

The Real Story of TV News Staffing and other numbers for TV and Radio in 2008
RTNDA/Hofstra University Survey - 2008
By Bob Papper

I spoke to a number of local TV news directors in July and August who said that they were among the “lucky ones” that haven’t had to cut staff or leave positions unfilled this year. Actually, I think they’re experience has been typical. In a follow-up to the RTNDA/Hofstra University Survey of more than 300 stations, almost three-quarters have reported either no staff cuts or staff increases. Unfilled positions were counted as staff reductions, and news directors were quick to point out that most of those TV news staff reductions happened through attrition, or by hiring freezes, rather than letting people go. TV news’ itinerant nature makes that easier to accomplish.

TV News Staff Changes Since January 1, 2008

	Staff Increase	Staff Decrease	Same
All TV news	22.1%	28.6%	49.4%

In an era of generally increasing TV news staff, those figures are comparatively depressing. Most years, the percentage of stations with increases would be 10 percent higher, and the percentage of stations with decreases would be at least 10 percent lower. This year, there were more layoffs than additions, far more people were cut than added, and some of those layoffs involved dozens of people at one time. In a number of cases, station cuts outside of news meant that the spared newspeople had to pick up the slack.

Stations that increased staff added an average of 2.9 people (median 2); stations that cut dropped by an average 3.8 people (median 2). Subtracting gains from losses and projecting across all stations, local TV news, nationwide, has lost about 360 people since the first of the year. There are about 24,500 people who work full-time in local TV news.

Recession aside, news directors expect the remainder of the year to be far better.

TV News Staff Changes Expected Over the Next Few Months

	Staff Increase	Staff Decrease	Same
All TV news	17.9%	9.1%	72.7%

While nearly three-quarters of the news directors expect no change in staff size, almost twice as many expect to add people as cut them. The industry-wide projection would be a net increase in TV newspeople of 151 through the remainder of the year. That would result in a 2008 net loss of 209 jobs. I’ll know in more detail after the next full RTNDA/Hofstra University Annual Survey, but TV news staffing appears to have slipped to its fourth highest level ever—behind 2007, earlier this year and 2001.

The pain of this year’s layoffs has not been spread evenly across all stations. The biggest markets, 1 – 25, and markets 101 – 150 have been hit the hardest. In both cases, just over a third of the stations have cut staff. Not surprisingly, the smallest markets, 151+, already on the lean side, were the least likely to see staff reductions (16.7 percent) and the most likely to remain unchanged (70.8 percent).

Stations in the South and Midwest were also hit harder than stations in the Northeast or West. While almost half the stations for every region remained the same, more than 30 percent of the stations in the Midwest and South had cutbacks. That is seven to 10 points higher than stations in the Northeast or West.

CBS affiliates suffered far more than others. Almost 40 percent of CBS stations had cutbacks. That compares with 28.2 percent of NBC affiliates, 25.9 percent of ABC affiliates, 18.2 percent of all other and just 11.1 percent of Fox stations. In fact, more than 40 percent of Fox affiliates reported staff increases.

Outlook For the Rest of the Year

Most stations appear to be done with most of their cuts. There are still some big layoffs on the horizon, but they're likely to be the exception, and few—if any—will come in markets smaller than 50. Overall, stations will be hiring more than letting people go, although many if not most of those hired will simply fill replacement spots left vacant because of hiring freezes.

Jobs are a little more likely to open up in the West and South, and Fox affiliates are likely to continue leading the way. But also look for modest rehiring at CBS affiliates as well. ABC and NBC stations are more likely to sit tight.

But hasn't it been widely reported that the cuts in TV news reflect the beginning of the end? That does seem to be the assumption, but the evidence doesn't support it. Virtually no one is cutting back on news. The latest figures put 2008 even with 2007's all-time record for highest amount of local TV news. A total of 774 stations are originating local news. That's down three stations from a year ago and four from the all-time record of 778. There are also 196 local stations that get news from one of those 774.

