An introductory note, if you will. 2019 marks my 25th year conducting the RTDNA (before that, RTNDA) Annual Survey. First at Ball State University and then at Hofstra University. It has been my privilege to do this, and I want to thank RTDNA, Ball State and Hofstra for the support and opportunity to keep this going. Most of all, I want to thank all of you who spend what I know is way too much time poring over the way too many questions that I ask on this survey. Thank you.

- Bob Papper

**How Broadcast Companies and Radio News Directors See the Future**

**by Bob Papper**

The latest RTDNA/Hofstra University Annual Survey found that broadcast companies and radio news directors are overwhelmingly optimistic about the future of the business. But this is the second time I ‘ve asked the question, and, compared to five years ago when I first asked, there are some decided differences in the answers.

**Based on your discussions with station and corporate management, how would you describe the company's outlook on the future of local radio?**

Extremely optimistic 37.7%

Cautiously optimistic 42.5

Neutral 10.7

Somewhat pessimistic 4.7

Extremely pessimistic 2.5

Don't know 1.9

The biggest change in the outlook between now and 5 years ago when I first asked this question is an increase in polarization. The neutral category dropped by 6 points. Interestingly, half of that went to the optimistic side (the cautious group) and half went to the pessimistic side (a little more on the extreme side). Still, overall, the optimistic side came in at 80.2% and the pessimistic side at 7.2%. Non-commercial stations, overall, are more optimistic about the future of local radio: 84.4% versus 78%. The biggest stations tended to be more optimistic. Market size didn’t make any difference except for the smallest markets which were noticeably less optimistic.

That was on the company’s outlook toward the future of local radio. The follow-up question asked for that person’s view on the future of local radio news:

**How would you describe your own outlook on the future of local radio news? And why?**

Extremely optimistic 33.8%

Cautiously optimistic 42.5

Neutral 14.7

Somewhat pessimistic 6.9

Extremely pessimistic 2.2

Optimistic wins again: 76.3% versus 14.7% neutral and 9.1% pessimistic. But that’s clearly less optimistic than the outlook on local radio generally.

Again, non-commercial news directors and general managers were more optimistic than their commercial counterparts. Non-commercial was 82.8% optimistic and 6.3% pessimistic versus commercial’s 72.7% optimistic and 10.6% pessimistic.

Bigger stations tended to be more optimistic, and news directors and general managers in the smallest markets were almost 10 points higher in extremely optimistic than any other group.

Why?

When I asked this question five years ago, I got about 140 responses. This time, it’s over 200 although the answers are largely the same:

* I'm in public media. Non-profit journalism is safer, seeing larger growth opportunities, and increase in use
* In our area, local radio is still the main source of local information & entertainment
* In our public station, we are the only game left in town for radio news
* In smaller markets without local TV affiliates radio news fills a need
* Local content (news, sports, weather, events) is something we can deliver that satellite radio, Pandora, Spotify, and TV either can't deliver profitably, or doesn't care because we are small
* Local news is content that listeners want but usually can’t consume anywhere else. We have a plan when it comes to news – that it be local, concise and personal when appropriate
* Local news/info is the only thing that sets us apart from audio apps, etc.
* More people are listening and reading our content online and have become more engaged on our social media platforms
* Newspapers are dying left and right, and the newspapers left are cutting way back on content
* Stations that are locally focused and provide local VALUE to the listener will be able to survive. Those that rely on generic national news can easily be replaced by national platforms that could provide more compelling, professional content
* There are many new technologies, but in a small market, local is the key. If we can stay big on local events, we should be ok
* This is a new era for audio content. New and emerging technology is making what was once traditional radio even more accessible to younger, more diverse audiences while also capturing the shifting consumption patterns of longtime listeners. Audio search is emerging through smart devices. This is radio's renaissance even if it might look a little different than it has in the past
* We only have weekly newspapers in our rural area. Radio is the only good source of daily local news here
* We're seeing enough growth digitally to make us think that we are not just staying relevant, but can continue to see that growth
* We've seen growth in our newsroom as local newspapers have experienced cuts/shrinkage
* Web, social media, gives us new venues to reach the audience beyond our traditional over-the-air
* When local radio stations play to their strengths of service to the local community they do well. My station is proof
* I don't see an expansion of news, but a re-focus to be as relevant as possible. Might include fewer stories but more in depth and more digital delivery

Those on the pessimistic side had different answers:

* Just so many other options - and - with a president who calls us the ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE - I'm concerned for not only the future of free news - but - for my LIFE!!!!!!!!
* Technology is changing many industries at a rapid pace. Radio is vulnerable to internet delivered music and information
* Those in management need to realize that only stations who value local content will survive
* We're a public radio station which has a strong base of listeners and supporters, but many young people don't own radios. I'm not sure if they'll pick up listening habits, which include our station in years to come
* Most people get news from social media
* The economics are broken
* Commercial stations seem to be getting away from news; some stations still active but with limited staff, time
* Fewer resources and more competition, especially from digital
* Look around, layoffs and buy-outs ruining the business; too many non-radio greedy people in ownership
* More automation, more corporate consolidation, low starting salaries for new personnel out of college, higher paying jobs elsewhere in media

***Bob Papper is Emeritus Distinguished Professor of Journalism at Hofstra University and has worked extensively in radio and TV news. This research was supported by the Lawrence Herbert School of Communication at Hofstra University and the Radio Television Digital News Association.***

**About the Survey**

The RTDNA/Hofstra University Survey was conducted in the fourth quarter of 2018 among all 1,685 operating, non-satellite television stations and a random sample of 3,481 radio stations. Valid responses came from 1,310 television stations (77.7%) and 645 radio news directors and general managers representing 1,938 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.