



## **Local tv news staffing rises despite burnout challenges**

**By Bob Papper and Keren Henderson**

MAY 14, 2024 –The latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey shows the total (full time) local TV news employment up 1% from a year ago to 27,880. Following last year's 5.1% increase, this is particularly impressive considering the total number of local TV newsrooms decreased by 14 compared to a year ago. So the average and typical TV newsroom is noticeably bigger. The total number working in local TV news is 120 shy of the all-time record of 28,000 set in 2021.

It's also impressive because it was not a good year for journalists. In 2023, it was estimated by employment firm Challenger, Gray, and Christmas that print, broadcast, and digital journalism experienced a decline of 3,087 jobs. But those losses appear to have largely bypassed local TV news.

Staff growth is across the board. The average station is up in staff in every size market except 101 to 150 – where it held steady. With the exception of the 26 to 50 market size, where there is a slight drop, the median staff size has increased or remained steady in every other market.

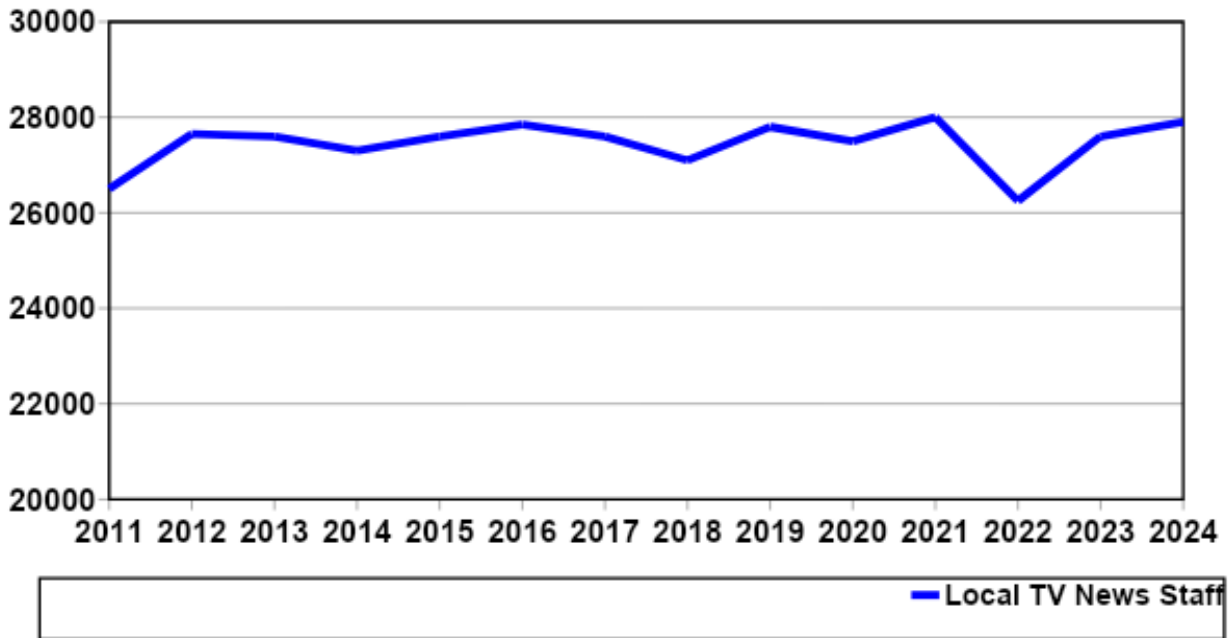
In every market size except 26 to 50, where there was a minor decline, part-time staff either increased or remained largely unchanged.

**TV staff size – 2024**

	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
<b>All TV</b>	47.5	40	201	3.1	1	50	50.8	42	251
Big four affiliates	49.3	40	168	2.8	1	30	52	43	180
Other commercial	41.1	13.5	201	7.3	2.5	50	50.6	16.5	251
Non-commercial	10	7	25	1.8	1	5	11.8	8	26
Market size:									
1 - 25	87.1	96	201	6.4	1	50	95.1	101	251
26 - 50	70.3	71.5	168	2.7	2	10	72.7	72	168
51 - 100	43	44	110	2.2	1	13	45.2	46.5	110
101 - 150	31	30.5	53	2.8	2	20	33.8	34	53
151+	23.5	21.5	51	2.6	1	21	26.5	24	65

See the employment gains reflected in the percentage of stations increasing, decreasing and holding steady in staff.

**Total TV news staff over time: 2011 - 2024**



There have been ups and downs in local TV news staffing over the years in reaction to what has taken place in the economy. However, the employment picture has been relatively steady.