Hours of Local TV News Per Day

	Average weekday	Weekday maximum	Average Saturday	Saturday maximum	Average Sunday	Sunday maximum
All TV news	4.1	10.0	1.8	7.0	1.7	6.0
Big four affiliates	4.3	10.0	1.8	7.0	1.8	6.0
Other commercial	3.1	10.0	1.4	4.0	1.2	3.0
Market size:						
1-25	4.0	9.0	2.5	7.0	2.4	6.0
26-50	4.3	7.0	2.6	6.0	2.5	6.0
51-100	4.7	10.0	1.9	5.0	1.8	5.0
101-150	4.1	10.0	1.4	3.0	1.3	5.0
151+	3.3	10.0	1.1	2.0	1.0	2.0
Staff size:						
Staff 51+	5.7	9.5	3.0	6.0	2.8	6.0
Staff 31-50	4.5	8.0	1.8	5.0	1.8	5.0
Staff 21-30	4.0	10.0	1.2	3.0	1.1	3.0
Staff 11-20	2.8	10.0	1.0	2.0	0.9	2.0
Staff 1-10	1.8	5.0	1.0	1.5	1.0	1.5
Affiliation:						
ABC	4.2	9.5	1.8	5.0	1.8	5.0
CBS	4.4	10.0	1.8	6.0	1.7	6.0
Fox	3.9	10.0	1.3	5.0	1.4	5.0
NBC	4.6	8.0	2.1	7.0	2.0	6.0
PBS	1.1	2.5	0	0	1.2	1.5

The average amount of local TV news is virtually unchanged from last year's record high. Some market sizes or staff sizes rose a little, and some fell a little, but there were no meaningful changes, and the bottom line was that the weekday average remained exactly the same at 4.1 hours of local news. The Saturday average rose by 18 minutes, and the Sunday average fell by 6 minutes.

Fox affiliates run a little less news than other affiliates. Stations in the South and Northeast continue to run the most news, but this year their edge over the Midwest and West has gotten smaller.

Amount of News Changes ... The Past Year

	Increase	Decrease	Same	Not sure
All TV News	42.7%	2.1%	54.6%	0.6%
Big four affiliates	44.1	1.0	54.2	0.7
Other commercial	40.7	11.1	48.1	
Market size:				
1-25	35.0	1.7	63.3	
26-50	26.7	0	73.3	
51-100	48.3	3.4	47.1	1.1
101-150	45.5	3.4	50.0	1.1
151+	50.9	0	49.1	

The figures here look a lot like last year's. A majority of stations a year ago said they ran the same amount of news, and a slightly larger majority this year said the same thing. Stations reporting an increase in news fell by almost 4 percent; stations saying they decreased the amount of local news rose by half a percent. As with a year ago, growth was more likely in smaller markets. Stations in the South and West were more likely to add news than stations in the Midwest or Northeast. At 16.7 percent, stations with the smallest staffs (1-10 people) were the most likely to decrease the amount of news they run.

Amount of News Planned ... The Next Year

	Increase	Decrease	Same	Not sure
All TV news	39.4%	3.6%	49.9%	7.2%
Big four affiliates	39.5	3.7	49.0	7.8
Other commercial	37.0	0	59.3	3.7
Market size:				
1-25	30.0	6.7	58.3	5.0
26-50	40.0	4.4	51.1	4.4
51-100	37.2	2.3	52.3	8.1
101-150	47.1	4.6	40.2	8.0
151+	40.4	0	50.9	8.8

Stations in the West were more likely to expect an increase in the amount of news (45.2 percent versus 36.4 percent). CBS and Fox affiliates were a bit more likely to expect to increase news than ABC or NBC stations.

