

Chicago Reader

CASE STUDY | DECEMBER 2024

READER

Northwestern | MEDILL
Local News Accelerator



How the Chicago Reader reimaged and implemented a new citywide newspaper distribution by developing a data analysis tool on its mission to better reach new and existing readers, and to better achieve diverse and inclusive citywide readership.

As a result, the Chicago Reader:

- Successfully transitioned from biweekly to weekly publishing
- Added 45 new distribution points on the South and West Sides of Chicago
- Boosted circulation from 60,000 papers per distribution cycle to 63,300 papers per week

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

Founded in 1971, the Chicago Reader was originally conceived as a free arts and culture print publication. The Reader's status as an "alternative weekly" newspaper embedded in Chicago's arts and music scene produced a cult following among young, hip audiences, creating name recognition for the Reader over time.

The newspaper's original delivery map focused on targeting young professionals who commuted to work, with the highest concentration of distribution points located near CTA stations. As of 2024, more than 1,100 locations—in the form of plastic boxes, newspaper racks and drop-off points at local businesses—acted as distribution points for the Reader's print product.

Over time, the Chicago Reader expanded operations, creating a digital platform while expanding the distribution of print newspapers. The addition of newspaper racks and stacks as distribution points in local businesses, museums, and art and culture centers enabled the Reader's print product to permeate cultural spaces across the city.

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

A 2024 Medill-funded research project for the Chicago Reader produced key insights into the publication's audience demographics and behavior. The project analyzed large pools of data collected through Nielsen-Scarborough, responses to an interactive survey on Qualtrics, and remote and in-person interviews.

The surveys provided key insights into the current makeup of the Chicago Reader's audience segmentation. The analysis of this data revealed that the readership is reflective of Chicago's diversity, which is indicated by the distribution of age, income, education and ethnicity. The surveys also mapped out geographical factors that influenced the LNA project and evaluated neighborhoods across the city based on a number of factors, including how much money people spend on arts and culture relative to their income.

The Reader's original distribution map was gradually constructed from word-of-mouth requests over the course of decades and was largely based on a social/transportation economy that no longer functions in the same manner. In short, the map was outdated, having been created before audience impact and engagement demographics were recorded. Additionally, the map lacked any mechanism for being evaluated or updated. The team had not yet developed protocols for determining whether any one distribution point was a valuable asset to the print product.

In order to tackle creating a model of this kind, the Reader needed to fill in several information gaps on current and prospective readership of the print product, as well as a lack of established protocols for evaluating and updating the distribution plan. To remedy these information deficits, the Reader team needed data and a consensus regarding which standards would be used to evaluate each distribution point. Once these standards were determined, the team needed to identify distribution points to relocate, identify neighborhoods to focus their expansion on, and identify specific institutions to house distribution points.

Addressing these issues was recognized as critical in the Reader's efforts to ensure the accessibility of their print product to representative audiences across geographical locations and demographics within the Chicago area. Therefore, this project was ultimately designed to create more equitable access to quality news and information on culture and the arts, with a specific focus on growth within Chicago's South and West Side neighborhoods, which had comparatively fewer distribution points at the project's onset.

The Chicago Reader's Initial Goal

The Reader's distribution overhaul plan was ambitious. The team began by doubling distribution from once every two weeks to once per week to better serve audiences and keep them up to date on local news. The team also planned to reposition 15% (165) of its 1,100 boxes by Oct. 4, 2024, while maintaining its 0% pullback rate. They also prioritized keeping their print product completely free of cost.

The impact goals governing the Reader's LNA project included creating a more informed and civically engaged public, facilitating inclusiveness in Chicago's art scene and integrating all neighborhoods into the Reader's community.

How did the Chicago Reader go about solving its project?

The Reader began tackling its chosen project by establishing clear, actionable goals via a three-part challenge statement and associated vision statement:

The Reader will reimagine and implement an agile, data-driven citywide distribution model strategy to:

- 1. Better reach existing readers*
- 2. Reach new Readers*
- 3. Ensure our goals for a diverse and inclusive readership are served*

Vision Statement: The Reader will reimagine the delivery of our citywide paper to better serve our modern and legacy readership, the arts ecosystem, and Chicago.

The publication then broke down this comprehensive vision into transformative from-to statements to guide the publication's project.

FROM	TO
Bi-weekly publication	Weekly publication
A distribution map based on word-of-mouth, designed using a commuter framework	A distribution map designed using data on current and prospective audiences, created using experience surveys, interviews and census data
Boxes and distribution points disproportionately concentrated in Chicago’s Loop and Magnificent Mile, as well as the North Side	Equitable distribution points and newspapers distributed across Chicago; increased circulation in South and West Sides
A distribution model lacking a mechanism to review and update map locations	An agile distribution plan that enables locations to be evaluated based on data and continuously updated

The Chicago Reader team worked to create a distribution model that utilized data to optimize the placement of boxes and racks, increasing circulation in communities that were comparatively underserved. Additionally, the Reader’s new model utilized a system that evaluated locations based on a 10-minute walk proximity to other points, placement in walkable areas, population density and percent of income spent on arts and culture (as well as other factors), allowing the map to be continuously updated.