**TV staff size changes ... the past year (2023)**

	Increase	Decrease	Same	Don't Know
<b>All TV</b>	31.8%	21.4%	46.2%	0.6%
Big four affiliates	33.5	20.6	45.8	0
Other commercial	15.4	38.5	38.5	7.7

“Stayed about the same” is the clear plurality winner in staff size for the past year—soaring by nearly 30 points from a year ago. “Increase” dropped 16 points from last year, but decrease dropped as well—down 13.

Last year’s predictions of what staffing was likely to be this year were right on target. Over half expected no change, and 40% expected an increase. A little optimistic, perhaps, but in line with what took place. So what do news directors expect for 2024?

**TV planned staff changes ... the next year (2024)**

	Increase	Decrease	Same	Not sure
<b>All TV</b>	34.1%	6.4%	52.6%	6.9%
Big four affiliates	36.1	5.8	51	7.1
Other commercial	23.1	15.4	53.8	7.7

Despite the layoffs we hear about in the media, local TV news directors expect another positive year. Overall, the smaller the market, the more likely that news directors expect to increase staff size. This year’s increases showed no pattern whatsoever by market size or staff size.

**TV digital staffing largely unchanged**

The latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey found that there are few changes in digital staff size. Full-time held steady, but part-time digital staffing dropped in every market category.

**How many people work on the digital side? 2024**

	Full-time	Part-time	Total
<b>All TV</b>	4	0.9	4.7
Markets 1-25	7.3	1.5	11.2*
Markets 26-50	6.2	1.3	5.9*
Markets 51-100	3.6	0.7	4.1
Markets 101-150	2.7	0.4	2.9
Markets 151+	2.1	1.3	3.4

\*The totals appear mismatched because of different news directors working full or part-time.

On TV, same station comparisons show an increase of almost one person on the digital side. Full-time staff and part-time staff split that increase pretty evenly.

### **What does the staffing look like for a 'typical' TV station?**

The latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey says the "typical" local TV news department of 40 people looks like:

News Director	1
Assistant News Director	0.6
Managing Editor	0.4
Executive Producer	1.6
News Anchor	5.3
Weathercaster	3.4
Sports Anchor	1.5
News Reporter	2.6
MMJ	4.6
Sports Reporter	0.6
Assignment Editor	1.3
News Producer	6.2
News Writer	0.3
News Assistant/AP	0.2
Photographer	5.2
Video Editor	1.8
Graphics Specialist	0.2
Digital Content Manager	0.8
Social Media Producer/Editor	0.3
Web/Mobile Writer/Producer	1.9
Other	0.2

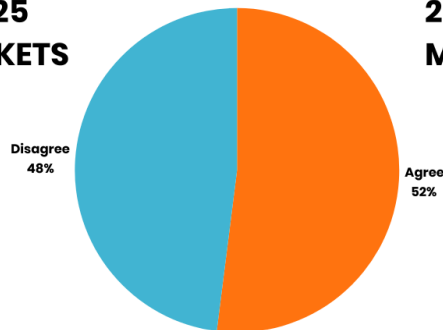
The list tends not to change radically from one year to the next.

### **Retaining staff remains a major challenge**

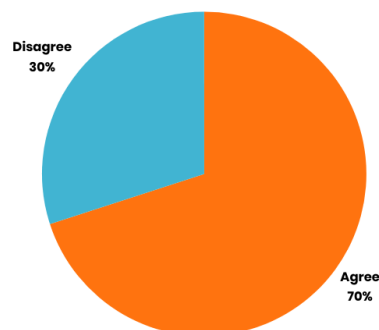
For the second year in a row, the survey asked whether news directors had seen more evidence of staff burnout than in the past. Staff burnout continues to be a growing problem, with nearly two-thirds (62.9%) of news directors agreeing. In the top 25 markets, the percentage is lower at 52%, as well as in the smallest markets at 54.5%. Nevertheless, all market sizes are over 50%, with markets 26 to 100 surpassing 70%.

# STAFF BURNOUT IS A **GROWING** PROBLEM

## TOP 25 MARKETS



## 26-100 MARKETS



- All market sizes are over 50%
- Stations in the Northeast are the highest
- Nearly two-thirds (62.9%) of TV News Directors say staff burnout is increasing

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Stations in the Northeast are the highest. Other commercial and non-commercial stations are lower than the big 4 network affiliates. The affiliates are about the same except CBS stations, which are a little lower.

