



Higher Local TV News Employment ... and Record Burnout

By Bob Papper and Keren Henderson

JUNE 21, 2023 – The latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey shows the total (full time) local TV news employment up 5.1% from last year – to 27,600. That’s a big jump (or correction) from last year but remains behind the all-time high of 28,000 set in 2021.

Of course, those were the numbers before Sinclair shut down news at five stations and reportedly cut staff at others. News is paying at least some of the price for Diamond Sports Group. The regional sports operation, owned by Sinclair, filed for bankruptcy in March. At those five stations, Sinclair’s *The National Desk* will replace local news; at some other Sinclair stations, *TND* will replace specific newscasts which have been cut to save money.

In the RTDNA Survey, real staff growth came mostly in top 50 markets. Stations in markets 51 to 100 went down; 101 to 150 held steady; and 151+ edged down in average and up in median. A toss-up.

Part time staff largely held steady.

Some of the overall increase in employment came from the addition of four newsrooms – up from 707 last year to 711 this time around. The total came to 710 two years ago and tends to float up and down within a narrow band surrounding 700. The Sinclair cuts take the total number of local TV newsrooms back down to 707. Sinclair eliminated news from five stations, but we never considered KPTH in Sioux City, IA, to be a separate newsroom operation.

TV 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 TV	41.7	36	147	2.7	1	37	43.9	39	167
Big four affiliates	43.2	37.5	147	2.6	1	37	45.4	40	167
Other commercial	35.9	22	95	3.7	1	24	39.6	22	104
Non-commercial	11	5	36	2.3	1	8	13.3	5	44
Market size:									
1 - 25	77.8	80	147	4.5	2	25	80.3	86	167
26 - 50	68	73	102	3.6	2	37	71.6	75	125
51 - 100	39.2	40	80	2.1	2	8	41.3	42	84
101 - 150	31	30.5	92	2.5	2	14	33.5	33.5	96
151+	18.6	19	49	2	1	21	20.6	19	62

You can see the mixed results reflected in the reporting on whether a station's staff size went up, down or stayed the same. Usually "stayed the same" is the winner, but this year most stations either went up or down. More went up.

TV staff size changes ... the past year (2022)

	Increase	Decrease	Same
All TV	47.7%	34.5%	17.7%
Big four affiliates	48.7	32.2	19.1
Other commercial	31.2	62.5	6.2

The percentage of stations reporting a staff increase more than doubled from a year ago as “stayed the same” plunged from 48.2% to 17.7% this time around. But stations reporting a drop rose by 7 points. Those “other commercial” numbers are not reversed; most other commercial stations reported a drop in staff.

Interestingly, a year ago, just over 44% of TV news directors said they expected to increase staff in 2022. And they did. Predictions for this year are also strong, although changing economic conditions could alter that.

TV planned staff changes ... the next year (2023)

	Increase	Decrease	Same	Not sure
All TV	40%	2.1%	51.9%	6%
Big four affiliates	40.3	1.9	53.1	4.7
Other commercial	41.2	5.9	35.3	17.6

Clearly, local TV news directors remain optimistic about hiring. The percentages for 2023 are very close to the percentages predicted a year ago. Interestingly, it's news directors in markets 51 and smaller who most expect to increase staff. They're the ones who lagged behind this time around.

TV digital staffing largely unchanged

The latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey found that, overall, there were modest gains in both full time and part time digital staffing. But market size mattered. The top 100 markets rose modestly, but smaller markets mostly held steady.

How many people work on the digital side? 2023

	Full-time	Part-time	Total
All TV	3.9	1.8	5.5
Markets 1-25	6.8	2.6	9.3
Markets 26-50	6.3	1.8	7.3
Markets 51-100	3.8	1.4	4.4
Markets 101-150	2.9	2.1	3.6
Markets 151+	1.8	1.4	3.7

In TV, same station comparison shows only very small increases in digital staff.

Do other staffers help on the web? 2023

All TV	69.9%
Markets 1-25	62.1
Markets 26-50	61.2
Markets 51-100	65.7
Markets 101-150	75
Markets 151+	80.2

TV news staff participation in the web is strikingly similar to last year (and the year before that).

What does the staffing look like for an “average” TV station?

