

2021 RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey Newsroom Safety

Was a Dangerous Year for Local Journalists by Bob Papper

As a result of rising safety concerns for journalists, for the first time in our history we added a series of safety questions to our 2021 research.

More than one in five TV news directors reported that there had been attacks on their newsroom employees in 2020. That's one of the key findings in the latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey.

The bigger the market, the more likely that there have been attacks, with 39% of news directors in top 25 markets reporting attacks. Journalism is more dangerous in the West than any other part of the country; network affiliation made no difference.

Have there been any attacks on newsrooms employees this year?

	Yes	No
All TV	20.5%	79.5%
Markets 1-25	39	61
Markets 26-50	29.4	70.6
Markets 51-100	24.4	75.6
Markets 101-150	8.3	91.7
Markets 151+	6.5	93.5
Staff size		
51+	38.3	61.7
31 – 50	16.9	83.1
21 – 30	9.3	90.7
11 – 20	6.9	93.1
1 – 10	0	100

Almost half of the attacks were against crews covering what news directors described as riots, protests and civil unrest. Security was beefed up at stations and fences, locks and gates installed. One-person crews became two-person; two-person crews became three ... with the third person frequently a station manager or, more commonly, a security guard.

In their own words:

- Crew surrounded and threatened during civil unrest in May
- Crew was hit with pepper spray during protests
- During protests, our crews have been verbally harassed, shoved, spit on, and hit with water bottles
- Memorial Day riots. Two news vehicles damaged and one anchor hit by a rock
- News reporter and photojournalist were attacked on-air just as their live shot was getting underway
- Protestors target news employees with lasers, tear gas, physical assault

- Reporter and photographer attacked by protestors during period of civil unrest
- Rock thrown through windshield at police protest
- Reporter shoved by police officer. Reporter hit with thrown liquor bottle
- Reporter punched during protest; reporter repeatedly threatened via phone

Note that most of the attacks were made by protestors, but some involved the police.

About 15% of the attacks involved random acts of violence – or the news director didn't indicate it came within the context of any other issue.

- A photographer was robbed at gunpoint while putting his gear into a live truck
- A woman slapped an MMJ
- Photographer attacked on live shot -- assaulted and minor injuries

At about 7.5% each came attacks during political events and rallies ... and COVID-related/anti-mask protests.

- Nothing beyond shoving and acts of intimidation -- all related to mask mandates due to COVID-19
- Protester attacked staff both verbally and physically during political marches
- One of our reporters was verbally assaulted at an Open Colorado rally

I asked if stations had changed any procedures in order to protect employees. Most interpreted the question as relating to physical or verbal attacks, but some included COVID protections as well, and a fair number included measures to deal with both. All told, 86% said they had changed procedures to protect employees.

The numbers varied little from one group (market size, staff size, network affiliation, etc.) to another.

A small sample from the hundreds of answers:

- Add professional security for high-risk situations like protests, limit solo live shots, ban live shots in certain locations
- After many threats, we now require more than one person in the field. Instructed to bail if threatened
- Not wearing identifying logos in situations media may be targeted
- Safety briefings before crews go out
- Hired security for field teams during riot coverage, established stricter rules for teams covering riots (no mic flags/shirts with station logo, no top lights, etc.)
- Have scaled back the amount of MMJs working solo. 2 person crews minimum at political rallies or protests. No solo live shots
- We've established 10-minute check-ins
- In potentially dangerous situations, employees must work in pairs. In riots, employees must be in teams of three. If needed, we will evacuate crews

- Mandatory 2 person teams when covering protests, rallies or other large gatherings. We will consider a 3rd person or having two teams of 2 work together
- No more MMJ - every story is covered by a team in the field
- No one does live shots alone. We have added third "spotters" at any protests
- No challenges to an employee's request not to cover some stories or go to specific locations
- Protest coverage is 3-person team, unmarked cars
- Situational awareness training
- We have kept the doors locked (also a COVID precaution) and have not replied to incendiary messages
- We hire security on a case by case basis
- We implemented a protest policy, so we are required to have 3 people in a group for any coverage of a protest or demonstration: one talent, one photog and one lookout/producer
- We pair our employees when there are safety concerns; whether protests, working in rural areas, going to crime scenes, no one goes alone
- We've created a policy when covering protests to involve a three-person crew. If we think it could get violent, we hire a security guard
- We've never had protests here before, so we didn't have to have a policy, but now we do: Nobody covers protests alone

COVID precautions involved working from home; mask requirements; lots of hand sanitizer; social distancing; Zoom interviews; mic extenders; plexiglass separators; crews not driving together; and personal protective equipment.

Radio

Not surprisingly, the level of attacks at radio stations and on radio news people is much lower. Four percent of radio news directors and general managers reported attacks on newsroom employees. It was primarily a problem in major markets, with one million and more people, where 13.8% of news directors and general managers reported attacks on employees. Region of the country made no difference:

- 2 reporters covering protests were tackled, tear-gassed and pepper-sprayed by police
- A reporter was struck in the head with a bottle during protest coverage. A second reporter was knocked down to the ground, and a 3rd reporter was the target of Twitter attacks because of her coverage of a Yeshiva failing to follow city-imposed COVID protocols
- At a pro-Trump rally, a protester deliberately coughed on our reporter
- During the election, someone shot out the living room window of the News Director
- I received a threat against the station and my family/children by a white supremacist
- News director was threatened and physically harassed by white male protester at a Black Lives Matter protest, on one of the more heated nights
- Reporter was spat upon at Trump rally in Tampa

- Reporters covering protests in downtown Portland have been hit by crowd control munitions, gassed and physically attacked by law enforcement officers. A few protesters have also threatened reporters but none have acted on the threats

Security measures include cameras, door locks and a lot more:

- Allowed conceal and carry on site for those who are licensed
- Bought gas masks, goggles and bullet-proof vests for six reporters so they can safely cover protests
- For covering protests: must attend in pairs, especially for night protests, check in with the editor regularly, avoid being 'in the middle' and leave when you feel you have sufficient material for a story, or if you feel unsafe
- News Director purchased a handgun, but that was his decision and he paid for it
- Protest gear (gas masks, etc.) for all employees
- Secure doors, windows, new telephone system. Exterior video surveillance
- We are sending two reporters to any story we deem to be potentially dangerous
- We have gone to a generic "by news dept." byline for all police beat items due to fear of retaliation for those accused of a crime
- We have new procedures to identify the sender of threatening email or phone messages to any staff who are working in the building on a daily basis
- We have secured a lawyer in case of arrests; we have started sending two reporters out at a time to protests; we gave reporters six-foot-long boom mics
- We've purchased a lot of protective equipment, including bullet proof vests. We've also formalized our guidance to staff on how to stay safe at protests
- Yes, training on situational awareness. Removed station logos from company vehicles. Equipment for reporters for civil unrest, etc.
- We instituted a buddy system when covering social justice protests so no reporter would be alone. When necessary, we expanded that for political coverage as well
- Had newsroom/studio panic buttons installed that directly contact NAU/Flagstaff police, locked all doors and made them accessible only with ID card swipe or manager keys, installed door camera that records front door activity
- Yes. Increased building security, new alarm and lock systems
- They have all taken Hostile Environment training. We have arranged for local PD to add the station to its patrol. Increased security in building
- We equip all of our staff on the street during protests with protective gear. We have a safety plan for every protest and have received training from former police officers about how to remove ourselves from dangerous situations. We also have a security firm available to send guards with reporters, if necessary

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.

About Bob Papper

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