

THE FUTURE DIRECTION OF TELEVISION NEWS

A look at the technologies, attitudes, and influences affecting the direction of reporting, production, and presentation



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Television news has a long history of evolving—from the days when stories in the field were shot on film through electronic newsgathering to wireless network contribution of live and finished packages. The same could be said of newsroom technologies—from reporters on manual typewriters through a newsroom computer system to laptops in the field connected via virtual private networks (VPNs) to the newsroom system.

Each of these news workflow transitions was gradual, giving journalists and their news organizations time to adapt and adopt that in many cases was years long.

However, in March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, leaving newsrooms, like the rest of society, in a scramble to maintain a degree of normalcy while the pandemic surged and alternatives to long-established routines were deployed.

Many newsrooms accelerated plans only under consideration prior to COVID-19 to a phase of rapid deployment, such as embedding journalists more deeply in their communities and reducing their presence in the newsroom or virtualizing common news workflows in the cloud. In other instances, newsrooms turned to new tools, such as video conferencing apps, to replace newsroom meetings.

These changes and others, however, do not seem temporary—tied to some future all-clear signal from a health authority. Rather, COVID-19 appears to have acted as a catalyst for a transformation in workflows touching newsgathering, production, and presentation that will be felt for years to come.

This white paper examines how broadcasters adapted their news workflows to the new reality and what they learned in the process that will affect how they gather and produce news in the future. It also looks at changing attitudes among news personnel with respect to technologies like the cloud, virtualized news production tools, and long-held newsroom institutions, such as the daily editorial planning meeting.



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Bob Ellis

Topics discussed include:

- Hyperlocal reporting
- Remote reporting and evolving skill sets
- The use of video conferencing apps for reporting and internal communications
- How broadcasters adapted existing technologies and workflows for remote operations
- The benefits of the cloud, including redundancy and disaster recovery
- Maintaining collaboration in the process of creating news

The conclusions reached in this paper are based on interviews with news executives and corporate leaders from eight broadcast organizations, including Al Arabiya, Graham Media, Gray Television, Meredith Corp., News-Press & Gazette Broadcasting, NBCU Telemundo, Sinclair Broadcast Group, and TEGNA Media.

THE COVID-19 EFFECT

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020, prompting governments and society at large to adopt strategies to limit its spread. Travel bans, social distancing mandates, lockdowns, and event postponements and cancellations were implemented.

Television broadcasters, too, responded to the pandemic with steps to limit exposure and maintain operations. Crowded newsrooms in particular were susceptible to the virus, not only because of the proximity of staff but because of the risk that reporters and news photographers in the field, who are exposed daily to a constant stream of people, might return to the station with the virus.

Further, the close confines of production control rooms and the proximity of anchors on a news set demanded change.

A common strategy was to direct as many staff as possible to leave the station, work remotely from home or elsewhere, and adjust the work patterns of those who remained to reduce the likelihood of exposure.

"I think the initial reaction of newsrooms, including mine, was, 'Everybody, go!'" says Bob Ellis, vice president and general manager of Graham Media's WJXT and WCWJ in Jacksonville, Fla. "For photographers, 'You all take trucks home.' For reporters, 'Don't come to the station.' Let's get as few people in here as possible."

For News-Press & Gazette, which owns 45 TV network affiliates, that meant moving 900 employees, half in news, out of stations to work offsite, says Jim DeChant, NP&G director of Technical Operations. Similarly, NBCU Telemundo Center in Miami initially directed about 850 of its 1,200-person staff to work remotely. In news, 70 percent were required to work from home, says Jeff Mayzursk, the network's executive vice president, Operations & Technology.

"COVID definitely changed our workflow in terms of production," says Ruba Ibrahim, director of operations, at Dubai-based Al Arabiya. "We had to send a lot of our staff to work from home."

Only those required to be physically present for on-air production stayed; the rest, including those working on packages and documentaries and media managers, were sent home to work. Ibrahim estimates at the beginning of the pandemic three out of four Al Arabiya news staff worked from home.

