

Chicago Public Media

CASE STUDY | DECEMBER 2024



How Chicago Public Media focused on reaching young Chicagoans and strengthened its relationship with its audience.

The Chicago Media Public team deepened its understanding of young Chicagoans through research, assessed the feasibility of potential tactics for reaching them, and ultimately found new ways of building trust with this key demographic.

As a result, Chicago Public Media:

- grew loyal readers in Illinois aged 18-24 by 45 percent
- grew social audiences in this age group by 22 percent
- acquired 2,000 new subscribers for a pilot text-messaging program
- found a new funder who supported that text messaging pilot – and support its future expansion in another experiment

A brief history of Chicago Public Media in relation to the community it serves.

Chicago Public Media reaches 3.5 million Chicagoans each week and serves an audience that reflects the diversity of the region. The company took its current form in 2022, when public radio station WBEZ’s parent company acquired the Chicago Sun-Times, a storied newspaper, creating the largest nonprofit news organization in the country.

The merger allowed WBEZ and the Sun-Times to leverage each other’s strengths—WBEZ’s history of in-depth, community-focused programming as Chicago’s NPR station and the Sun-Times’ legacy of investigative journalism and local reporting as “the hardest-working paper in America.” Together, they provide trusted local news in digital, print, audio, video and interactive formats. The combined entity aims to create a stronger, more diverse news ecosystem, with a focus on serving the full spectrum of Chicago’s communities.

What problem was Chicago Public Media trying to solve, and why was solving this problem strategically important for the news organization?

Chicago Public Media recognized that to ensure its future sustainability, it needed to better engage younger audiences that were not being reached as effectively by its existing products, particularly people aged 18 to 24 in underserved communities. This younger demographic is vital for the long-term health of any news organization. CPM felt it needed to take a more intentional approach to understanding what resonates with these audiences—what they’re reading, watching and listening to digitally—and then develop products that would better serve them.

Ultimately, solving this problem was critical to CPM’s mission of serving all Chicagoans; it wanted to cultivate an engaged audience of younger readers and listeners who saw the organization as a trusted source of local news and information. In turn, this audience could help sustain the organization’s long-term financial health.

Chicago Public Media's Initial Goals

The CPM team began with a set of qualitative goals for what it wanted to accomplish and how its success would benefit both the organization and the community. In the LNA, the team refined those into quantitative SMART goals for measuring the project's success.

The team hoped that through this project, it could:

- Actively attract young Chicago-area residents (under 25) to reliable news
- Make Chicago Public Media a resource to raise their social status among their peers, increase their influence in their communities and strengthen their connections to the region
- Create a model for news organizations to better inform our community's youth, thereby strengthening our democracy and our region

The team knew it would be successful if it was able to:

- Grow its social media audience by 20% with 18- to 24-year-olds, in particular on Instagram and TikTok, during the six months of the LNA
- Increase the number of 18- to 24-year-old return visitors in Illinois each month by 20% in the same period
- Launch at least one project that engaged community members in a new way and gained a critical mass of users (at least 500 users within a month of launch)
- Find funding to support this work, either through philanthropy or a member-support campaign

How did Chicago Public Media go about solving its project?

CPM started the project with the goal of reaching and engaging younger audiences and understanding how to best serve these audiences.

The first major milestone within the Local News Accelerator was adapting this idea into a clear vision statement – an ambitious, guiding statement that challenged the group to think big while pointing to the impact if successful. The team crafted numerous versions throughout the first session and ultimately landed here:

We will actively attract young Chicago-area residents (under 25) to reliable news by making Chicago Public Media a resource to raise their social status among their peers, increase their influence in their communities and strengthen their connections to the region. Through community research and ongoing listening, we will develop a deep understanding of young Chicagoans' needs and habits to grow their appetites for reliable news. If we succeed, young residents will come to us proactively, enjoy spending time with us and see us as both a tool for their own success and a trusted way to engage with issues they care about. Recognizing that the future of news depends on engaging younger audiences, our project aims to create a model for news organizations to better inform our youth, thereby strengthening our democracy and our region.

From-To statements were useful throughout the program, and you can see one in the team's vision statement. In fact, that statement was developed partly by combining a number of individual From-To statements together.

Here are some examples of From-To statements the team developed in the early stages of the program. Some are directly tied to the project and CPM's ambitions. Others speak to the larger changes the team wants to see in the community and to their hopes that this work could drive positive community outcomes.