A small sample of the evidence news directors cited—in their own words:

- Calling out for unscheduled “mental health days” more often
- Comparisons being made more often to those in other fields, especially those who work remotely
- Concerns about pay, less enthusiasm
- Inexperienced journalists often find it difficult to cope with the mental strain of long hours, weekends, and witnessing tragic events. It is difficult for them to receive support from their team as well.
- General fatigue, anxiety, groundhog day feelings
- Increased sick time usage, more intrapersonal disputes
- It is tougher for team members to pay their bills, and some are working two jobs now
- Demonstrating reduced passion, becoming easily frustrated, and lacking the willingness to exceed expectations.
- Increased anxiety and upset regarding news coverage and writing, as well as heightened personality conflicts that were not previously problematic. People are expressing greater burnout.
- More breaking of contracts despite liquidated damages, more leaving the business (either at the end or in the middle of contracts)

- More complaining, lack of checking over one's work, more sick days, morale is super low
- The need to have personal time and being hesitant to cover controversial stories without putting in extra effort to make them outstanding.
- People who are done and walk away - breach contract
- There is no grace anymore. The staff, both in production and news, are tense. No one gives each other the benefit of the doubt. They are quicker to throw their coworkers on the bus. I have become a "mental health therapist." I have several employees who have anxiety. She mentioned that she could not work by herself. I'm still figuring out to handle these issues.
- Two employees referred to harming themselves
- Our staff is smaller, but we're doing more work and not getting paid enough for it. We also need to produce content for different platforms. That combination isn't sustainable and leads people to leave after one contract or sometimes even before.
- Younger people, especially producers, are quitting. MMJ's voice says they're overworked. One 25-year-old MMJ said their knees hurt because they work so hard during the day.

Almost nine out of ten news directors (88.3%) say they're doing something about the problem. Overall, this year's answers are a bit more specific than last year's. They divide into six categories:

At the top of the list, 44% involve time off, scheduling flexibility, decreased workload and the 4-day workweek.

- Allowed working from home for some staff, reduced workload for MMJs
- Approving more time off, being more empathetic
- Empathetic leadership, under the table time off
- Flexibility with schedules. There is nothing promised, but I stay flexible with leaving early for quality-of-life things.
- I combat it by providing options like 4-day workweeks and work from home.
- Offer 4-day work weeks to MMJs
- Give people a mental health break when we can. When the team was stressed, I added "mental health days" to the schedule.

RTDNA/Newhouse School spoke to groups of broadcasters on this topic and wrote about this as a newsroom crisis. Because the problem is caused by (among other things) the 24-hour, never-ending nature of the business, one suggestion has been allowing much of the staff to work a 4-day week. This is noteworthy because one news director in the survey wrote that the stress problem had become less of an issue:

- Not so much [burnout and conflicts] this year because 4/10 schedules really helped burnout subside [along with running] less or no news on holidays

Second on the list, at 28.4%, is counseling, coaching, training, encouragement, parties, and food:

- A lot of coaching
- Additional training, additional feedbacks, gift cards, puzzles, coloring walls, shout out boards, constant thank-you's
- Celebrating small wins, bringing in more food, bringing in therapy dogs
- Our goal is to establish a mentorship program with colleagues in larger markets to boost creativity and support career advancement.
- Fitness classes, meditation classes, free tickets, food truck Fridays, station gear
- We want to make things more fun, so we'll bring in more meals, candy, and treats. We'll also be more flexible with scheduling and relax some requirements.

6.4% involve money:

- Adding completion bonus
- Monthly monetary awards based on peer reviews
- Fighting corporate for increase \$\$, etc

Also at 6.4% – producing less news content:

- Reduced non-TV obligations (ex. radio weather hits)
- Decreased workload to allow MMJs to focus on 1 package per day
- Deciding not to do some projects because of lack of human resources and fear of more burnout
- Decrease news coverage, boost content from alternate sources.
- Replaced more newscasts on Christmas to give people's day off.
- Reuse content to reduce workload.

5.5% note letting at least some people work on stories that are special to them and giving them time to work on those stories.

- Beat days (not on air)
- More long form passion projects
- Giving people time to work on specials – and getting out of the daily mix

The rest, 9.2%, falls under the category of other, which includes nothing.

- Looking into the roots of mental health of college grads who all were diagnosed with depression/mental health issues
- I'm out of ideas
- We've discussed our concerns with corporate, but in their defense, this isn't a company problem, it's an industry problem. We're expected to innovate and distribute content across a wide variety of linear and digital platforms. Staying updated is challenging.

In another new question in this year's Survey, we asked why people are leaving their newsroom jobs. We offered four choices: burnout, salary, work-life balance and other. We allowed news

directors to choose as many answers as applied. The total for the four choices comes to 233.8%. The issues are frequently "all of the above." Leading the way: salaries at 87% of all responses. Interestingly, market size made no difference. Every market size came in between 82% and 91%. Fox affiliates and stations in the Northeast are a little lower than the rest, but the differences are small.

