

# Equipping newsrooms for the future

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LOCAL NEWS ACCELERATOR COHORT CASE STUDY  
JANUARY TO MAY 2025

**At the start of 2025, 10 Chicago-area newsrooms took on a challenge: to build stronger, more sustainable futures for their organizations. Over five months as part of the Northwestern University Local News Accelerator (LNA) at the Medill School of Journalism, they worked toward ambitious goals — refining business models, deepening audience engagement and learning directly from industry leaders.**

**Over the program, participants launched newsletters, expanded their reporting coverage and built up new digital audiences — like growing their presence on YouTube. Along the way, they picked up practical tools and strategies designed to last well beyond the program itself. With research-backed insights from Medill, 1-on-1 support from coaches and a spirit of collaboration across newsrooms, LNA participants walked away with real, measurable achievements.**



La Voz del Paseo Boricua editor-in-chief Xiomara Rodriguez presents at the LNA's graduation. Credit: Hannah Carroll



Chicago in Arabic coach Audrey Azzo works with co-founder Malek Abdulsamad. Credit: Hannah Carroll

Organization	Outcome
The Lansing Journal	YouTube channel serving a core audience and increasing local advertising revenue by 46%
Growing Community Media	Nearly tripled social media reach and added more than 200 newsletter subscribers
La Voz del Paseo Boricua	Brought in \$65,000 in fresh funding from the Field Foundation, streamlined an inefficient print distribution strategy, systemized crucial data collection and introduced new editorial pillars for stronger community relevance
Chicago News Weekly	Launched new research-informed newsletter, secured first sponsorship and a steady increase in subscribers
Chicago Southsider	More than doubled revenue goal of \$3,000, bringing in \$7,500 by the end of the program
Record North Shore	Added 780 top-of-funnel newsletter subscribers and 80 paying subscribers; won a new \$150,000 grant through the Google News Initiative to expand into Skokie
Evanston RoundTable	Launched a newsletter about kids to deepen engagement with 10,000 current subscribers
Reparations Media	Implemented social media content calendar, resulting in increased engagement and brand visibility; developed new launch plan for upcoming podcast season
Connect Puerto Rico	Doubled subscribers, brought in \$20,000 in fresh funding from the Listening Post Collective and gained national visibility
Chicago in Arabic	Launched MVP of Arab-focused cultural and commercial exchange. At the same time, the outlet relaunched its website into US in Arabic, which reaches audience clusters in Chicago, New York, Montréal and Los Angeles.

## What participants learned

### **Audience research provided new and detailed insights to all participants**

Medill conducted 10 customized research surveys on behalf of the LNA's participants, each with the goal of helping clients better understand their audiences and how to best attack their goals for their project. This insight helped guide the organizations to understand who their customers are, what content they prefer, how they interact with local news and a number of other pillars.



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**“We haven’t had clear answers on what our audience is or looks like in Austin for years,” said Max Reinsdorf, the interim executive director of Growing Community Media. “Yes, we conduct our own reader surveys, but getting answers from folks you already have relationships with only goes so far. Getting broader perspective from the LNA survey, and not having to execute it (bandwidth!) was great for us.”**

Some participants were even able to leverage their research findings into clear strategies for pursuing additional sponsors.



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**“We are using the research we got through the LNA to refine our content pillars so they respond to exactly what our readers wanted to see more of, and to go after institutions that serve our readers (identified in the research) for annual sponsorships,” said Xiomara Rodriguez, the editor-in-chief of La Voz del Paseo Boricua.**

**Business model canvas, three-part project statement and other LNA tools helped solidify goals and laid the foundation for future projects**



LNA director Mackenzie Warren explains the Business Model Canvas. Credit: Hannah Carroll



**“All the worksheets to organize our thoughts around the idea like the ‘From/To’ and the Business Model Canvas crystallized our thinking and was super helpful,” said Malek Abdulsamad of Chicago in Arabic.**

Over the course of the program, teams learned to think systemically — not just about content, but about sustainability. The structured approach helped turn good ideas into actionable plans.