Impactful results : 0.5 mile radius analysis

Averages before LNA (rounded up) : **Averages after LNA (rounded up):**

South and North Lawndale: 3

South and North Lawndale: 6

Garfield Park: 4

Garfield Park: 6

West Englewood and Englewood: 2

West Englewood and Englewood: 4

Humboldt Park: 9

Humboldt Park: 16

Austin: 2

Austin: 3

In each of these areas, the Reader almost doubled its distribution locations within a 10-minute walk (0.5 miles).

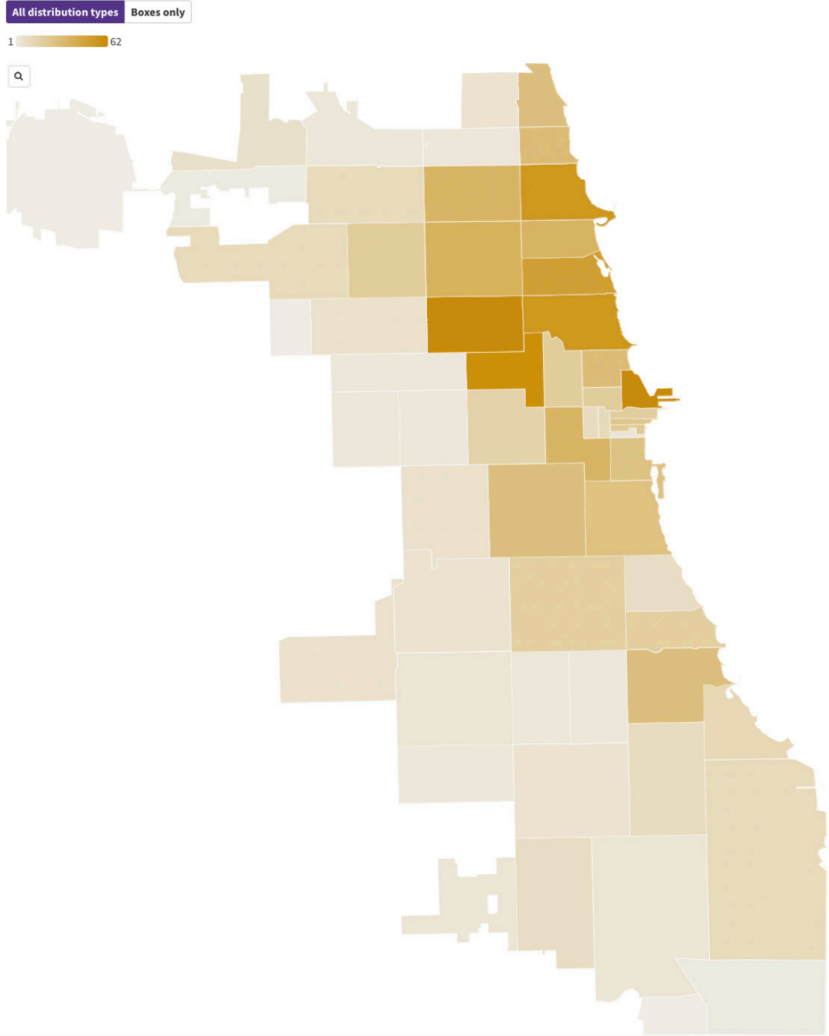
Medill-founded research process

Medill’s Local News Initiative facilitated an intensive research project that used data, surveys and interviews to better understand audience demographics and purchase patterns, comparisons with competing publications and analysis using U.S. government data to map out potential audiences. The Medill fellow assigned to the Reader project analyzed data to map readership and conducted surveys and follow-up interviews.

At the start of LNA programming, research revealed the Chicago Reader’s distribution points—which included yellow boxes and newspaper racks— were disproportionately concentrated in the city’s North Side and Downtown Loop. However, data from surveys indicated that on average, individuals located in Chicago’s South and West Sides— areas with fewer distribution points—actually spent a higher percentage of their incomes on arts and culture. The data analysis identified zip codes that contained audience segments with the greatest potential for growth, as demonstrated in the map on the right:

Chicago Reader print distribution locations by ZIP code

Sorted by all distribution types (Ex. boxes, libraries, cafés, etc.) and Chicago Reader boxes only