Next, at 72%, is work-life balance. Here, market size makes a difference, with employees at the top 100 markets noticeably more likely to cite work-life balance than those in smaller markets. Other relationships are insignificant or inconsistent.

After that is burnout at 59%. The number is especially high in the top 25 markets and markets 51 to 100. It also is higher in bigger newsrooms and lower at NBC affiliates and in the Northeast.

16% said "other." But half of those cite issues that are really burnout, work-life balance or salary (in that order). Twenty-two percent say the now-former employees want to go to a bigger market. Then there are scattered answers, including wanting to be closer to home and general unhappiness.

Then we asked where those former employees went. We offered seven choices plus other, and news directors could choose more than one answer. The easy winner was public relations/government jobs at 75% (remember, the total comes to over 100%). That is especially true for bigger markets. The easy second-place finisher is another TV newsroom at 52%. That is true for the smallest markets, 101 and smaller.

Among the choices offered, we drop way down after those two to grad school at just 12%. That choice is uncommon among those in top 25 markets. Otherwise, the numbers vary without pattern. Teaching comes in at 10%. People in the top 25 markets are less likely to choose that option.

Real estate comes in at 5%; online/print newsrooms comes in at 3%, and radio news is under 1%.

Other is 27%. Of that group, 21% are salary, bigger newsroom or, most often, PR. Forty percent are "various," unknown or retired. Then:

- One became a bartender, one retired
- Entertainment, streaming
- Business
- Anything that pays a more livable wage. Many young people in a newsroom still rely on their parents to pay for necessities.

### **MMJ use slips a bit ... again**

As their use continues to be debated from a safety standpoint, the percentage of MMJs again 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. After reaching a fairly stable number a few years ago, the numbers have been sliding down. The "mostly use" and "use some"



categories decreased by 4 points, while the “not much” and “do not use” categories increased. Once again, the decline in MMJ usage in the top 50 markets was the major factor.

**Percentage of TV newsrooms reporting using MMJs - 2024**

	Yes, Mostly Use MMJ	Yes, Use Some MMJ	Yes, But Not Use Much	No, Do Not Use
<b>All TV</b>	58.1%	24.4%	12.8%	4.7%
Market size:				
1-25	11.5	46.2	30.8	11.5
26-50	12.5	37.5	45.8	4.2
51-100	63.6	29.5	2.3	4.5
101-150	82.2	13.3	0	4.4
151+	87.9	6.1	6.1	0
Staff size:				
51+	42.4	35.4	19.2	3
31-50	91.4	2.9	2.9	2.9
21-30	87.5	6.2	6.2	0
11-20	77.8	11.1	11.1	0
1-10	66.7	0	0	33.3

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

See the Threats to Employees article on what stations are doing to improve safety for MMJs.

**New and replacement hiring**

The latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey found the average TV station hired 8 replacements during 2023 and 1.1 new, additional positions. Both of those numbers are down from a year ago: replacements by 1.7 and new hires by 0.6. The median (typical) numbers are lower. The typical TV station hired 6 replacements and 0 new hires. Stations in the West and Northeast easily outpaced stations in the South and Midwest. That represents an increase for the Northeast and a drop for the South.

# NEW AND REPLACEMENT HIRING

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- Both of those numbers are down from a year ago: replacements by 1.7 and new hires by 0.6
- Increase for the Northeast and a drop for the South

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

1. MMJs ... 21.5% ... back into first place after slipping to #2 last year
2. Producers ... 21.2% ... back down into second place
3. Anchors and anchor/reporters ... 12.2% ... still in third place
4. Photographers ... 8.8% ... staying at #4, but tying with Digital (including digital producers and managers) ... up from sixth last year
6. Reporters ... 8.2% ... same as last year
7. Weather ... 6.2% ... up a notch
8. Managers (including assistant news directors and EPs) ... 3.2% ... new to the list
9. Sports ... 2.8% ... holding at #9 but tied with Video editor ... up a spot from last year

All other positions totaled 4.3%.

## New hires

This year's new hires were, again, more varied than usual. Still the top two positions made up nearly half of the total:

1. Producers ... 23.9% ... retaining the #1 spot
2. MMJs ... 22.4% ... up from #4 last year
3. Managers (including assistant news director, EPs and managing editors) ... 10.4% ... new on the list
4. Anchors ... 9% ... steady at #4

5. Digital ... 7.5% ... down from #2 a year ago
6. Reporter ... 6% ... down from #3 last year

No other position passed 3%.

### **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.