These frameworks also served as a shared language across the cohort — allowing coaches, experts and peer teams to communicate more effectively. When everyone is working from the same toolkit, collaboration gets easier, accountability increases and organizations are better positioned to maintain momentum after the program ends.

Here are some samples that LNA participants used throughout the program:

## How The Lansing Journal used the Value Proposition Builder

<b>For</b> (What customer segment?)	Adam Advertiser
<b>looking to</b> (what problem are they trying to solve? What situation are they trying to improve?)	Coasting on word of mouth but senses that might not be enough over time.
<b>our</b> (Product or service)	Video projects
<b>will</b> (Provide that benefit or alleviate what challenge?)	Convey Adam's value to an audience that he's not reaching and build confidence that he's thinking about the future and participating in modern marketing
<b>Unlike</b> (list the primary alternative)	Other advertising he could / doing nothing
<b>our</b> (Product or service)	Video products
<b>will</b> (How are you setting yourself apart)	use local expertise at modern national scale
<b>because</b> (why should they believe you?)	He trusts us, has seen the value of our work and we have done video for ourselves and can prove the benefit in this market

Now, re-write your value prop so that it flows easily and can easily be read or stated.

For Adam Advertiser who is relying on word of mouth for customers' senses this might not be enough. He is very busy but could be willing to hear about ways he could improve/modernize his customer acquisition efforts.

Lansing Journal video products will tell Adam's story in a modern format that drives new customers and builds his confidence that he's ahead of the curve.

Unlike other customer acquisition programs, LJ video products leverage local expertise (what LJ learned YT expert) and influence (LJ staff are known and trusted in video).

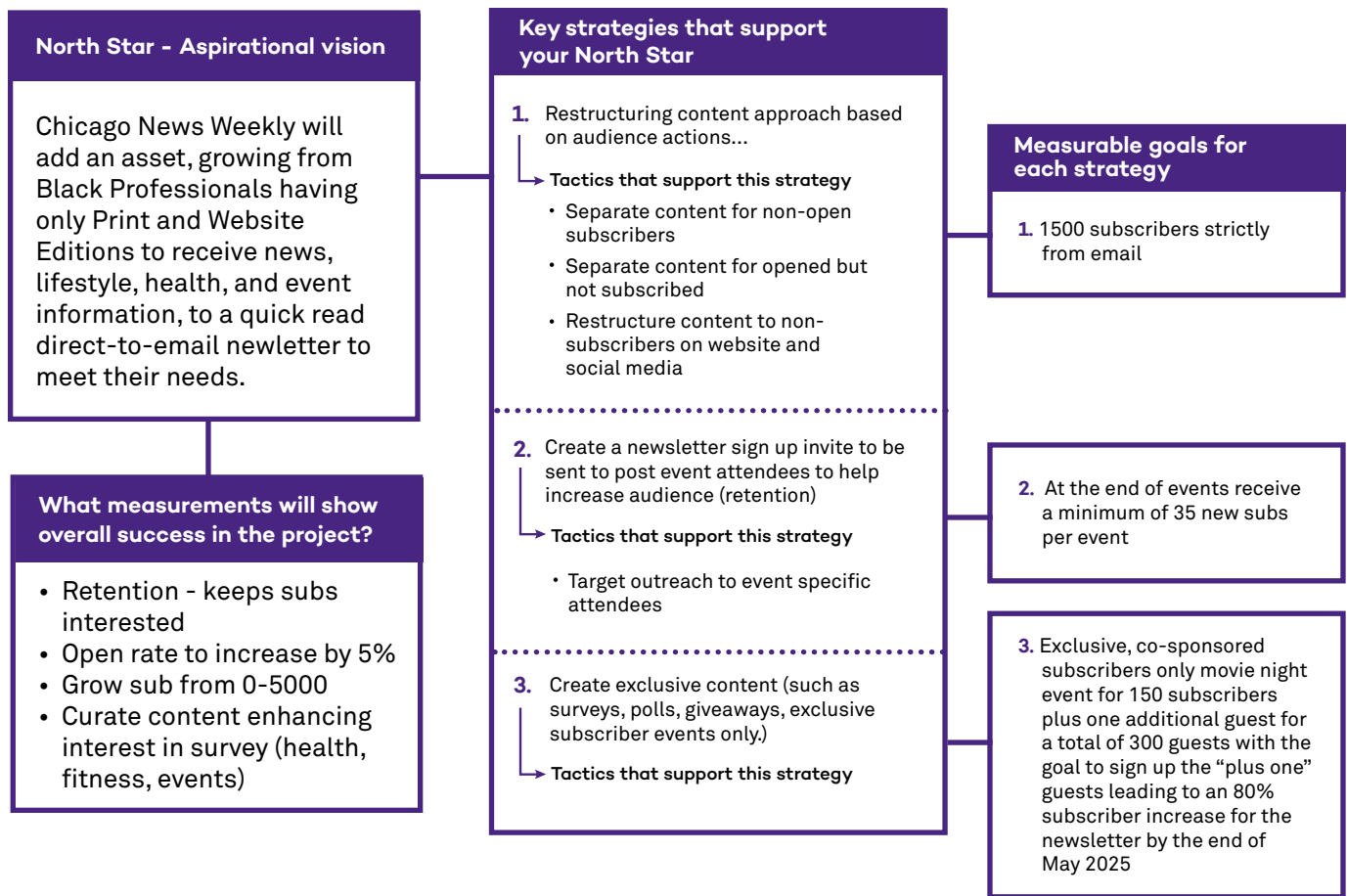
He will pick us because:

- 1) He trust us
- 2) He is compelled by the numbers
- 3) He doesn't want to be behind the curve

# How Chicago Southsider used the Business Model Canvas

<p><b>Customer segments</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Primary Audience:</b> South Side Chicago residents, particularly Black communities, seniors and marginalized groups</li> <li>• <b>Secondary Audience:</b> Advertisers targeting South Side residents (e.g., local businesses, healthcare providers, schools)</li> <li>• <b>Tourists &amp; Visitors</b> looking for authentic, cultural experiences on the South Side (e.g., events, food, history and art)</li> <li>• <b>Supporters:</b> Mission-aligned readers willing to pay for premium content</li> </ul>
<p><b>Value propositions</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hyperlocal, community-focused news not found in mainstream outlets</li> <li>• Platform that amplifies underrepresented voices</li> <li>• Cultural and community event coverage with storytelling that connects people</li> <li>• Targeted and affordable ad space for local businesses</li> <li>• Local guides and recommendations tailored to residents and visitors</li> </ul>
<p><b>Channels</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Substack newsletter</li> <li>• Website (ChicagoSouthsider.com)</li> <li>• Facebook Live and social media</li> <li>• Local events and community forums</li> </ul>
<p><b>Customer Relationships</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community trust and transparency</li> <li>• Interactive engagement via surveys, social media and events</li> <li>• Premium subscriber perks</li> <li>• Relationships with sponsors and advertisers through measurable ROI</li> </ul>
<p><b>Revenue streams</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Newsletter Sponsorships (\$500/issue)</li> <li>• Ad Placements (\$250/slot)</li> <li>• Subscriptions (\$5/month or \$50/year)</li> <li>• Press Release Packages (\$150–\$300)</li> <li>• Grants and journalism support funds</li> </ul>
<p><b>Key resources</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Editorial and writing team</li> <li>• Substack platform &amp; analytics or other newsletter platform</li> <li>• 30,000+ newsletter subscribers</li> <li>• Community credibility and access</li> <li>• Photography/video contributors for events</li> <li>• CRM and content management tools</li> </ul>
<p><b>Key activities</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating and publishing newsletter content</li> <li>• Outreach to advertisers and sponsors</li> <li>• Community engagement and listening</li> <li>• Event and campaign coverage</li> </ul>
<p><b>Key partners</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local businesses and advertisers</li> <li>• Community organizations and nonprofits</li> <li>• Tourism boards, Airbnb hosts, local hotels</li> <li>• Foundations and grantmakers</li> <li>• Cultural institutions and event organizers</li> <li>• Associations and affiliations (Northwestern, Lion Publishing, Dearborn Realtor Board, NAREB, Miss Chicago Org)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Cost structure</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Content creation (writers, editors, photographers)</li> <li>• Substack and web hosting fees</li> <li>• Paid ad spend for growth</li> <li>• Admin, legal, and compliance costs</li> <li>• Event and partnership activations</li> <li>• Freelancer and operational costs</li> </ul>

