Study: Cutbacks impact quality of news

By David Bauder, AP

NEW YORK — Years of newsroom cutbacks have had a demonstrable impact on the quality of digital, newspaper and television news and in how consumers view that work, a study released Monday found.

Nearly one-third of consumers surveyed by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism said they have abandoned a news outlet because it no longer gave them what they had counted on, either with fewer or less complete stories.

Pew's annual State of the News Media report delivered what has become a common litany of grim business statistics. Television news viewership is down. Newsroom employment at newspapers is down 30 percent since a peak in 2000 and has gone below 40,000 people for the first time since 1978. *Newsweek* shut its print edition and *Time* magazine is cutting staff.

"These cutbacks are real," said Amy Mitchell, the project's acting director. "And based on the data that we've collected, they are having an effect."

Government coverage on local television news has been cut in half since 2005, the study said. Sports, weather and traffic now account for 40 percent of the content on these broadcasts; yet that's just the sort of information readily available elsewhere. That's a recipe for future erosion, Mitchell said.

Forty-two percent of adults under age 30 counted themselves as regular local news viewers in 2006; last year that was down to 28 percent, the study found.

Cable news is increasingly cable talk, although it's difficult to conclude whether that is because of financial considerations or the sense among executives of what viewers want. Over the last five years, CNN has sharply cut back on produced story packages and live event coverage, the study found.

During the presidential campaign, reporters increasingly acted as megaphones instead of investigators, Pew said. More stories are simply reporting verbatim what candidates or partisans were saying, rather than using those statements as a starting-off point to explore an issue.

There are many more places that people can go for news or information now. The question is whether consumers are leaving prominent news organizations because they are not getting what they want, or whether these outlets can no longer afford to give them more because consumers are leaving, said David Westin, former ABC News president.

"Increasingly, it's not just a question of what people want," said Westin, who presided over an era of cutbacks at ABC News. "It's what people are willing to pay for."

More organizations are experimenting with charging for digital content, which Mitchell called a positive sign. The Pew report said 450 of the nation's 1,380 daily newspapers have started or announced plans for some kind of paid subscription model. Partly as a result, newspaper circulation stayed steady in 2012 after years of decline. Revenue continued to go down, though.

With newsroom cutbacks, some news organizations supplement their reporting through work funded through other sources, like ProPublica and the Kaiser Family Foundation's service for reporting health news. When he was at ABC, Westin said the network accepted a grant from the Gates Foundation for reporting on subjects like the water supply in Africa it

otherwise would not have been able to afford.

Pew’s survey of 2,000 consumers taken earlier this year revealed that a majority of people had little or no awareness that the news industry has financial problems. The people aware of the problems are the ones more likely to abandon a news outlet because they weren’t getting what they wanted.

Of the people who left a news outlet, 61 percent said that the stories were less complete than they had been, Pew said.

“We are at a point where we have to get back to quality and think about what we are giving people,” Mitchell said.