While a dramatic step, directing staff to work remotely in the initial phase of the pandemic also set in motion a major rethink and retooling of news processes and workflows that promise to leave a lasting mark on how TV news is gathered, produced, and presented.

For some newsrooms, like those of Sinclair Broadcast Group's news-producing stations, COVID-19 served as a catalyst that accelerated adoption of planned changes aimed at improving the quality and growing the number of news stories produced for on-air and digital distribution.

"COVID moved us five years forward in a matter of five weeks," says Bill Anderson, Sinclair's director of Change Management—News. "It forced change that was probably inevitable and necessary."



Jim DeChant

It demanded change in how news is gathered, meetings are conducted, interviews done, stories edited, and newscasts produced and anchored, he says.

CHANGES IN ATTITUDES

To change just about every aspect of the television news process is no small undertaking. Not only did news management and engineering teams have to establish new workflows, but long-held attitudes and institutions in the newsroom had to change.

For example, the morning editorial meeting, a newsroom fixture during which news management and journalists sit around a conference table to set the direction of the day's coverage, was no longer appropriate at a time when the public was being directed to maintain six feet of social distance.

In its place, the in-person meeting was replaced with virtual equivalents leveraging video conferencing apps like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Slack. What was once a sacrosanct part of editorial operations changed in an instant and in the process revealed where new workflow efficiencies might be achieved.

"The editorial meeting as an institution is very important. However, I think for those of us who have been around the news game for a while, we understand that institution sometimes could be a time waster," says James Finch, director, News Services at Gray Television.

Participants now come to these meetings more prepared to execute the newsgathering mission of the day than they did when they simply sat around a conference table "tossing out ideas that may not be viable and wasting time," he says.

"My hope is that if we've found efficiencies in shaping content for our audience that we will stay with what we are doing rather than going back to something that is traditional just because we've always done it that way," adds Finch.

With reporters and news photographers relieved of commuting to the station to attend a daily hour-long editorial planning meeting, several hours each

week were freed up that could be better spent working sources, reporting, or shooting. In turn, story counts grew and the quality of reporting and stories increased, says Patrick McCreery, president, Meredith Corp., Local Media Group.

"At the end of the day, having our reporters walk out the front doors of their homes in the community in which they live and cover that community is a more efficient, better coverage model," he says.

The pandemic also prompted an attitude change about using virtual equivalents of familiar technologies in the cloud. Pre-COVID-19, many were lukewarm to the idea, adopting an if-it's-not-broke-don't-fix-it attitude.

"One of the challenges in technology adoption among creative users is that they get to a point where



Jeff Mayzumi
CREDIT: NBCUniversal
Telemundo Enterprises



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there's a comfort level and a trust factor with existing technologies," says NBCU Telemundo's Mayzurb. "That is unless there's a real strong motivation to change. COVID forced us to accelerate our adoption of that technology."

Prior to the outbreak, NBCU Telemundo conducted proof-of-concept testing of software-only video switching and software-only playback in the cloud. While pleased with the results, producers resisted getting onboard—at least until COVID. But with 70 percent of newsroom staff ordered home to work, producers had a good reason to rethink their reluctance and adopt cloud-based alternatives, he says.

HYPERLOCAL REPORTING

Some broadcasters saw the initial urgency to get reporters and news photographers out of the station and into the field as an opportunity to advance their long-term strategy of embedding journalists in the communities they cover.

"Embedding reporters means they're probably more connected than ever in their local communities," says Scott Livingston, Sinclair vice president of News.

Establishing closer ties with the community may address a feeling among many news consumers that local media are disconnected from their locale. In 2019, a Pew Research Center survey revealed nearly half of those polled said local media mostly cover areas other than the one they live in. Further, only 21 percent acknowledged ever speaking with a local journalist.

This feeling isn't restricted to the United States. A 2016 BBC Trust study revealed some viewers of BBC Regional TV news, particularly those in more rural areas, "felt that proportionately not enough coverage is given to their location."

