



Are reporters safer now? It depends on the market

By Bob Papper and Keren Henderson

Aug. 8, 2024 – How safe you are as a newsroom employee depends on the market size you work in. Overall, attacks on newsroom employees dropped from one in seven TV newsrooms last year to one in 12 this past year. But you would not have noticed that in the top 50 markets. Attacks in the top 25 markets were unchanged from a year ago (at 22%), but attacks in markets 26 to 50 went up from 15% to 20%.

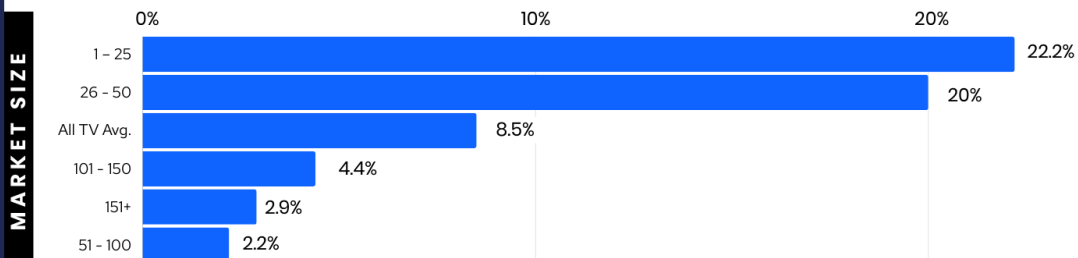
The percentage of attacks in the last year dropped in markets 51 and smaller. A year ago, news directors in the West reported the most attacks, followed by the Northeast. This year, the two areas reversed order. The Midwest and the South were both much lower and, again, almost exactly the same.

Have there been any attacks on newsroom employees this year?

	Yes	No
All TV	8.5%	91.5%
Market		
1 - 25	22.2	77.8
26 - 50	20	80
51 - 100	2.2	97.8
101 - 150	4.4	95.6
151+	2.9	97.1
Staff size		
51+	10.8	89.2
31 - 50	2.9	97.1
21 - 30	0	100
11 - 20	20	80
1 - 10	0	100

ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

What percentage of news directors have reported attacks on newsroom employees in 2023?



INSIGHTS

- Newsroom safety varies by market.
- Overall, attacks dropped from one in seven to one in 12 newsrooms.
- Overall attacks dropped, but top 50 markets saw increased attacks.

THREATS TO EMPLOYEES



When we first asked about attacks, almost half were against crews covering what news directors described as riots, protests and civil unrest. Stations beefed up security and installed fences, locks and gates. One-person crews became two-person; two-person crews sometimes became three. Over time, the attacks have become much more varied and random.

Some of what happened this past year – in their own words:

- Employee was sent harassing emails and voicemails, we've had crews approached in the field
- An individual came into the station threatening to kill everybody
- Group attacked photographer/reporter team when they arrived on the scene of a vigil for someone who had been killed
- Gun flashed at protest, photog assaulted
- Harassed after nighttime live shot. Police were called; perpetrator left before police arrived
- None physical, but verbally and emotionally off and on daily
- Online cyberbullying
- Photographer was shot multiple times by airsoft pellets (BBs)
- Reporter attacked at live location

- Stalkers, assaults in the field (rocks thrown, people pushed)
- Stranger attacked a photographer at a homeless camp. Vandalism, verbal assault, physical altercations
- We had a man show up in our lobby claiming to have a bomb. We had to evacuate the building
- We have had crews attacked by members of the homeless community, though no one has been seriously hurt

Some studies have found that women journalists experience more attacks than men, so we asked news directors if they had noticed a difference. Last year, the answer was “no difference.” Nearly two-thirds said there was no meaningful difference in attacks on men versus women. For the third who said there was a difference, four times as many news directors said women were more often the target. This was especially true in the top 50 markets.

Overall, news directors feel 2023 was “about the same” in terms of danger to news employees compared to the year before. Fifteen percent think 2023 was more dangerous and 10% less so. News directors in the Northeast are noticeably more likely to say they are more dangerous, while news directors elsewhere are more evenly split.

Of course, 2024 is an election year, so expect a spike in attacks.

The general picture is darker when we look at social media. A new question on the survey this year asked whether there have been any attacks on newsroom employees this year on social media. Nearly 40% (38.3%) said yes. If we look at those who know the answer (some said they didn’t know), then 44% said yes, there have been attacks on social media.

Answers by market size are inconsistent, but more than half the news directors in the top 25 markets report attacks on social media. There is no consistent relationship between staff size or network affiliation. Stations in the West report more attacks than in any other region.

We broke the comments down into three broad categories. Most – 75% – fit into the general abuse category – in their own words:

- Abusive comments – some reported to authorities
- Verbal assaults and physical threats

Eighteen percent involve attacks or criticism based on looks – mostly addressed toward women – or sexual orientation or ethnicity:

- Attack against reporters for how they looked

- Just the typical harsh critiques of any new, on-air people, especially women. Viewers making derogatory comments about their dress, hair, weight, makeup, age, reading style, etc.
- Reporters attacked for stories they did on various subjects, producers attacked for work on local political debate productions, reporters attacked for sexual orientation
- Unhappy with bilingual employee

And then there are a group that appear more serious:

- Death threats
- Local sheriff went after a reporter
- Stalking, inappropriate communication/images

MMJ Safety

We again asked whether news directors have changed to better safeguard MMJs. Two-thirds (66.7%) say they have, which is down a bit from last year's 72.9%, but it may reflect that news directors had already changed the past. Last year, the biggest newsrooms were more likely to have instituted MMJ safeguards. This year, the efforts are more spread out. Traditional network affiliates prioritize the protection of MMJs more than other commercial or non-commercial stations.