# How Chicago News Weekly used the Three-Part Project Statement



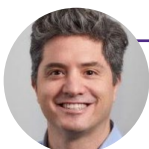


LNA assistant director Yazmin Dominguez works with Chicago News Weekly on a three-part project statement. Credit: Hannah Carroll

### Importance of collaboration

As part of the LNA cohort, participants had the opportunity to work and learn from other organizations who were confronting similar challenges and, perhaps, had already overcome obstacles another peer was trying to navigate. In addition, the LNA gave all teams access to coaches with a variety of experiences working with local news organizations, in the media industry and in the areas of journalism research.

This support helped facilitate a sense of community and collaboration among participants, pushing each team to strive for its goals.



**“Other organizations would benefit to be in the same room as educators, coaches and colleagues who all understand the same challenges and be inspired by vital work happening despite industry headwinds,”** said Ryan Osborn, the director of development for The Record North Shore.

## Value of having a coach to hold your team accountable

In addition to opportunities to collaborate and learn from a variety of outlets and educators, the LNA's method of pairing a coach with each organization built in a level of accountability that organizations sometimes struggle to find in the absence of participating in a program. So often, publishers and editors confront any number of challenges on a given day, pushing back meetings and conversations about bigger picture topics (launching a newsletter, rethinking web design, etc.) to cover a breaking news story or help a reporter file a FOIA request.

LNA participants found great value in having someone from outside their organization holding them accountable and pushing them to achieve what were, in some cases, long-standing goals.



**“Like many small news organizations, we have no shortage of great ideas, just limited time and resources to bring them to life,” Tracy Quattrocki, the publisher of Evanston RoundTable, said. “Participating in LNA made our long-standing dream of launching a parenting newsletter possible.”**



Ben Reininga presents research on the latest trends in media consumption at an LNA gathering. Reininga was the 2024-25 Nieman Berkman-Klein Fellow for Journalism Innovation at Harvard University and previously worked as the head of editorial at Snapchat. Credit: Hannah Carroll



Coach Andaiye Taylor (left) works with Chicago News Weekly publisher Cheryl Mainor Norman. Credit: Hannah Carroll

### **Importance of staying up-to-date on latest newsroom tools and strategies**

With a rapidly changing news media landscape, exposure to the latest trends and research in the journalism world through the LNA better equipped participants to run their businesses and have confidence to make data-based decisions. Particularly on the business side — where several participants said they needed the most support — this level of education set the organizations up for long-term success is growing their businesses even amid the uncertain ecosystem.



**“Ongoing education about changes in the media landscape is vital for every newsroom,”** said Laura Miller, the managing editor for Chicago News Weekly. **“Sales training and insights into market innovations aren’t always accessible, and most teams don’t have the time to make major changes day to day. This program helps newsrooms clearly understand where the industry is headed and offers tools that are actually useful.”**

## Team profiles

### Chicago News Weekly



**Problem to solve:** Launch a newsletter targeted at Black professionals in Chicago between 35–55 years old, earning at least \$75,000 a year.

**Qualitative win:** Launched the “Stay Ready Playbook” newsletter and landed a pre-launch email sponsor.

**Quantitative win:** Achieved a 60% open rate on the newsletter featured as a high-value on-the-go source for busy Black professionals, intended to reflect and serve Chicago’s upwardly Black community.