In Australia, concern among news consumers about availability of local coverage stems from media consolidation. A 2020 report from the University of Canberra's News & Media Research Centre revealed that nearly half of news consumers who were aware of

media mergers and closures said the actions reduced the amount of available local information. Nearly a quarter said it "reduced their sense of belonging to their community."

While local reporting is the foundation of local TV news, requiring journalists to stay in the field changes the equation, making time otherwise spent commuting back and forth to the station available for reporting. As Livingston puts it, "You're spending your downtime in the communities you serve, giving you more time to work your beat."

Coupled with this deeper community presence, technologies like laptops, small portable cameras and smartphone cameras, wireless connectivity, VPNs to connect back to the station, and cloud-enabled news workflows are making hyperlocal coverage a reality, adds Sinclair's Anderson.

This strategy has already begun paying dividends. Not only has the quality of stories improved due to embedded reporters' closer connection to their communities, but also these same journalists are producing 15 to 20 percent more content for on-air and digital distribution because they are spending more time reporting and less time commuting, says Livingston.

Meredith, too, is redoubling its efforts in this regard. "This is our chance to prove by being more places than we used to and using new mobile workflows our commitment to community coverage," says McCreery.

However, Graham Media's Ellis sees things a little differently. While WJXT's news director assigned geographical beats to reporters a few years before the pandemic to enhance local coverage, the notion of working entirely remotely began wearing thin a few months into the pandemic, he says.

"It's fun to camp. It's not fun to live in a tent," says Ellis. "The point is, what we discovered over time is if we're telling our team they can't come to the station, they are in a restaurant or a gas station [for wireless connectivity or to use the bathroom]."

Today, WJXT reporters start their days in the field, but are encouraged to return to the station to work in



Ruba Ibrahim



Bill Anderson

CREDIT: Abbie McIntosh



James Finch

a renovated news environment. The station created a second newsroom in a public quad, which allows reporters to maintain proper social distancing, he adds.

NEWSGATHERING EVOLUTION

Even before the pandemic, TEGNA Media, like many other broadcasters, encouraged reporters and news photographers to spend more time reporting from the field and less time in the station, says Robert Lydick, vice president, Information Technology and Station Operations, at TEGNA.

"If you have the ability to shoot, edit your story, edit your script, and send it back remotely, often times, it was far better than driving in traffic back to the station

and plugging in your laptop to a docking station and then doing all that work," he says.

Journalists with multiple skills—from reporting, writing, and editing to micing, lighting, and shooting—were already in their ascendancy at TEGNA when the pandemic hit, but with the station group requiring more people to work from home the number of journalists developing new competencies in areas previously left to others grew at an accelerated pace, he says.

"Our journalists demonstrated they could produce and edit and move completed pieces into the workflow chain at an exceptionally high level," he says, adding that the usability of today's remote newsgathering

tools and an emphasis on fast adaptation of workflows to meet the challenges presented by COVID-19 expedited development of new skills.

Perhaps the biggest standout in newsgathering technology to emerge during the pandemic was video conferencing. Apps like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, and Slack offered journalists a convenient way to conduct face-to-face interviews without personally visiting newsmakers.

Gray Television's reporters, for instance, made heavy use of Microsoft Teams and Zoom for interviews to great effect, says Finch.

The convenience of scheduling a video conference interview versus an in-person equivalent, as well as



Patrick McCreery

the natural tendency of some people to be overly concerned about their appearance when an interview is shot in a typical manner, makes Zoom and similar apps must-have technologies. "I don't see that going back," he says.

From a workflow perspective, video conferencing apps also can help newsrooms unlock underused editorial resources, says Sinclair's Livingston.

"Instead of having a photographer and reporter going to someone's office at city hall to talk about the mayor's economic plan, we can just schedule a Zoom call at 10 o'clock, have a producer do the interview, write the script, publish the interview for all of our digital platforms, and then pull a soundbite for the 5 o'clock and 6 o'clock newscast. That's really part of our newsroom of the future," he says.