FROM	TO
A newsroom that needs to improve engagement with younger audiences.	A newsroom that understands the interests and motivations of 16-24-year-old Chicagoans.
Two organizations that don't meaningfully serve the under 25 audience.	One organization with a clear strategy for reaching them.
Publications young Chicagoans may or may not be familiar with.	A publication young Chicagoans rely on and trust (and even talk to their friends about).
Publications young Chicagoans might read for news.	A go-to source for connecting, enjoying, and engaging with Chicago and a reader's specific community.
A place of passive consumption.	A place young Chicagoans turn to intentionally to know more about their community.
"Many young people in America / our community feel disconnected from each other and their community, and deal with the many ramifications of that disconnection."	"Young people feel more connected because of our work and that has a positive impact on our city."
An organization that reaches a diverse set of Chicago readers but doesn't connect with the young adults (and soon-to-be adults) in our community.	An organization that truly reaches and represents all of Chicago.

The team then ran this idea through the Feasibility Filter to check that this project made sense for the organization and to stress-test the parts that might be most challenging to accomplish

Feasibility Filters	Y	N	DK	Comment/insight: If we're not unanimously YES, what how would we change the project so we all check YES?
Core to the mission	XX			Absolutely; if we can't serve younger people, we have no future — and are missing a big opportunity to fulfill our current mission.
Reason to believe we can do this	X		X	We believe on our ability to reach 18-24-year-olds, but we need to understand more about them and the potential strategies for reaching them before we'll truly know. This is a key challenge for us that will shape how we approach our strategies and tactics.
Now is the time	X			It is going to be a busy summer from a news standpoint; we'll need to make sure we use those events to fuel and succeed in this project (and not let them stand in the way of making progress)
Decision-maker support	X			We have the full support of the content leadership.
Differentiation/competitive edge	X			Our combined staff is larger than many of our competitors. Also, our mission — we're free and multiplatform, and our strategy of truly putting community engagement and impact at the center of our editorial strategy makes this a great fit.

This process reinforced that the reasons the team chose this project still held true and that there were plenty of reasons to be confident it could succeed. But it also pointed to a major need: to better understand the target audience. CPM engages in regular community listening sessions and uses active feedback loops to help guide its journalism, but for this project, a more targeted outreach was needed.

A Medill-sponsored researcher interviewed 27 young Chicagoans across the city and found a number of valuable insights. Some of these findings, such as interviewees' use of digital devices to consume media and their inconsistent consumption of local news, confirmed CPM's own hypotheses and matched other Medill research that helped inform the project. Other, more surprising insights became directly relevant to the strategies and tactics the team used within the project. In particular, results found a number of young Chicagoans used local media to confirm information they had seen on TikTok and other social platforms. This insight spurred the CPM team to make fact-checking and explainer articles a key part of the project.

The team continued to narrow the scope of the project and honed in on three main areas of focus:

1. Increase social-first vertical video engagement on WBEZ and CST handles
2. Develop and assign fact-check / explainer articles based on the LNA research and Google searches
3. Find funding and attempt an experiment with text messaging as an engagement strategy to reach young readers and improve trust

The team then set SMART goals for each of those objectives (mentioned above). This further guided the project. From there, it determined the specific strategies and tactics it would use to make progress toward those goals.

This was an iterative process — the team used Sprint Planning to quickly test aspects and then learn from what was working. To commit to consistently producing fact-checks and explainer articles is daunting – it involves significant resources, which would reduce the capacity for other coverage, in addition to getting internal buy-in, sorting out processes, building out workflows, finding appropriate topics for the brand and for reaching new young readers, and more. But, opportunistically assigning one article that we already have the knowledge and information to produce and learning from what happens is doable.

The team took the same approach with social video. One strategy was to increase the variety of videos posted to increase engagement. The underlying tactics used included more slideshow videos, “things to do this weekend” videos, videos from major

summer events, like concerts and more. By focusing on testing a few quick turn-around videos instead of perfecting the processes first, the team rapidly learned what worked and what didn't. This informed the next set of videos.

This iterative approach resulted in early progress and allowed momentum to build over time. The first two fact-checks/explainers the Sun-Times published performed well and gave the team lessons it could share with the newsroom. This helped encourage adoption, and eventually, these types of stories became a part of regular coverage pitched by reporters, including around major news events like the DNC.

This iterative approach continued to serve the team well as small successes built into bigger successes.

Results

The team exceeded all four of its main goals and set itself up to keep growing these audiences into the future.