**Link to full case study:** <https://tinyurl.com/bdcpabat>



**Ongoing education about changes in the media landscape is vital for every newsroom. This program helps newsrooms clearly understand where the industry is headed and offers tools that are actually useful.**



**Laura Miller**  
managing editor,  
Chicago News Weekly



## Chicago Southsider

**Problem to solve:** Move from a passion project to a profit-driving enterprise.

**Qualitative win:** Developed business strategies and techniques as well as a honed pitch to position Chicago Southsider to generate revenue, while sunsetting a potentially distracting product spin-off that research suggested would not be core to the Southsider's immediate growth plans.

**Quantitative win:** Earned its first \$7,500 by the end of the program, more than double than its goal of \$3,000, with a path forward to accelerate growth and build toward hiring staff, while continuing to grow Substack following past 30,000 subscribers.

**Link to full case study:** <https://tinyurl.com/yaw5snkr>



**I realized that even though I'm in the news business, I need to spend the lion's share of my time on marketing and sales-related activities in order to build a sustainable venture. Generating consistent revenue gives me the ability to hire support and improve the editorial product based on audience feedback instead of relying solely on my own time and capacity.**



**Charlene Rhinehart**  
Publisher  
Chicago Southsider



## Connect Puerto Rico

**Problem to solve:** Grow subscriber base, organize workflow and add national partnerships to help introduce Connect Puerto Rico to a wider potential audience beyond Chicago.

**Qualitative win:** Developed a stronger understanding of best practices as a solopreneur and built out strategies for growth and tools to serve the newsletter long-term.

**Quantitative win:** Doubled audience from just under 100 subscribers at the start of the program to 198 by the end, sustaining an open rate of 58% and secured a \$20,000 grant from the Listening Post Collective.

**Link to full case study:** <https://tinyurl.com/38db96wj>



**The biggest lesson from LNA is one I keep relearning, which is that you don't have to have all the answers before you get started. You can test and learn things in real time. And that win leads to other wins.**



**Jillian Melero**  
Founder  
Connect Puerto Rico

## Evanston RoundTable



**Problem to solve:** Launch a parenting newsletter that the organization had discussed for years but could never get off the ground, aiming to develop their audience with young families.

**Qualitative win:** Developed a new parent and caregiver-specific newsletter, Raising Evanston, and formulated a long-term growth strategy to use it to attract advertisers and new subscribers.

**Quantitative win:** Utilizing an opt-out strategy built off an existing email list, the newsletter launched with 10,000 subscribers and has not seen significant drop off.

**Link to full case study:** <https://tinyurl.com/fk4hd5fe>



**Like many small news organizations, we have no shortage of great ideas, just limited time and resources to bring them to life. Participating in LNA made our long-standing dream of launching a parenting newsletter possible.**



**Tracey Quattrochi**  
Publisher and  
executive editor,  
Evanston RoundTable



## Growing Community Media

**Problem to solve:** Grow its audience for *Austin Weekly News* in the Austin neighborhood of Chicago, while maintaining momentum for more profitable titles in Oak Park, River Forest and elsewhere.

**Qualitative win:** Expanding the publication's coverage of Austin, including the development of a newsletter and a stronger social media presence.

**Quantitative win:** A 162% increase in reach on Instagram and 200 new newsletter subscribers (a 10% increase).

Link to full case study: <https://tinyurl.com/4ukfbw24>



**LNA helped us by providing resources and, importantly, structure in first framing the questions we need to have answered and then answering them. Meaning — we came in knowing we had shortfalls with our Austin title but weren't even sure what that meant. LNA helped us frame the question, 'How do we best serve and grow our Austin audience?' and helped us find the answers.**



**Max Reinsdorf**  
Interim executive director,  
Growing Community Media



## La Voz del Paseo Boricua

**Problem to solve:** Significantly optimize print distribution to save money and get the product into the hands of those who value it the most.

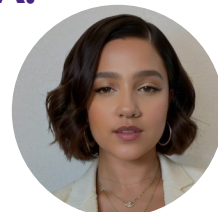
**Qualitative win:** A clearer understanding of who the readers of La Voz are and a sustainable distribution model to demonstrate clear value to sponsors and funders.