These apps also offer a way for anchors and others at the station to tap into their journalistic skills, adds Sinclair's Anderson. "Think about all of the journalists in your newsroom who could never really conduct an interview because that's where they were based," he says.

"Your producers, your assignment editors, managers, executive producers, they have this panoply of journalistic skills, but they're limited because they can't exit the building," he says. With these apps, they can do the next best thing.

NEW CHALLENGES, NEW AND REIMAGINED TOOLS

With so many broadcasters requiring journalists to work remotely, developing new workflows and modifying existing ones became essential. Newsgathering in the field, newsroom editorial processes, control room workflows, and news production quickly evolved.

New technologies and existing solutions used in new ways helped propel the necessary changes. At Al Arabiya, journalists, graphic artists, and others sent home to work connected to their workstations at the company's headquarters via virtual private networks and Microsoft Windows Virtual Desktop, says Ibrahim, adding that putting newscasts on air remained the

responsibility of the staff who continued to work from the broadcaster's studios.

At News-Press & Gazette Broadcasting, the pandemic prompted the addition of playout support to the station group's homegrown cloud-based newsgathering and story creation tool, says DeChant.

Left with only skeleton crews at its stations, NP&G used the modified system to streamline the process of taking newscasts to air. "You can actually use the system to build a newscast—pre-produce anchor open and closes, marry the whole thing up, and put it in our playout systems without ever being in the station," he says.

"In fact, you don't need our master control. You could actually push that video all the way through to on-air playout, never even touching our online production control."

TEGNA, too, reimagined a production control room workflow based on existing automation and enhanced with new software code and a virtual control panel to enable offsite control, says the company's Lydick.

"We actually did a couple of shows—but in particular a new show—in a pretty big market [at WXIA in Atlanta] with the person [controlling the show] sitting at the kitchen table," says Lydick.

Gray Television is another example. About 12 years ago, the station group decided to consolidate master control and production control. As part of the project, the station group made it possible for sister stations to control each other's combined master control-production control technology in the event of an emergency.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, Gray Television took remote control a step farther. "What we saw with our workflow is that you didn't need to be in the control room to run all of the technology because when you're working with automation, it's computers," says Mike Fass, vice president of Broadcast Operations at Gray Television.

Deploying what Fass describes as "hefty" keyboard-video-mouse (KVM) systems and applications like TeamViewer and Splashtop, Gray Television gave



Scott Livingston

employees, including those in news, access to their on-premise systems, he says.

"It's kind of made the TV station almost like a cloud," he says, adding that the first Gray station began directing a full newscast from home at the beginning of April 2020, less than a month after the outbreak of the pandemic.

The flexibility remotely controlling stations in this fashion offers Gray Television will be key going forward. "As we continue to install new control rooms, upgrade existing control rooms and build out new facilities, there are some tweaks we're making to the technology we are installing," says Fass.

For example, Gray Television will ensure its news producers have the same tools available to them in the control room, at their desk in the newsroom, and from a remote site. "We want to make sure the lessons we've learned over the last year are incorporated in what we do going forward," he adds.

Another approach is transitioning workflows to the cloud. Meredith completed its first step of that journey earlier this year with group-wide deployment of cloud-based services for master control, says McCreery.

Doing so offered Meredith benefits beyond keeping staff safe during the pandemic, not the least of which is affordable redundancy and disaster recovery. "In the world I grew up in, we had to build redundant control rooms if we wanted to have redundancy. That was an extra million dollars in capital that we had to spend," he says.

However, the cloud offers what McCreery describes as "ultimate redundancy and backup," protecting Meredith from outages due to natural disasters, a fire at a station, or even the pandemic. On the horizon is transitioning production control to the cloud, adding another level of redundancy and further insulating staff from possible virus exposure, he says.

