

Surviving the Times Online By Bob Papper and Michael Gerhard

The economic downturn has put stations and news directors in a web site squeeze. "While the home office cuts back on the web, stations continue to set new traffic records," says Cory Bergman, editor of the online newsletter LostRemote.com. "It's an unfortunate paradox."

The latest figures from the annual RTNDA/Ball State University Survey show a significant drop in the number of station people working on the web. That doesn't mean stations are abandoning the Internet. They're spreading the work around, as more staff members than ever before contribute to the site. Some media corporations are helping out, too, providing corporate templates or upgrading to Internet-friendly technology.

Why a station web site?

Almost all stations (91.3 percent of TV stations and 67.7 percent of radio stations) see a need for a web site, even if they're not sure exactly why. But a weak economy is forcing stations to focus in on what role the web site should fill. Is it simply a necessary companion to a broadcast news operation? Is it a meaningful content provider that can expand the reach of the station? Is it a potential new medium and significant source of new revenue?

"The big focus is on breaking news and breaking weather," says Craig Friedman, managing editor at nbc4columbus.com at WCMH-TV in Columbus, Ohio. That's the first NBC-owned station set up by Internet Broadcasting Systems of Mendota Heights, Minnesota. "The days of sending people on street to get a web story have largely gone by the wayside," says Friedman.

"We do stories where viewers have some sort of emotional reaction," notes Sherrie Brown, former news director at KHBS-TV/KHOG-TV in Ft. Smith/Fayetteville, Arkansas, "and they need an outlet for that, and [the web's] a great tool for that."

Bill Page, news director at WEIS radio in Centre, Alabama, says they use the web to promote both the station and their resort area. With no daily newspaper, the web picks up some of the slack. The site just passed 100,000 hits in a month—in a town of 3,000 people.

"I hope in the near future that we can show it's a driver back to our newscast," says Lee Williams, news director at KTUL-TV in Tulsa, Oklahoma, "but right now we just think it's an expected service that we better do or we're going to compare badly to our competition. Two years ago, people wouldn't have expected it, but now they do."

"I think we've gone from a period where there was a big push to put all kinds of things on a web site," notes Mike Cavender, news director at WGCL-TV in Atlanta. "Let's stream our newscast; let's put all our scripts on line.' I see much less of that now. It seems to me that more stations are using the web to augment the existing brand of the broadcast product. That's certainly the way we're going."

"I'd rather have people just listen to the radio to find out what we're doing," says Matt Murphy, news director at KACL in Mandan, North Dakota. The Cumulus station has no web site. "I'd like to see us have a web site just for the fact that everybody else seems to."

"The Internet needs to be an extension of everything a station already does—a complement to their current business that is additive in benefit, not in cost," says Mark Zagorski, president of WorldNow, the largest supplier of television station web sites in the country.

Maintaining a web site ... without sacrificing the core business

For many stations caught in a budget squeeze, it's the web site that's suffered. Several news directors told us they sacrificed web personnel because the only other choice would have been fewer reporters or photographers on the street. That's the issue that Jim Garrott faced at WEEK-TV in Peoria, Illinois. Like most news directors, he voted for the core business of broadcasting. In fact, Garrott says that Granite Broadcasting felt that "too many of its stations were making that decision," so headquarters picked up the tab for a shared online editor.

Some news directors have found the answer lies within.

"For the last two years, I have been doing about 90, 95 percent of the news, weather and sports updating of the web site," says Garrott. He's not alone. Christine Riser, news director at WJHL-TV in Johnson City, Tennessee, was in at 5 a.m., updating the school closings on the web, and Matt Miller, news director at WGXA-TV in Macon, Georgia, does much of the web work.

"By default, today's web strategy is survival," says Bergman. "Post the top few stories, hope to sell a couple ads and pray for the economy to recover."

"We have had some personnel cutbacks for sure at our web sites around the country," says Beth Pearlman, director of news at IBS. "I think it is a combination of the economy and rethinking web site strategy."