In real life – or even in a TV newsroom – it’s not easy to divide people into fractions. Thankfully, it’s no problem on paper. This is what the latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey says the “average” local TV news department of 41.7 people looks like:

News Director	1	Assignment Editor	1.1
Assistant News Director	0.8	News Producer	6.4
Managing Editor	0.3	News Writer	0.1
Executive Producer	1.7	News Assistant/AP	0.1
News Anchor	5.5	Photographer	5.5
Weathercaster	3.8	Video Editor	1.9
Sports Anchor	1.5	Graphics Specialist	0.4
News Reporter	2.6	Digital Content Manager	0.9
MMJ	5	Social Media Producer/Editor	0.4
Sports Reporter	0.6	Web/Mobile Writer/Producer	1.9
		Other	0.2

The list tends not to change radically from one year to the next, although it floats up and down as staff size changes.

Retaining staff has been a challenge

A new question in this year's RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey asked whether news directors had seen more evidence of staff burnout this year than in the past. Overwhelmingly – at more than two-thirds of all news directors (68.9%) – the answer is yes. The percentage was a bit lower in top 25 markets (at 59.4%), but all other market sizes were in the two-thirds range or higher, peaking in the smallest markets at 77.3%. Stations in both the Northeast and the Midwest were near 75%, but both the South and West were in the mid-60s.

What was the evidence news directors saw? Here's a sampling of the hundreds of answers:

- They quit, they "quiet quit," they cry in my office, they call out more often than is usual for them, they complain to me and to each other, etc.
- We are stretched too thin and that gets worse each year. Further, it's nearly impossible to get applicants anymore. We have jobs posted for months before we even see one application, let alone a good one. This business is broken, and if something is not done soon, at the top, television news will go the same way newspapers have
- Even in myself, this is no longer an enjoyable business. Frustration, frayed tempers, extreme disgust at this corporation and others for their focus on the bottom line and failure to recognize employee burnout and need to increase pay
- People are just exhausted
- 4 staffers broke contract, stress of job and economic situation were among reasons given
- Apathy, fatigue
- Because we are constantly short staffed (7-8 employees at any given time, even though I am constantly hiring), staff is asked to do more or do jobs they don't normally do; frustrations have boiled over at times; many are coming to me with mental health or stress-related issues
- Calling in sick and taking a full week to recover. We work long hours, so I understand
- Increased number of departures with no job lined up
- Employees are more stressed than they were previously and tend to need time off more regularly
- More employees are leaving the business than we've seen before
- Exhaustion, lack of resiliency, apathy, frustration, people leaving the business
- Flared tempers, exhaustion, preventable mistakes
- Higher turnover that started in August 2021. More people leaving the business
- Outgoing employees saying television news is too stressful and the schedules are difficult
- Less passion, more sick days, heavier mood, more stress

- Many more first-year employees paying liquidated damages to get out of their contract
- Don't have enough pto [personal time off]. More expressing stress, anxiety, depression. More want to be closer to home/family
- Staff openly talk about stress, burnout, etc. in newsroom/one-on-one meetings
- More employees taking time off or quitting for mental health reasons
- More folks calling in sick and looking for opportunities outside of news
- More reporters leaving the business. more people breaking contracts
- Shorter tempers, fewer staffers agreeing to overtime
- I am exhausted

Almost nine out of ten news directors (88.8%) say they're trying to do something about it. We break down the efforts into three broad categories: events, counseling and significant changes. Let's start with events:

- "Fun Committee" events. Had a mental health seminar
- Company provided eap [employee assistance program] and station team building events (bowling, workshops etc.)
- Feedback, career growth, staff parties, celebrations
- Lots of food - candy, cake, burgers, BBQ, pizza, etc., therapy dog visits, open communication about issues
- Offer mental health days off the books, gift cards, buy lunch, host midday nature walks, on-site yoga
- Staff cookouts. It makes us feel good for a couple days. Still doesn't stop the burnout

Quite a few stations are experimenting or working on counseling:

- Added mentoring, camaraderie building, increased salaries, encouraged use of sick time for mental health
- Career counseling, more pay, encouragement...nothing worked
- Counselor brought in for 6 weeks, now monthly. All volunteer for staff to participate
- Engaging with staff with non-work-related conversations and continuing to nurture and open, inclusive and positive work environment

- Gym memberships, emphasis on mental health care that we provide, lots of encouragement and coaching

Then there are efforts at making more substantive changes in terms of scheduling and money:

- We have increased salaries to better compete, offered more training and career advancement opportunities and enacted an intentional 1:1 feedback plan between managers and direct reports to focus on their career advancement. Internal promotions at the station and within the company
- A lot of one on one discussion with staff when they are sad; we've made accommodations when anxiety is medical and they need breaks. News directors are more like "moms" than ever before, listening and guiding to the best of our abilities when staff are troubled. We are much more accommodating than ever before for personal/family needs. We stress family and personal health and safety is a priority
- The company gave every employee a bonus; more touch-points between employees and managers
- Accommodating time off requests as much as possible and checking in regularly with employees
- Adjusted schedules (experimented with 4 on 3 off) worked to reinforce work/life balance
- Offered 4/10 schedules to some employees, increased wages
- Increased salary, hiring photographers, moving away from MMJ model in 2023
- Adjusted workloads - to be more even, encouraged pto, increased feedback sessions to help provide encouragement
- Allow mental health sick days, give extra time off, leave people alone on their days off, give up local content, miss out on reporting things. Worked in a few raises but in the end, it's not the money... it's the overworking and under staffing that's causing all the burnout. Simply put, we're all doing too much, with too little and we've lost all quality control
- Being more open to all requests for time off, remote work ... holding station events
- Changed schedules, gave additional time off if needed, accommodate remote work as needed, had HR bring in counselor to meet with staff individually, managers lowered journalistic expectations and let more things slide so as not to upset certain staffers
- For producers, I try to pull them from doing a show once a week
- I accommodate all vacation requests, remember and recognize all birthdays, reward employees with extra time off
- Increased pay, added more training. More open to schedule requests

- Stay interviews, pay adjustments where can, killed 2 headcount to raise salaries
- We don't have people work extra shifts, encourage mental health day

MMJ use slips a bit

As their use is being debated from a safety standpoint, the percentage of MMJs edged lower this past year. We've tracked their growth through the RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey for more than a dozen years. The last few years, the numbers have tended to go up a little, then down a little. This year is down some, with "mostly use" falling by a surprisingly large 7+ points – mostly because of a big drop in top 50 markets. For the most part, the "mostly use" numbers slid into the "use some" category. The "do not use" rose by just 2 points.

Percentage of TV newsrooms reporting using MMJs - 2023

	Yes, Mostly Use MMJ	Yes, Use Some MMJ	Yes, But Not Use Much	No, Do Not Use
All TV	59.1%	27.2%	8.6%	5.2%
Market size:				
1-25	16.1	48.4	22.6	12.9
26-50	9.4	50	28.1	12.5
51-100	63.1	30.8	3.1	3.1
101-150	75.9	19	1.7	3.4
151+	95.7	2.2	2.2	0

	Yes, Mostly Use MMJ	Yes, Use Some MMJ	Yes, But Not Use Much	No, Do Not Use
Staff size:				
51+	13.5	57.7	19.2	9.6
31-50	62.9	28.6	7.1	1.4
21-30	88.9	6.7	2.2	2.2
11-20	95.8	4.2	0	0
1-10	76.5	11.8	0	11.8

The tipping point for news reporter vs. MMJ is in markets 51 to 100. Bigger markets have more news reporters than MMJs, and markets smaller than that are overwhelmingly MMJs.

New and replacement hiring

The latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey found that the average TV station hired 9.7 replacements during 2022 and 1.7 new, additional positions. Replacements are up 2.3 from a year ago, and new hires edged up by 0.3. The averages look pretty good, but the medians are lower. The median (or typical) TV station hired 7 replacement positions and 1 new hire. Both are up 1 from a year ago. As usual, stations in the South and then the West hired the most replacements and new hires.

Who got hired? These are the top TV replacement hires:

1. Producer ... 22.3% ... back into first place after a couple years as #2
2. MMJs ... 18.8% ... down from first place
3. Anchors and anchor/reporters ... 11.9% ... still in third place
4. Photographers ... 10.7% ... up from seventh place last year

5. Reporters ... 9.3% ... down from fourth place last year
6. Digital (including digital producers and managers) ... 7.5% ... steady in sixth place
7. Weather ... 5.1% ... down two places from a year ago
8. Sports anchors and reporters ... 4.2% ... up a spot from last year
9. Video editor ... 3% ... down one place
10. Assignment editor ... 2.4% ... steady at #10

All other positions totaled 4.8%.

New hires

This year's new hires were more varied than a year ago ... when two-thirds of all new hires were among just three positions (digital, MMJ and producer).

1. Producers ... 21.4% ... up from a second place tie a year ago
2. Digital ... 18.4% ... down from first place last year
3. Reporter ... 13.3% ... up a place and more than double a year ago
4. Tie: Anchor ... 12.4% ... up a place from a year ago
MMJ ... 12.4% ... down one spot
6. Photographer ... 7.1% ... same place but a higher percentage

No other position passed 3%.

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.

This research was supported by the S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University and the Radio Television Digital News Association.

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.