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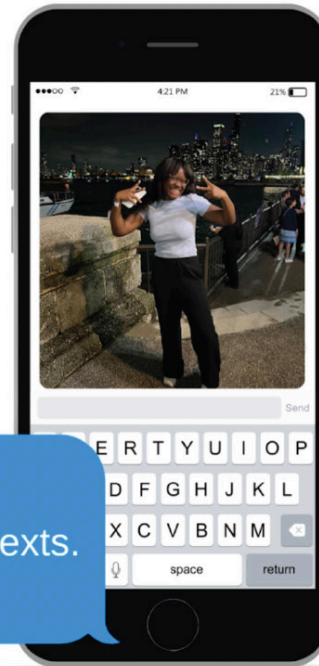
This was meaningful growth, and the team accomplished this by integrating this work into its core processes. They also regularly asked for feedback and incorporated it. With the text messaging project, for example, they regularly solicited feedback from readers about the product's usefulness and considered questions and comments from users in creating coverage. At the end of the DNC, they received high marks from the people who followed the coverage: 96% of respondents said they were happy with the Sun-Times' DNC coverage.

This is why we do what we do ...

Very HAPPY. It was almost like being there without the hassle. Thank you so much for keeping us in the loop--figuratively speaking. Such a pleasure to feel so well informed.

Didn't read the paper. Only followed your texts.

You did a very nice job. It was fun reading your texts. Thanks!



What did the news organization learn about its target audience?

The team identified early that it needed a deeper understanding of its target audience. Research performed by the Local News Accelerator was crucial to shaping its approach. The team picked up a few key insights and confirmed a few other theories.

- The Sun-Times and WBEZ have strong name recognition, and many young Chicagoans said they trusted both outlets
 - But their local news consumption is not habitual. The Sun-Times and WBEZ were not where most individuals initially received their news.
- The most common reasons they visited the Sun-Times or WBEZ were:
 1. Friends or family sharing links: This helped explain why they trusted these news sources.

2. “Political events” made them seek out this news: In fact, many associated the Sun-Times with political news coverage, which was a potential opportunity (and also a potential challenge as the site looked to provide more than just politics news).
 3. Fact-checking viral stories on social media: They said they’re more likely to click on a search result from a local news organization they recognize and trust it over a national outlet.
- The organization could do more to highlight its mission and some of its key features, including that it is non-profit and doesn’t have a paywall. (One respondent cited a paywall as a problem, likely thinking of a competitor’s website.)
 - Digital devices are the most common way these individuals consume media
 - They used their phones and many cited Spotify as a place where they’d discovered a show like WBEZ’s Curious City

What worked?

Starting with understanding: The team prioritized understanding the news habits and preferences of Chicago area residents under 25 through surveys, interviews and interactions with their social media audience. They directly engaged with young Chicagoans to learn how they consumed news and what topics mattered most. This foundational research helped tailor content and strategies to meet the needs of the audience, ensuring their efforts were both relevant and effective.

Meeting younger users where they are: The team met young people where they already spend time—on platforms like TikTok and on their phones through text messaging. It wasn’t just the stories being produced that changed – it was their distribution. The team produced short-form social videos and launched a text chat to deliver timely, digestible news directly to younger users. These platforms provided a way to engage with real-time information and foster consistent connections with the audiences.

Make it integral to the daily work: From the beginning, the CPM team was determined to build any experiments into the core of their work; it would not allow this to become a side project because the likelihood of longer-term success would drop. By making younger audience engagement a priority throughout their editorial and outreach strategies, the team began to think of producing relevant content for younger users as a key aspect of their work, not an afterthought. This step helped CPM succeed in reaching its goals during

the six months of the LNA, but it also sets it up for continued, organic success moving forward.

Big events as opportunities, not distractions: It was a busy summer of news. Instead of treating big events like the Democratic National Convention (DNC) as competing priorities that would make the experiments a distraction, the team leaned into those events to help focus and accelerate the project. The team used the DNC to launch its text messaging initiative, allowing it to engage with young people during a high-interest moment. They also expanded fact-checking projects, aligning content with the heightened interest in trustworthy news during a major political moment.

Texting leads to funding: Text messaging became central to reaching younger audiences. With initial support from a new funder, the team launched a pilot that proved successful. The positive response led to additional funding, allowing the team to expand into a new experiment aiming to try to reach more Spanish speakers. This outcome speaks to the importance of the team's work over the course of the LNA.

What didn't work? What would the organization do differently now?