TV Staff Size – 2008

	Avg full-time	Median full-time	Maximum full-time	Avg part-time	Median part-time	Maximum part-time	Avg total staff	Median total	Maximum total staff
All TV	37.3	30.0	152	8.7	6.0	130	41.3	33.5	153
Big four	39.3	32.0	152	8.6	6.0	130	43.2	36.0	153

affiliates									
Other commercial	25.5	21.5	92	9.9	8.0	27	31.3	27.5	114
Market size:									
1-25	57.5	58.0	152	14.2	8.5	47	65.6	66.0	153
26-50	54.6	54.0	102	7.3	6.0	22	58.4	55.0	109
51-100	40.7	40.5	112	6.1	5.0	15	43.7	43.0	112
101-150	25.8	26.0	51	9.8	5.0	130	30.2	29.0	148
151+	19.0	19.5	46	5.9	5.0	13	20.7	21.0	51

The above employment figures were gathered in the fourth quarter of 2007. Last year, the average staff size fell but the median went up. This year, it was just the opposite. At 37.3, the average full time staff size is the highest ever. But I view the median size as a better indicator of what's happening, overall, in the industry, and the median fell from its all time high by 2 to 30. Both average and median part time numbers rose substantially this year, suggesting that stations may be economizing by "filling" full-time vacancies with part-timers. For full time staff, overall, larger markets (1 – 50) tended to grow; the middle group (51-150) tended to slip back a bit; and the smallest group (markets 151+) stayed largely the same. But the increase in part-timers was across the board.

There were relatively small staff size differences among affiliate stations – which was also true last year. Regional differences were small.

Staff Size Changes ... The Past Year

	Increase	Decrease	Same	Don't know
All TV news	34.5%	19.9%	45.2%	0.3%
Big four affiliates	35.7	19.2	44.8	0.3
Other commercial	33.3	25.9	40.7	

A plurality of stations said their staff size remained the same: around 45 percent – which was the same as a year ago. But the percentage of stations reporting increases fell by almost 7 points, and stations reporting a decrease rose by almost 6. About a quarter of the newsrooms with 31 or more newspeople reported decreases, and almost a third of the smallest newsrooms (1 – 10 people) reported a staff decrease – although only the latter group actually had more stations reporting decreases than increases. Fox affiliates were the most likely to report increasing staff – as were stations in the West.

Planned Staff Changes ... the next year

	Increase	Decrease	Same	Not sure
All TV news	32.9%	4.2%	58.7%	4.2%
Big four affiliates	33.2	4.1	59.0	3.7
Other commercial	40.7	3.7	44.4	11.1

As usual, most news directors expect no changes in staff size in the next year, but only about 4 percent expect a decrease. Fox affiliates and stations in the South and West are a little more likely to expect staff increases.

TV News Budget ... the past year

	Increase	Decrease	Same	Don't know
All TV news	45.9%	13.4%	33.7%	7.0%
Big four affiliates	47.4	12.4	33.0	7.2
Other commercial	44.4	22.2	25.9	7.4
Market size:				
1-25	32.8	20.7	37.9	8.6
26-50	51.1	15.6	28.9	4.4
51-100	53.6	11.9	27.4	7.1
101-150	41.2	12.9	41.2	4.7
151+	50.9	7.0	31.6	10.5

After a pretty good budget year last time, budgets slipped a bit this reporting period. A plurality still rose, but the percentage reporting an increase was down almost 8 from a year ago. And 5 percent more said their budgets fell with 2 percent more saying they stayed the same. The biggest drop came in markets 101-150, followed by 151+ and 1 – 25. Changes were smaller in markets 26 – 100. There were no consistent patterns based on staff size, affiliation or geography.

TV News Profitability ... 1999 to 2008

	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000	1999
Showing profit	55.4%	56.2%	57.4%	44.5%	58.4%	55.3%	54.9%	56%	58%	57%
Breaking even	11.5	11.5	8.1	24.2	10.4	13.6	11.6	13	11	9
Showing loss	10.5	6.4	10.0	12.1	9.2	9.2	11.2	10	11	11
Don't know	22.6	26.0	24.4	19.2	22.0	21.9	22.3	21	20	23

TV newsroom profitability remained in the mid 50 percentile range -- where it has almost always been over the last decade. The percentage showing a loss rose to 10.5 percent, but that actually put it back to where it's been most of the last 10 years.