At the Columbus IBS operation, Friedman starts his day at six in the morning; his news editor—the only other web content employee—comes in around 11. They've changed their schedules to reflect what they've learned about when and where people use the web. The first heavy usage starts around eight in the morning—after people get to work. Usage peaks in the noon hour, dips and comes back just before people leave work. They concentrate on having regular updates during peak usage; they do less in the evenings and on the weekends.

In Ft. Smith/Fayetteville, the IBS station has no local content people. Staffers there generally email material to the home office, and it gets posted from there.

Page tries to update news stories around 6:30 a.m. and change the "front page" picture every day. Everybody in the station—all seven employees—pitch in on the web.

Some stations have improved their web sites simply by changing technology, particularly newsroom computer systems.

KEYC-TV worked with a local company in Mankato, Minnesota, DayPort, Inc., which developed an interface with the newsroom computer system. The system also captures and codes every newscast, allowing the station to run streaming video of each individual story right after the newscast—complete with web-only commercials. The station has no full time people working on the web site, and the site makes money.

Mel Martin, senior vice president for research at Fisher Communications, felt that stations were so stretched that they were hurting themselves on the air in order to deal with the web—and doing the web badly anyway. "I'm convinced that the only way to make money on the web is not to throw a lot of money at it," says Martin. His answer: automate everything you can. Fisher developed software with Ingeniux that would apply content filters to wire stories, for instance, and automatically post them to the web. They also worked at making the web an easy extension of regular television work. The goal is to have a robust site that's updated and relevant to the audience—with as few people as possible doing as little extra work as possible.

The chicken and the egg ... resources or revenues ... what comes first?

“On the sales front, almost all broadcast websites are dead in the water, thanks to the economy,” says Bergman. So, do you wait for the site to produce revenue in order to invest more in it ... or do you invest in the web site, hoping it will produce more revenue? Most of the news directors we talked to spoke of investing first, but the annual survey suggests that most stations are waiting for revenue. Everyone we spoke with wanted to add people to work on the web; no one was doing it.

In addition to a 16.5 percent staffing drop in TV and a 9.5 percent drop in radio, the use of both audio and video in television and radio web sites fell noticeably.

“We’ve come to a realization that the web, like any other aspect of our business model needs to have at least some reasonable expectation of financial benefit,” says Cavender. “You can’t pour tons and tons of money into something if you’re not going to see a return.”

Along with cutbacks on the content side, IBS has also shifted sales strategy. For the most part, regular station salespeople handle the web, too, while IBS concentrates more on national and regional sales.

Both Hinds and Riser say their web sites make money. Riser says the station has someone who just sells the web. Hinds doesn’t, but he notes that the station will not bonus the web. It’s purely for sale—unlike so many stations that give the web away as “value added.”

Not at fredericksburg.com, the converged web site for WFLS, WWUZ, WYSK and the co-owned *Free Lance-Star* newspaper. Radio news director Frank Hammon says the converged operation has been going for more than three years, and the web site has a completely separate staff—both content and sales—although it gets content from both the paper and the radio. This year, the annual bridal extravaganza in town wasn’t sponsored by the paper or the radio station; it was sponsored by the web site.

“Stations waiting to grow their web businesses until the economy improves will never make money,” says Zagorski. “They have already decided that the site is a loss-leader. With that strategy, what difference will a strong economy make?”

Some believe that success is only a matter of time—and brainpower. That it’s just figuring out how to do it right.

“The web is going to expand whether it makes money or not,” says Williams. “I really see it as an essential service, and you just hope that somebody finds the right model for making a lot of money on it. Or I’d be happy with a little money right now.”

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What people are looking for:

(Use the table on what people use the web for in TV and radio ... and explanatory notes under. Then:)

According to Beth Pearlman, director of news at IBS, after the home page, the most popular spots, in order, are local weather, local news, entertainment, sports, and health. She says contests, surveys, and quizzes are all getting a lot of play, too.

