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WXAA Ch. 23 slashes 11 jobs

Cuts at Fox affiliate are part of restructuring by corporate owner

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ALBANY -- WXXA on Wednesday slashed 11 jobs, the latest turbulence in Capital Region media.

The cuts at the television station, Fox affiliate Ch. 23, were part of a larger restructuring by owner Newport Television LLC at stations across the country.

A Newport spokeswoman said the cuts do not reflect either the performance of WXXA or the strength of the local market.

But the cuts quickly follow announcements of staff reductions at other regional media outlets, including the Times Union and The Daily Gazette newspapers, leading some observers to worry about diminished news quality in a market considered information-hungry.

"The opportunity to encounter quality journalism is disappearing as the financial structure that supports it is diminishing," said Ed Dague, a former anchorman at WNYT Ch. 13, the local NBC affiliate, and a blogger on timesunion.com. "That's what scares me."

Newspapers and television stations depend largely on advertising revenue. And when the economy slows, or when business owners fear that it will, advertising spending typically declines.

But observers on Wednesday said the recent reductions are as much about the changing nature of media as current economic conditions. Established media habits are shifting as viewers and readers migrate to Internet sites.

"There certainly is a lot of churn and anguish in the media because eyeballs are turning to new outlets," said Paul Conti, a former WNYT news director now teaching at The College of Saint Rose in Albany. "That's shaking things up."

"It's (affecting) the whole industry," said Lisa Jackson, news director at WRGB Ch. 6 in Niskayuna. "It's certainly affecting everyone in this market, and it's a sad sign of the times."

Jackson said WRGB, a CBS affiliate, has been "belt tightening" but has not cut staff recently and is not planning to do so.

Other outlets have: WTEN Ch. 10, the ABC affiliate in Albany, cut 20 jobs in February, including anchor Alyssa Van Wie and reporter John Craig.

In May, the Times Union announced it was offering buyout packages as part of an effort to reduce its payroll of about 500 employees by 30. And this month, the Daily Gazette said it had cut six jobs, including three in the newsroom.

Conti said the cuts announced by WXXA likely had more to do with the station's purchase by an equity firm looking to maximize profit than with media-industry struggles.

Owner Newport Television is a Missouri-based subsidiary of Providence Equity Partners, the Rhode Island firm that in March purchased WXXA and 55 other television stations. Newport said Wednesday it was cutting about 157 of its 2,100 workers.

Spokeswoman Lucy Neugart said Newport remains committed to television news, adding that the company did not intend to cut WXXA's news programming. She declined to say which WXXA positions were cut.

Bill Sally, general manager at WXXA, declined to comment, as did news director Gary LaPlante. Churchill can be reached at 454-5442 or by e-mail at cchurchill@timesunion.com.

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