NEWS COLLABORATION

Broadcasters also increasingly have turned to video conferencing applications to facilitate editorial meetings while newsrooms are largely empty. For

example, TEGNA Media expanded the number of its Zoom licenses for its news team leaders and general managers early on in the pandemic, says Lydick.

"We increased the frequency of our meetings and how frequently we talk as a leadership team, as a local team, and as a station through Zoom," he says.

However, opinions are mixed about whether these tools are an acceptable alternative to the in-person editorial give-and-take that happens in newsrooms and shapes what stories and how stories are covered.

"There is something to be said for bouncing ideas off one another as part of the creative process," says Meredith's McCreery. "There's a seed of an idea, and it grows through face-to-face, back-and-forth ideation. I think some of that is lost in the workflows that we're in today, and I look forward to a return to normalcy so that some of that creativity comes back into our product," he says.

Al Arabiya's Ibrahim shares McCreery's sentiment, noting there is a strong desire on the part of journalists to rekindle the in-person collaboration that happens in the newsroom.

"That's the question here," she says. "When it comes to the newsroom and journalists, it's the interaction and being in the environment of a proper newsroom where people exchange and discuss and debate all the time [that's important]."

However, others see video conferencing applications as a tool that can enhance collaboration in the newsroom, ultimately leading to improvements in the news product.

"In general, I think collaboration has been improved as a result [of video conferencing tools]. What used to be informal and ad hoc, now has to be a bit more formalized," says NBCU Telemundo's Mayzark.

"We've gone from relying on the fact that you sit across the room from somebody and can stand up and yell at them or even pass by them and have a quick conversation, to needing to channel that communication through specific, well-defined channels," he says.

Specifically, one-on-one, in-person editorial



Robert Lydick



Mike Fass

conversations have migrated to Microsoft Teams at NBCU Telemundo, which opens up the dialog to a larger group, raising the level of situational awareness among the group and fostering greater editorial teamwork, he says.

Similarly, Sinclair has used Apple FaceTime to foster collaboration. Managers and producers are having one-on-one conversations with reporters and photographers in the field throughout the day, says Livingston.

"There's always a discussion of the story and/or just an opportunity to touch base to make sure that we're all on the same page," he says. "We think there's more collaboration because there are more touchpoints throughout the day."

LASTING CHANGES

Like society at large, television news will be left with marks from the pandemic. Those effects will shape workflows and coverage far into the future.

In certain respects, the pandemic served as a catalyst that accelerated adoption of long-planned strategies. For instance, two years ago Sinclair began studying the question of what the newsroom of the future should look like. Part of that answer was the decision to embed reporters and news photographers in the community to make stories more relevant to local audiences and free up time wasted commuting to stations. The outbreak accelerated implementation of these plans by years.

In other respects, the pandemic forced reevaluation of newsroom institutions like the daily morning editorial meeting. Many broadcasters learned they could replace in-person planning meetings with video conferencing, freeing up thousands of hours annually that could be better spent reporting.

Broadcasters also leveraged these apps to enrich news coverage. Newsmakers who might otherwise have had difficulty scheduling in-person interviews with reporters now could be interviewed at home or at work with video conferencing apps, making it more convenient to accept reporters' interview requests. The apps also enabled news organizations to use their



journalists more effectively by giving those with duties that confine them to the newsroom a means to assist in newsgathering.

Attitudes among many about how the cloud and other technologies enabling remote workflows changed rapidly. When considered at all prior to the pandemic, these tools were more frequently seen as something that would be nice to have.

However, work-from-home mandates largely changed that point of view. Suddenly, many news managers viewed the cloud—where virtualized alternatives for editing, graphics, and other newsroom workflows exist—as a necessity.

Taken together, these changes point to a future for TV news operations—whether on air or online and on social media—that is far more flexible and better positioned to serve the news and information needs of local audiences.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Kurz is a contributing editor to *TVTech*. He has covered the TV industry for over 30 years, served as editor of three industry magazines and written more than a thousand articles on technology.