Mark Zagorski, president of WorldNow, cited a "WorldNow/Magid Research Study" conducted this past summer based on more than 35,000 interviews. Most popular were local news headlines (56 percent) and current weather conditions or forecast (52 percent). "Nearly four in ten are at the site for breaking news coverage, and a little less than that are seeking general information about the local area. Doppler radar is a reason to visit for about a third of the visitors. One in five are looking for a story that aired during a local TV newscast. Sports, local entertainment information, and job classifieds are reasons to visit a WorldNow site for one in ten visitors."

Web sites cited:

Stations:

KEYC-TV ... www.keyc.tv (DayPort)
KHBS-TV/KHOG-TV ... www.thehometownchannel.com (IBS)
KTUL-TV ... www.ktul.com (Allbritton)
WCMH-TV ... www.nbc4columbus.com (IBS)
WEEK-TV ... www.week.com (Granite)
WFLS radio ... www.wfls.com and fredericksburg.com (*The Free Lance-Star*)
WGCL-TV ... www.wgnx.com (WorldNow)
WGXA-TV ... www.fox24.com (their own)
WJHL-TV ... www.wjhl.com (Media General)
WEIS radio ... www.weis990am.com (their own)

Companies:

DayPort ... www.dayport.com
Ingeniux ... www.ingeniux.com
Internet Broadcasting Systems (IBS) ... www.ibsys.com
The Lost Remote (newsletter) ... www.lostremote.com
WorldNow ... www.worldnow.com

Some Favorite Station Websites:

"Just like TV newscasts," says Cory Berman, editor of LostRemote.com, "the best TV websites are produced, not stacked. The best web producers know which stories play well on the web—and how to play them. The home page is always a great mix of breaking news and weather, compelling stories, pictures and video."

We asked Cory Bergman and John Wesley Brett, publisher of thebackhaul.com, for some of their favorite station websites:

KATV-TV ... www.katv.com
KCTV-TV ... www.kctv.com
KDKA-TV ... www.kdka.com
KGW-TV ... www.kgw.com
KHOU-TV ... www.khou.com
KMGH-TV ... www.thedenverchannel.com
KOMO-TV ... www.komotv.com

KPRC-TV ... www.click2houston.com
 KRON-TV ... www.kron.com
 WABC-TV ... abclocal.go.com/wabc
 WCPO-TV ... www.cincinow.com
 WHDH-TV ... www.whdh.com
 WJLA-TV ... www.wjla.com
 WRAL-TV ... www.wral.com
 WSVN-TV ... www.wsvn.com
 WTVJ-TV ... www.nbc6.net

To Find Station Web Sites:

TV and Radio: www.gebbieinc.com/tvintro.htm
 Radio: www.radio-locator.com/cgi-bin/home

Web site templates and operational models

There are three basic models of web site operation, but they come with more variation than even a year ago.

Someone else can handle the web. Internet Broadcasting Systems, of Mendota Heights, Minnesota, forms a partnership with a station, and IBS handles the web. Among IBS clients: Scripps Howard, Post-Newsweek, Hearst-Argyle, McGraw-Hill, and now NBC-owned stations. As this is written, IBS has 51 station web sites up and running with most of the NBC-owned stations to be added by the time this is printed. There are also some joint web sites operated as a separate entity. TBO.com (Tampa Bay Online) is the converged website with *The Tampa Tribune* and WFLA-TV and fredericksburg.com is the converged website for WFLS, WWUZ, and WYSK radio and co-owned *Free Lance-Star* newspaper.

Buy a template and plug in local content. WorldNow, based in New York City, is easily the largest in the field with 125 stations in all size markets. DayPort, Inc. in Mankato, MN is a new entry in the field, with specialized video capturing and streaming capabilities. As this is written, the company is just starting to look for its first batch of clients after setting up KEYC-TV 's web site in Mankato. Another new entry is a system designed for maximum automation by Ingeniux and Fisher Communications in Seattle. More and more companies are making web sites easier for their stations by establishing corporate templates for the stations. Allbritton, Granite, and Media General—among others—have either done that or are working toward it.