TV News Profitability ... by Size and Affiliation - 2008

	Showing profit	Breaking even	Showing loss	Don't know
Market size:				
1-25	53.4%	10.3%	15.5%	20.7%
26-50	59.5	7.1	11.9	21.4
51-100	62.2	8.5	8.5	20.7
101-150	59.5	10.7	8.3	21.4
151+	38.6	21.1	10.5	29.8
Staff size:				
51+	71.0	8.1	4.8	16.1
31-50	67.9	6.2	8.6	17.3
21-30	54.7	14.0	9.3	22.1
11-20	41.9	14.0	16.3	27.9
1-10	20.8	12.5	25.0	41.7
Affiliation:				
ABC	53.8	8.8	7.5	30.0
CBS	62.2	12.2	6.7	18.9
Fox	60.0	12.5	15.0	12.5
NBC	59.2	10.5	10.5	19.7
Big four affiliates	58.7	10.8	9.1	21.3
Other commercial	37.0	11.1	22.2	29.6

The profitability level of stations in the biggest markets would be much higher were it not for downward pull from the smallest stations (staff size 1 – 10) that drag it down. The most significant change from a year ago is the drop in profitability among stations in markets 151+, where profitability plunged from 61.5 percent to 38.6 percent. Breaking even in those markets rose by almost 9 points and showing a loss doubled to 10.5.

Percentage of TV Station Revenue Produced by News - 2008

	Average	Median	Minimum	Maximum	Not sure
All TV news	44.6%	42.5%	9.0%	89.0%	63.9%
Market size:					
1-25	40.2	40.0	9.0	89.0	51.5
26-50	43.7	46.0	20.0	80.0	58.0
51-100	50.2	50.0	20.0	75.0	60.8
101-150	44.9	40.0	30.0	65.0	73.9
151+	44.4	45.0	10.0	75.0	72.1
Staff size:					
51+	46.8	46.0	20.0	89.0	62.5
31-50	47.3	50.0	22.0	75.0	70.2
21-30	43.1	40.0	9.0	75.0	69.3
11-20	40.0	30.0	20.0	60.0	84.1
1-10	12.5	12.5	10.0	15.0	76.0
Affiliation:					
ABC	46.1	50.0	20.0	70.0	68.6
CBS	44.2	40.0	10.0	70.0	66.7
Fox	36.3	30.0	22.0	60.0	64.3
NBC	53.5	50.0	20.0	89.0	64.5
Big four affiliates	46.2	45.0	10.0	89.0	66.3
Other commercial	37.3	35.0	9.0	80.0	44.4

Both the average and median revenue percentages are up slightly from a year ago – the average is up by about two and a half percent and the median up by half a percent. Almost all the categories are up slightly as well. These numbers are right in line with the revenue percentages we’ve seen for the last decade. Note that two-thirds of TV news directors do not know the percentage of station revenue that news brings in, but that’s actually less than last year’s 78 percent.

Radio

Almost three-quarters (71.6 percent) of radio news directors said there was a centralized newsroom for all or most of their stations that air local news. That’s the first drop – albeit a small one – since radio consolidation took hold. The average centralized newsroom supplied news to 2.9 stations within the local market (the median was 2) and 1.4 stations somewhere else (the median figure was 0). Those figures present a mixed picture compared to a year ago. The average number of stations within the market is down by half a station compared to a year ago, and the median dropped from 3 to 2. But the average number outside the market rose by a full station. We’ll have to wait for at least another year to know whether we’re starting to see a trend develop.

Average Minutes of Locally-Produced Radio News - 2008

	All radio	Major market	Large market	Medium market	Small market
Weekdays:					
AM drive	24.3	24.0	28.7	23.8	19.1
Midday	12.2	19.8	8.1	9.7	10.9
PM drive	14.5	20.8	13.3	13.6	11.3
Night	15.1	19.3	5.7	6.1	8.6

