore new topics and serve the public in new and different ways. I truly hope people across the country recognize that journalists are out there on front lines, fighting for them, and it helps us regain trust that has been damaged in recent years through no fault of our own.” (100 to 150 news director)

Good news with extra caution:

- “What we are seeing is a desire for local news and information on all platforms at a level never seen before (in my 30 years). If we do a good job, perhaps we will at least keep a portion of those new news consumers engaged in local news across all platforms when this comes to a close.” (top 100 news director)

**We don't always recognize a watershed moment until it has passed. That's not the case now.**

"I've been through a lot of things," noted a long-time, top 100 news director. "This one scares me the most."

"Covering a war on the home front. Even the strongest of disaster plans did not include the elements we have had to tackle." (top 25 news director)

Quite a few news directors talked about the stress they're under ... the stress the whole newsroom is under.

"Our people are frightened. They have families. They worry about the impact of all this. Now is not the time to push our people hard. Now is the time to offer a lot of encouragement, keep things moving forward in a soft but firm way, and help people deal with walking through fire. Our team needs to see us walking through fire with them. Our team members need to know and BELIEVE that we care about their well-being and that we are doing all we can to keep them safe." (top 100 news director)

"This crisis represents a tremendous opportunity to serve viewers. These are the kinds of stories which demand the best of our profession. We must rise to the occasion. So many journalists are meeting this challenge." (100 to 150 news director)

"Maybe we can stop using the terms BREAKING URGENT NEWS. It's all urgent. This pandemic will reveal who is committed to the tenets of journalism -- protect and serve. Be the voice that keeps our community informed." (100 to 150 news director)

"It could change viewership, either retaining/restoring local TV news' place as a central, trusted source of reliable news or eroding it depending on how well we sustain through an expected long season (3-6 months) of taxing coverage demands." (100 to 150 news director)

"If we meet our viewers/digital users' needs and do our jobs well, we will regain lost trust. If we simply pander to panic and go for numbers, we lose." (another top 100 news director)

And, of course, the bottom line:

"We will all need a vacation when this is all over."

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### **About the Survey**

This RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Special Survey was conducted in the week of March 23, 2020 among more than 100 local TV news directors, representing all market sizes and all areas of the country.