On your own. Fewer and fewer stations appear to be going purely on their own. The weak economy couldn't have hit at a worse time in terms of the development of station web sites.

Who Has Web Sites?

All TV	91.3%	All Radio	67.7%
Market Size		Market Size	
1-25	91.7	Major	95.7
26-50	97.1	Large	62.5

51 – 100	96.6	Medium	69.7
101-150	91.7	Small	53.9
151+	83.0		

The television web site data is virtually unchanged from a year ago. Over 90 percent of television stations have web sites—except in the smallest markets where the figure remains over 80 percent. The percentage of radio stations actually slipped a little from last year, but that’s because of a drop in the percentage of large market radio stations reporting web sites this year.

How Many Web Sites Include News?

All TV	93.4%	All Radio	31.7%
Market Size		Market Size	
1-25	83.3	Major	41.3
26-50	100.0	Large	22.8
51-100	93.0	Medium	32.9
101-150	96.3	Small	32.3
151+	93.3		

Television showed a small increase (from 91 percent last year) in the percentage of stations whose web sites include local news. Radio dropped some (from 36 percent) from last year. The reason why markets 1-25 are lower than the others is that that grouping includes quite a few very small, mostly independent television newsrooms—the same group least likely to run local news on their web sites at all.

How Many Are on the Web Staff?

	Full-time	Part-time	Total
All TV	0.99	0.93	1.92
Markets 1-25	1.70	0.80	2.50
Markets 26-50	1.55	0.48	2.03
Markets 51-100	0.98	0.69	1.67
Markets 101-150	0.76	1.10	1.86
Markets 151+	0.52	1.50	2.02
All Radio	1.03	0.78	1.81
Major Market	0.63	1.25	1.88
Large Market	1.63	0.90	2.53
Medium Market	1.07	0.86	1.93
Small Market	0.94	0.35	1.29

The number of people working on the web fell for both television and radio from a year ago. TV dropped 16.5 percent from 2.3 last year—about equally in full time and part time. Radio fell 9.5 percent from last year—all in part timers. In television, the number of full-timers drops steadily with market size, but the number of part-timers actually increases in the smaller markets. Radio is more variable, with the number of web workers generally increasing based on the number of stations within a group. For both radio and TV, the larger the news staff, the more web workers there are.

Do Other Staffers Help on the Web?

All TV	21.1%
Markets 1-25	16.2
Markets 26-50	12.6
Markets 51-100	22.8
Markets 101-150	23.2
Markets 151+	24.3
All Radio	47.4%
Major Market	36.6
Large Market	54.2
Medium Market	44.8
Small Market	50.1

Staffers in both television and radio are more likely to help with the web this year than last year. Television rose 5.1 percent, and radio rose 4.4 percent. There were no consistent differences by staff size, network affiliation, ownership or region—for either radio or television.

Elements of Local News Web Sites

TV	Images	Audio	Video	Radio	Images	Audio	Live Cameras	Video
All TV:	69.9%	29.8%	35.6%	All Radio:	26.9%	22.4%	0	1.5%
Markets 1-25	66.7	38.1	47.6	Major Market	25.0	50.0	0	0
Markets 26-50	91.2	55.9	61.8	Large Market	9.1	15.7	0	0
Markets 51-100	80.0	38.2	41.8	Medium Market	24.1	17.1	0	3.4
Markets 101-150	66.7	18.9	20.8	Small Market	44.4	22.2	0	0
Markets 151+	53.5	11.6	20.9					

In television, other than the very biggest markets, web site complexity tends to diminish with market size. As noted elsewhere, the top markets (1-25) include a number of small, independent stations with few news employees and correspondingly thin web sites. In radio, the most ambitious web sites tended to be those in the biggest markets and the smallest markets. Perhaps reflecting the tighter economy and fewer people, television web sites were, if anything, less ambitious this year than last. The percentage of TV stations using still pictures remained unchanged, but the use of both audio and video actually dropped from a year ago (from 34 percent using audio and 44 percent using video). Radio use of still pictures soared from 11 percent last year, but audio use dropped in half—perhaps reflecting copyright issues.