Total weekday	66.1	83.9	55.8	53.2	49.9
Saturday:					
AM drive	16.8	15.3	11.6	16.4	7.3
Midday	9.5	8.3	8.0	8.4	8.8
PM drive	1.7	6.0	0	4.1	7.9
Night	8.6	9.0	0	4.0	5.8
Total Saturday	36.6	38.6	19.6	32.9	29.8
Sunday:					
AM drive	14.4	5.3	6.0	7.4	9.3
Midday	10.0	8.3	8.0	9.7	8.1
PM drive	10.8	6.0	8.0	2.8	6.7
Night	9.3	9.0	0	4.0	6.3
Total Sunday	44.5	28.6	22.0	23.9	30.4

Fueled by a jump in the amount of news reported in afternoon drive and the evening, the average amount of radio news per day – both weekday and weekend – rose from a year ago. The biggest growth came in major and medium markets with smaller increases in large and small markets. Generally, the bigger the staff, the more news produced, but there was no relationship between how much news was run and the number of stations in a market. Independent stations tended to produce more news than group-owned stations.

Radio Staff Size – 2008

	Avg. full-time	Median full-time	Max full-time	Avg part-time	Med part-time	Max part-time	Avg total staff	Med total staff	Max total staff
All radio news	2.1	1.0	9	2.4	2.0	12	3.1	2.0	16
Market size:									
Major	4.0	3.5	9	2.4	2.0	7	5.4	5.0	16
Large	2.9	3.0	7	2.7	2.0	5	4.1	3.0	10
Medium	1.9	1.0	5	2.5	1.5	12	3.1	2.0	13
Small	1.6	1.0	5	2.1	2.0	8	2.3	1.0	8

The average staff size fell back down this year. Two years ago, it was 2.0; last year 2.5; this year back down to 2.1. The median staff size remained at 1.0 – as it has for a number of years. Both average and median part time numbers rose by about 1 from a year ago. Generally, the bigger the market, the more newspeople a station had. Group-owned stations tended to employ slightly more newspeople than independent stations.

Changes in Radio News, Staff and Budget in the last 12 months and planned for the future – 2008

	Increase	Decrease	Same	Not sure
Amount of news the past year	34.8%	4.5%	60.6%	0
Plan to change amount of news next year	25.0	0	68.9	6.1
Total news staff the past year	12.9	12.1	74.2	0.8
Plan to change amount of staff next year	12.9	0.8	75.8	10.6
Change in news budget from the year before	11.3	4.0	66.9	17.7

As usual, most stations voted for “same” in the amount of news, plans for more news, current and planned staff and news budget. On the other hand, the percentage saying that they ran more news last year or plan to this year both doubled. In contrast, the percentage of news directors reporting that their staff rose last year or they expect it to this year dropped in half compared to a year ago.

The budget figures are little changed. There were no consistent patterns to any of these numbers based on staff size, number of stations, market size, ownership or geography.

Radio News Profitability ... 1999 to 2008

	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000	1999
Showing profit	21.0%	29.1%	18.1%	19.6%	22.5%	25.2%	15.2%	17%	25%	19%
Breaking even	13.7	13.1	17.6	14.4	17.1	13.8	13.9	17	15	18
Showing loss	10.5	8.6	6.4	3.1	7.2	2.4	7.3	0	7	6
Don't know	54.8	49.1	58.0	62.9	53.2	58.6	63.6	66	53	57

Last year I suggested that the jump in profitability might well be just a statistical anomaly, and this year's retreat to the past indicates that that was probably the case. There were no consistent patterns based on staff size, station number, market size or ownership. Note that, as usual, most radio news directors do not know whether the station makes a profit on news.

Radio News Profitability by Market Size - 2008

	Showing profit	Breaking even	Showing loss	Don't know
Major market	0	22.2%	11.1%	66.7%
Large market	27.8	27.8	5.6	38.9
Medium market	18.4	14.3	12.2	55.1
Small market	23.9	6.5	10.9	58.7

Major markets are those with 1 million or more potential listeners. Large markets are from 250,000 to 1 million. Medium markets are 50,000 to 250,000. Small markets are fewer than 50,000.