The biggest obstacle was often finding the people and resources to implement these initiatives. To try so many things in a short period meant competing with existing priorities for limited resources. Everyone in the newsroom wears multiple hats, including the members of the team working on this project, so the team regularly reassessed the feasibility of this work. One key lesson over the course of the LNA was the value of early successes. These fostered buy-in and highlighted the value of this work, attracting support and participation from others in the newsroom. This was one reason the team was able to stay on track and ultimately reach its goals.

What was surprising or challenging?

Winning over some members of the newsroom took time — these projects required workflow changes and, in some cases, asked reporters and editors to try something new during an already high-stakes news period. The CPM team worked through these challenges by being transparent and finding early adopters who could evangelize for the project. The team's focus on iteration also helped here: by testing quickly, the team found early successes and useful learnings that could inform future choices and win over skeptics.

The team focused on building this work into the core of their day-to-day, and not treating it as a side project. This was essential to the longer-term success of the project. But in the short term, it made it more challenging to make things happen quickly. This was also made more complicated by the fact that WBEZ and the Sun-Times were still two separate newsrooms and many distinctive editorial products. While WBEZ and the Sun-Times worked well together on the project, additional logistical challenges arose from coordinating efforts between organizations. Sometimes, it took twice as many conversations to get everyone working in the same direction. Integrating their planning and resources, and maintaining clear communication across teams, was also essential to avoid duplication of efforts and ensure the project aligned with both organizations' long-term goals and operational plans.

What are key takeaways or advice for other news organizations to learn from and/or apply to their own LNA experience?

“The Medill Accelerator project for Chicago Public Media (WBEZ and the Sun-Times) enabled the two newsrooms to focus on reaching new, younger audiences through techniques that can be expanded for different audience groups and platforms. CPM outreach on TikTok and texting during the Democratic National Convention and then fall election cycle were successful in attracting new audiences with different content across new platforms. The project built a CPM collaboration that will support future efforts to gain younger audiences and broader audiences using an expanded portfolio of platforms.”

— Gilbert Bailon, executive editor of WBEZ

“The Medill Local News Accelerator gave us the space to focus deeply on a new initiative and develop a structured approach to testing and learning during its launch. The bigger challenge lies in figuring out when a test transitions into something scalable for the entire newsroom. However, this experience has been a game-changer in helping us refine how we pressure-test new ideas and move them closer to operationalization.”

— Victor Lim, Senior Director of Audience Development

“When it comes to identifying and reaching specific audiences you need strategic alignment and buy-in across the organization so tactics can be baked into the daily workflow. By focusing on younger audiences for our LNA project, it gave the organization space to have deeper conversations from the leadership level to the implementation level about the newsroom’s content, platforms and approach to reaching and engaging this key demographic. This focused energy allowed us to make assumptions, test theories, and break existing workflows in an effort to learn more about this audience and how we fit into their lives. While we did see gains (and still are!) in growing our reach with younger followers, ultimately, this allowed more people across the organization to have more sophisticated conversations on who our audience is and the tools at our disposal to reach them. This to me is the real win. It’s not just about growing followers, it’s about changing the culture of the organization to think “audience-first” across every aspect of our operations so we can challenge each other to make smart decisions based on a shared understanding of who we are and why we exist – for our community.”

— Angela Massino, Senior Director of Audience Engagement, Chicago Sun-Times

For us, the challenge was to start up on a new social media platform, TikTok, to reach and build a new audience. What we didn't realize was how quickly we will be able to build interest and engagement by sharing what we're already creating for Instagram. People began to stumble on our stories, kept coming for more and we kept it going for them. We made a conscious effort to think about TikTok and include it in our workflow and processes. To us, it's our way of creating brand awareness, fostering good will and propagating our mission. We want our audience to believe in us and care about what we do so earnestly. Our hope is that we will build community and the younger audiences we reach will one day become members in the future.

— Saman Creel, Social Media Editor, WBEZ

Where is the news organization going from here? How will Chicago Public Media apply what it learned in LNA moving forward?

The CPM team will continue to build its audience of young Chicagoans based on everything it accomplished in the LNA. Reaching people under 25 is essential to CPM's mission and essential to building a sustainable organization. The focus on integrating this project into the core of their work during the program sets the organization up for longer term success. And arguably the biggest win during the LNA — finding an outside funder to help pilot the text messaging initiative, which then led to additional funding — shows that this work can be financially valuable today as well. CPM plans to continue reaching younger readers and listeners and viewers where they are — because it knows how important doing so is for building a better Chicago.