Anybody Making Money?

	Profit	Breaking Even	Loss	Don't Know
All TV	9.7%	18.8%	27.0%	44.5%
Markets 1-25	4.8	9.5	38.1	47.6

Markets 26-50	12.1	15.2	30.3	42.4
Markets 51-100	16.7	25.9	33.3	24.1
Markets 101-150	13.5	17.3	19.2	50.0
Markets 151+	4.8	28.6	16.7	49.9
All Radio	7.8%	10.9%	12.5%	68.8%
Major Market	12.5	0	25.0	62.5
Large Market	0	0	9.1	90.9
Medium Market	3.7	14.8	11.1	70.4
Small Market	17.7	17.6	11.8	52.9

Television web site profitability rose slightly (from 7 percent last year)—as did radio (from 4 percent last year), but so few news directors know web site profitability that the numbers, especially in radio, should be viewed with caution.

News Director Role with Web Site

	In Charge	In Charge of News Content Only	No Management Role	Other
All TV	19.8%	53.8%	26.4%	
Markets 1-25	4.8	57.1	38.1	
Markets 26-50	14.7	52.9	32.4	
Markets 51-100	17.5	61.4	21.1	
Markets 101-150	38.2	45.4	16.4	
Markets 151+	21.7	56.5	21.8	
All Radio	18.2%	60.6%	18.2%	3.0%
Major Market	22.2	66.7	0	11.1
Large Market	9.1	72.7	18.2	0
Medium Market	10.4	65.5	20.7	3.4
Small Market	35.3	41.2	23.5	0

In television, there is a general trend toward more responsibility for the web site as market size drops. Interestingly, the latest figures represent a decreased web management role for television news directors (from 22 percent, 64 percent and 14 percent respectively) and an increased web management role for radio news directors (from 16 percent, 47 percent and 37 percent respectively).

What Do Users Want From Your Site?

Rank	All TV This Year	All TV Last Year	All Radio This Year	All Radio Last Year
1	Local weather	Local weather	Local sports	Local news
2	Local news	Local news	Local weather	Local weather
3	Local sports	Sports elsewhere	Talent bios	Local sports
4	National news	Talent bios	Local news	Other info
5	Health	Health	Entertainment	Talent bios

			News	
6	Talent bios	Headlines	National news	National news
7	Food	Other info	Other info	Entertainment News
8	Weather elsewhere	Live cameras	Headlines	Headlines
9	Traffic	Food	International news	International news
10	Money	National news	Traffic	Consumer news
11	Education	Local sports	Sports elsewhere	Education
12	Sports elsewhere	Consumer news	Weather elsewhere	Weather elsewhere
13	Entertainment News	Education	Consumer news	Sports elsewhere
14	International news	Weather elsewhere	Education	Traffic
15	Headlines	Entertainment News	Food	Health
16	Other info	Traffic	Money	Live cameras
17	Live cameras	Money	Health	Money
18	Consumer news	International news	Live cameras	Food

In television, the biggest changes came in local sports (up), national news (up), weather elsewhere (up), traffic (up), money (up), headlines (down), other info (down), and live cameras (down). In radio, there were no huge changes. Research tells us that the audience will tend to respond to what a web site does well or what a station is known for. The jump in local sports could simply reflect stations doing a better job of getting local scores up in a timely manner. The drop in interest in live cameras could reflect the novelty wearing off.

About the Survey

The RTNDA/Ball State University Survey was conducted in the fourth quarter of 2001 among all 1,396 operating, non-satellite television stations and a random sample of 1,505 radio stations. Valid responses came from 818 television stations (58.6 percent) and 249 radio news directors and general managers representing 622 radio stations.