**Quantitative win:** Optimizing distribution sites from more than 200 to 33 that receive the highest traffic and increasing the minimum pickup rate threshold from 50% to 75%. The team also piloted a new senior housing distribution plan at four locations to reach their older audience and added \$65,000 in new philanthropic grant funding from the Field Foundation through strategies learned through the LNA.

Link to full case study: <https://tinyurl.com/mryk2bjr>



**The coaches and leaders of the LNA make the work digestible and straightforward, but the outcomes are profound and, for many of us, truly life-changing. I was surprised at how capable and empowered I felt coming out of the LNA.**



**Xiomara Rodriguez,**  
Editor, La Voz del  
Paseo Boricua

## Reparations Media



**Problem to solve:** Grow the audience for their podcast “Change Agents The Podcast.”

**Qualitative win:** The team developed a stronger presence on social media, including launching their Facebook page. Through their work in the LNA, they also launched an animated video series and completed a documentary.

**Quantitative win:** Received nearly 300 unique podcast downloads in 90 days following increased social media presence and shift in video strategy.

**Link to full case study:** <https://tinyurl.com/26s3de6k>



**I think our better sense of self and our mission as an organization will be of tremendous asset as we move forward.**



**Maurice Bisailon,**  
executive producer and program  
director, Reparations Media

## The Lansing Journal



**Problem to solve:** Transform The Lansing Journal's YouTube channel to serve its core audience and overall mission while contributing to increased revenue after gaining viral attention from around the world.

**Qualitative win:** A more professionalized YouTube channel appearance, an incorporation of YouTube video work into The Lansing Journal's global content plan and clear marketing personas to target businesses for advertising and sponsorship deals.

**Quantitative win:** Increasing local advertising revenue by 46% more than doubling revenue from YouTube advertising.

**Link to full case study:** <https://tinyurl.com/4k95uj3r>



**It's exciting for us to have these new YouTube products that are authentic to our local expertise and that meet a real need in our local community. And it's a relief to move away from chasing views and clicks to generate revenue from YouTube ads, affiliate links and other non-local sources.**



**Melanie Jongsma,**  
publisher,  
The Lansing Journal

## The Record North Shore

**Problem to solve:** Determine whether and how to expand The Record North Shore into new communities — specifically highly educated, highly affluent but underserved Highland Park and Highwood.

**Qualitative win:** Hired a new reporter to cover Highland Park and produce more local government coverage; also expanded into neighboring Highwood. The expansion positioned The Record to win \$150,000 in funding to expand into another undercovered suburb, Skokie, through the Google News Initiative Growth Catalyst project.

**Quantitative win:** The team added 720 new newsletter subscribers and 80 new paying members, including 20 from Highland Park.

**Link to full case study:** <https://tinyurl.com/4uf7pbfx>



**We feel momentum and are energized to serve our communities. The biggest lesson is that as we expand, we must be more intentional about spreading the word and building our audience funnel.**



Ryan Osborn, director of development, The Record North Shore

## Chicago in Arabic

**Problem to solve:** Build a platform to connect Arab professionals with individuals in need of their services in Chicago.

**Qualitative win:** The “From/To” chart and Business Model Canvas helped organize and crystalize the team’s thoughts and pushed them to achieve their goal by the end of the program.

**Quantitative win:** Daleel now exists to serve the population of approximately 150,000 Arab Americans in the Chicago area, with the potential to be replicated in other areas with high concentrations of Arabic speakers. At the same time, Chicago in Arabic relaunched their website into US in Arabic, which reaches audience clusters in Chicago, New York, Montréal and Los Angeles.

**Link to full case study:** <https://tinyurl.com/mr9ms5sh>



**It takes a lot of work to build small and simple ideas. In our mind, this was supposed to be something super simple that we can just grab a template online and do it. The LNA taught us that it is a lot more complicated than that, but now we’re there. I think the path forward, now that we have the centralized platform that we’ve always wanted, is just to push it, grow it and bring more traffic to it.**



**Malek Abdulsamad,**  
Chicago in Arabic  
co-founder