ENHANCED SAFETY MEASURES FOR MMJS

- News directors are still working to safeguard MMJs, with 66.7% making changes, a slight decrease from last year's 72.9%.
- Traditional network affiliates prioritize MMJ protection more than other stations.
- This year's measures are more definitive, with 44.7% enforcing strict bans on solo live shots and others adapting safety practices based on the situation.

What stations are doing to help safeguard MMJs differs from a year ago. This year's answers are more definite and prescriptive. The top group – at 44.7% – has a strict ban on solo live shots:

- Added more photojournalists, no one person live shots
- Always had a policy of no solo live shots or being out in areas alone. Mostly pressers solo
- I do not allow solo live shots, as it is not safe
- No live shots alone, no going anywhere unsafe or uncertain alone, no interactions with unconfirmed public members alone, no roadside shots, more communication and coordination of whereabouts, more use of virtual news gathering tools
- We do not do solo live shots. A person may work as an MMJ for most of their shift, but a photojournalist will meet up with them if they are assigned to go live
- We don't allow them to go anywhere dangerous by themselves. For reporter/photographer crews, we hire security in large crowd situations (major league games or planned protests)
- Almost no live shots at all, unless there are security guards or special circumstances. No live shots in the morning or the late news
- No MMJ is allowed to do a live shot by themselves. They always have a photographer. MMJ's don't work alone at night or in the morning. They are only used for interviews inside a safe structure (hospital, the station, etc.)

The second group, at 32%, is more variable, determining what the situation demands and scheduling accordingly:

- Two-person crews on risky stories and severe weather
- Double team during breaking news and breaking weather plus election night

The next three groups are pretty close. At 8.7%, stations that allow dayside only solo live shots:

- Always pairs for nighttime live shots and breaking news
- Do not schedule them in evening or overnight shifts
- No reporter works alone early morning or night
- Only allowed during 10am to 6pm, and only allowed to cover planned events, not allowed in neighborhoods by themselves
- We have discussions about where and when to do live shots and discussions before sending staff into possible hostile situations

At 7.8%, there's a group that relies on safety training awareness and the understanding that an MMJ can terminate a live shot or an assignment if he or she is uncomfortable:

- If someone is concerned about covering something in an area where they are uncomfortable, we have a second person go with them
- We brought in a safety expert from the local P.D. to talk about safety protocols and how to be aware of potential danger

The last group, at 6.8%, is still working out its rules of engagement:

- In cases involving demonstrations or large groups of people, I try to ensure at least two people are assigned together
- Try to send second crew member or assistant news director
- We try to send a photographer with MMJ's for all live shots

What separates this last group from the others is the word, "try," which we translate to mean not necessarily.

Radio

Not surprisingly, the level of attacks at radio stations and on radio news people is much lower. Just 2.2% of radio news directors and general managers report attacks on newsroom employees which is down from 3% a year ago. Last year, market size made little difference. This year, over 7% of major market news directors and general managers report attacks, and over 4% of non-commercial news directors and general managers report attacks. Geography doesn't make a lot of difference, but there were more attacks in the Northeast than elsewhere.

Nearly nine out of 10 news directors and general managers (86.7%) thought that the past year (2023) was about the same in danger as the year before. That's up 10 points from a year ago. Another 10.2% think it was more dangerous, and 3.1% thought it was less dangerous. While there were more attacks on non-commercial news people, commercial news directors and GMs were more likely to say that 2023 was more dangerous than 2022. At 21%, major market news directors and general managers are more than twice as likely as any other group to say that 2023 was more dangerous than the year before.

Here are incidents reported in their own words:

- Uninvited guests prowling around the station and its tower
- Someone thru a brick thru the window of the radio station
- Crazy listener came by with a baseball bat
- Vandalism at journalists' homes

We also asked about attacks on social media. This was a lot more common, with 16.2% saying yes. Commercial news directors and general managers are a bit more likely to say yes than their non-commercial counterparts. Here are incidents noted in their own words:

- Vague threats against news writer
- General harassment
- Criticism/Complaints over story as "Fake News"
- Verbal attacks and mostly empty threats but scary enough to alert the authorities
- Reporter who covers abortion was targeted in nationally organized social media campaign against her
- Abusive language on social media
- People are constantly questioning content, photos of accidents, and validity of reporting
- Neo-Nazi threats toward a reporter
- People threatening to get us
- Again just mainly verbal abuse ... "fake news" and threats
- Death threats, vile cursing

Nearly 70% (68.6%) say they saw no meaningful difference in the attacks on men versus women. Among those who noticed a difference, a higher percentage (17.1%) claimed that the attacks targeted men rather than women (14.3%). Of course, radio is more male-dominated than TV.

About the Authors

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About the Survey

The RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey was conducted in the fourth quarter of 2023 among all 1,876 operating, non-satellite television stations and a random sample of 4,764 radio stations. The television response rate is different for every question, but Valid responses came from as many as 1,387 television stations (73.9%) and 631 radio news

directors and general managers representing 1,902 radio stations. Some data sets (e.g. the number of TV stations originating local news, getting news from others and women TV news directors) are based on a complete census and are not projected from a smaller sample.