



Radio Staffing Bounces Back ... But Not Every Market

By Bob Papper and Keren Henderson

JUNE 21, 2023 – The latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey shows the typical (median) radio news operation in 2023 had a full-time news staff of two – for the first time since Bob started doing these surveys 29 years ago (we have always reported a median staff of one until now). The increase was led by non-commercial radio stations which came in with a median of three news people; commercial radio remained at one.

This year's numbers indicate that overall news staffing has improved since last year. It's not a lot, but the average radio news operation increased from 3 full-timers to 3.2 while part time remains unchanged at 1.6. However, breaking these results down by market size shows a different picture: While staffing improved across major, medium, and small markets, large markets stations report a full-time staffing decline of 1.1 from last year and a 1.6 decline overall.

The use of a centralized newsroom by multi-station groups has returned to numbers resembling pre-COVID years. Last year's two-thirds (66.6%) of all multi-station local groups operating with a centralized newsroom represented a surprising 10-point drop. But this year's report of 79.4% usage is another indication that radio staffing is returning to pre-COVID levels. Or maybe it's just correcting last year's aberration.

Radio staff size (2023)

	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 Radio	3.2	2	71	1.6	1	30	4.9	3	79
Market size:									
Major	11.1	4	71	2.2	1	30	13.3	6	79
Large	3.3	2.5	18	1.3	1	8	4.6	3	19
Medium	2.2	1	21	1.8	1	17	4.0	3	24
Small	1.8	1	12	1.3	1	11	3.1	2	18
Commercial	2.2	1	36	1.5	1	30	3.8	2	66
Non-comm	6.1	3	71	1.8	1	10	7.9	5	79

The overall staff size differences between commercial and non-commercial stations remains steady at around 3:1, non-commercial to commercial. However, last year, commercial radio station staffs decreased, on average, by 0.2 employees and non-commercial station staff fell by 0.8, while this year, we see both commercial and non-commercial radio staffing have increased by 0.4 and 0.2 workers respectively. Note that non-commercial stations are more likely to be found in large and major markets.

As usual, the larger the market, the larger the news staff is likely to be.

Changes in radio staff in the last 12 months (2022) and planned for the future (2023)

	Increase	Decrease	Same	Not sure
Total news staff the past year (2022)	14.5%	10.9%	73.9%	0.6%
Plan to change amount of staff next year (2023)	16.8	1.3	69.9	12.0

The overall percentage of stations saying they increased staff rose again – but this time only by 0.1 points compared to last year’s full four points. We should note that we continue to see a much larger survey response from small and medium sized markets, however, based on percentages, major markets reported hiring at a much greater rate than any other market size. Meanwhile, large-sized markets were the least likely by far to hire new staff out of all groups surveyed.

Last year, non-commercial stations were more than three times as likely to add staff as commercial stations, an improvement from the previous year’s two to one. And non-commercial stations were more likely to cut staff than commercial stations. Non-commercial stations are also four times more likely than commercial stations to expect to add staff next year. Of course, non-commercial stations started with more staff to begin with.

The bottom line for all of this is that 2022 appears to have been a difficult year for large market radio stations in terms of staffing.

A bright side is that large market news directors and general managers expect the situation to turn around 2023. While overall plans to increase staff is predicted to decline next year, that number represents primarily small and medium market stations. Both large and major markets predict significant increases. We should note, however, that the same was true last year. And again this year, non-commercial stations predict a far higher likelihood of increasing staff over commercial stations, but this year only at a rate of 4:1 compared to last year’s even more optimistic 5:1 odds.

Radio digital staffing increases in major markets

The latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey found a mixed picture in digital staffing again this year. Full time increased by 0.2 while part time fell by the same amount.

How many people work on the digital side?

	Full-time	Part-time	Total
All Radio	0.9	0.6	1.5
Market size:			
Major Market	2.9	0.3	3.1
Large Market	0.9	0.4	1.3
Medium Market	0.6	0.7	1.3
Small Market	0.4	0.8	1.2
Commercial	0.8	0.5	1.3
Non-commercial	1	0.9	1.9

Drilling down, medium and small market digital staffing held steady while large market improved by 0.1. – but major markets increased their digital staff by a notable 1.2.

Meanwhile, commercial radio increased by 0.2 while non-commercial held steady at 1.

Do other staffers help on the web?

All Radio	86.3%
Market size:	
Major Market	87.6
Large Market	87.9
Medium Market	84.9
Small Market	86.7
Commercial	86.3
Non-commercial	86.4

The number of people expected to help with digital work increased dramatically on all counts. Every category of non-digital staffers helping on the web increased significantly in the latest survey – with the overall percentage jumping by nearly 25 points.

New and replacement hiring

The average radio station hired 0.6 replacement positions and 0.5 new hires – both up from last year. Average replacements are up 0.1 or 20% from last year, but new hires are up an average of 0.3 or 150%. But the median – or typical – for both replacements and new hires remained at zero. That’s exactly what it’s been for the last eight years. In other words, the typical radio station made no hires whatsoever.

The top radio replacement position by far is reporter at 55% of all replacement positions. Reporter has been on top the last few years, but this is a jump of 6 points from a year ago and 15 points from two years ago.

Turnover for management slowed down since last year. In 2022, management positions – mostly news directors – came in at 18%. This year the same types of management replacements represent 14% of such staffing. Producers were replaced at the same rate as managers with 14% of the results – double that of last year. Anchor/host came next at 8% – nearly half as many as last year – followed by digital at only 2% (a 7-point drop from last year), and announcers at a mere 1% compared to last year's 3%.

The top new position in radio news again this year was reporter – at 59% of all new hires. That's up 7 points from last year. Meanwhile, producers, at 11%, fell 7 points from last year. Digital hires increased this year to represent 18% of new employees, up 3 points from last year. Host/anchor fell by 50% to 4.5% and new management positions came in at 11% – nearly double last year's numbers.

In radio, 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.

Bob Papper is Research Professor of Broadcast and Digital Journalism at Syracuse University and has worked extensively in radio and TV news.

Keren Henderson is Associate Professor of Broadcast and Digital Journalism at Syracuse University and has worked in local TV news as a producer and video editor.

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About the Survey

The RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey was conducted in the fourth quarter of 2022 among all 1,812 operating, non-satellite television stations and a random sample of 4,819 radio stations. Valid responses came from as many as 1,365 television stations (75.3%) and 777 radio news directors and general managers representing 2,514 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.