Number of Stations Where the Radio News Director Oversees the News – 2008

No. of Stations	Percentage
One	21.0%
Two-three	18.5
Four	8.6
Five-Six	11.1
Seven-Eight	40.7
Overall	Number
Average	2.9 (locally) +1.4 elsewhere
Median	2.0
Maximum	14

These numbers are virtually unchanged from a year ago.

What Else Radio News Directors Do – 2008

After dropping last year, the percentage of radio news directors saying they have responsibilities other than news rose to a record high 83.1 percent. There were no meaningful differences in that percentage based on staff size, number of stations, market size, ownership or geography. The only meaningful variation was that news directors at non-commercial stations were a little less likely to have other responsibilities than their commercial counterparts.

Other job	Percentage
Talk show host	23.2%
Announcing (including sports and weather)	17.1
Program Director	11.0
General Manager	9.8
Operations	7.3
Sales	7.3
Public Affairs	7.3
Production	4.9
Owner	2.4
Other	9.8

Most of these numbers are generally in line with the last few years.

Miscellaneous

Percentage of TV News Departments Providing Content to Other Media – 2008

	Another local TV station	TV in another market	Cable TV channel	Local radio	Station website	Other website	Other
All TV	23.8%	10.6%	15.6%	39.4%	80.6%	3.2%	3.5%
Big four affiliates	24.9	10.3	15.9	41.2	83.4	3.3	3.3
Other commercial	11.1	14.8	14.8	18.5	51.9	3.7	3.7
Market size:							
1-25	26.2	6.6	6.6	29.5	63.9	8.2	4.9
26-50	26.1	13.0	23.9	37.0	89.1	2.2	4.3
51-100	23.9	6.8	20.5	35.2	78.4	2.3	3.4
101-150	22.7	13.6	15.9	48.9	85.2	3.4	3.4
151+	21.1	14.0	10.5	43.9	87.7	0	1.8

Most of these numbers are little changed from a year ago. Note that for every market size, 21 to 26 percent of the stations supply news to another local TV station. Even the smallest markets. Another 10 percent are supplying news to a TV station outside the local market; and 15 percent are supplying news to a cable channel.

Convergence

After three years at around 40 percent, the percentage of news directors saying that they're doing something that they consider to be convergence rose to 47 percent this year. Not a big increase, but an increase nonetheless. But that increase came despite a steady drop in the percentage of TV stations saying that they're working with a newspaper. In the last three years, the percentage has fallen from 59.8 percent to 50 percent to this year's 38 percent.

Type of Convergence Partner	Percent of the stations of those involved in convergence
Newspaper(s)	38.0%
Web site(s)	31.7
Radio station(s)	20.4
Other television	8.5
Cell phone	4.9

Magazines	3.5
Podcasting	2.1
Other languages	1.4
Other	14.1

News Director Age and Tenure ... 2008

TV news directors ranged in age from 23 to 68 ... with an average age of 44.7 and a median age of 44. That's virtually identical to a year ago -- and the year before that, and so on. Apparently, TV news directors do not age. As usual, there was no meaningful variation based on market size, staff size, network affiliation or geography.

The number of years a TV news director had been news director at that station ranged from just over 2 months to 34 years. The average was 4.9 and the median was 3. The old adage that TV news directors are at their station for two years and then out hasn't been true for years. There's no consistent pattern by market size, staff size or region, but news directors at Fox stations are a year under the averages and medians.

Radio news directors ranged in age from 16 (is that legal?) to 75 ... with an average of 46.6 and a median of 49. That's about a half-year older than a year ago, and as with TV, there were no differences based on any station grouping.

We didn't ask radio news directors about time on the job this year, but last year we reported that they averaged 11.5 years with that station, with a median tenure of 8 years.

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About the Survey

The RTNDA/Hofstra University Survey was conducted in the fourth quarter of 2007 among all 1,647 operating, non-satellite television stations and a random sample of 2,000 radio stations. Valid responses came from 1,241 television stations (75.3 percent) and 138 radio news directors and general managers representing 271 radio stations. Data for the number of TV stations originating local news and getting it from others is based on a complete census and is not projected from a smaller sample.