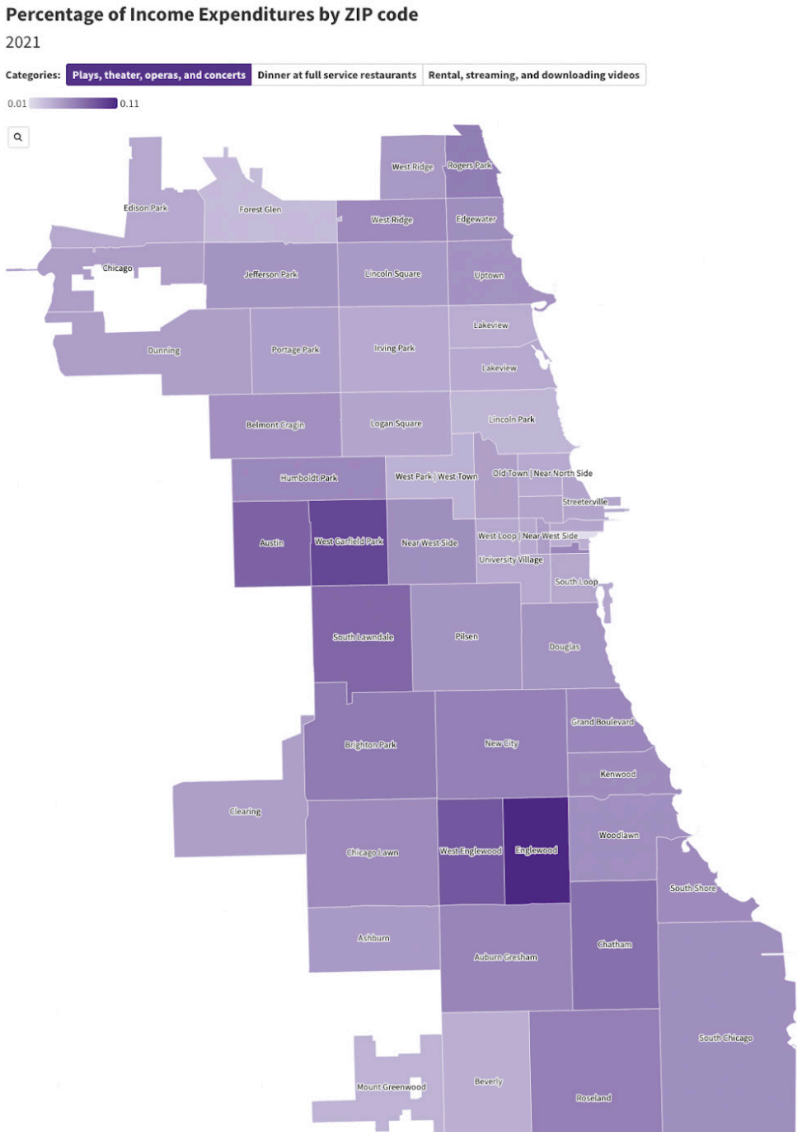


The Medill fellow also used Reader data to analyze distribution within each community area, producing an interactive map illustrating distribution sites within a 0.5-mile radius. These data visualizations highlighted community areas that are over- or underserved, enabling the Reader team to select boxes to relocate from areas of higher concentration, including the Loop and Chicago’s North Side.

In addition to tracking gross expenditures on arts and culture, Medill research investigated the percentage of income spent on arts and culture activities. This data revealed that populations in areas with lower income often invested a higher percentage of their income in arts and culture activities.

In addition to distribution analyses, researchers also collected 32 responses to a Chicago Reader Qualtrics product survey to gather information about readers’ preferences and reading habits. The survey asked respondents why they read the Reader, how they became familiar with the publication and what their interests were.

The survey revealed that the Reader’s audience prefers sections relating to Arts & Culture and News, as well as columns and opinion pieces.



Follow-up interviews were conducted with three respondents to create in-depth profiles of sample audience members. Respondents shared personal experiences of engagement, impact and membership, enabling them to map real-life progress through the audience funnel.

Key takeaways from these follow-up interviews:

1. Reader demographics largely mirror Chicago's demographics, meaning they indicate diversity in a variety of areas.
 - a. 24% of readers of the Reader earn less than \$35,000 a year and 35% of readers earn 100,000+ a year per household
 - b. Readers of the Reader mirror the city in terms of education and age
 - c. The Reader's audience at the beginning of the LNA program was already ethnically diverse. Black readers have an index of 203, indicating double the average of Black readership at other similar Chicago publications. (An index of 100 is the citywide average for publications' proportion of readers who are Black). Nielsen Scarborough indicated that 31% of the Reader's readers identify as Black.
2. Arts & Culture and News were the most popular sections among survey takers. Most respondents were also interested in politics and democracy, and most have volunteered for a political campaign.
3. Some print readers have lost access over time, but still think that the print product is important.

Survey respondent: "Sometimes you get tired of people telling you to look online when there's a hard copy."

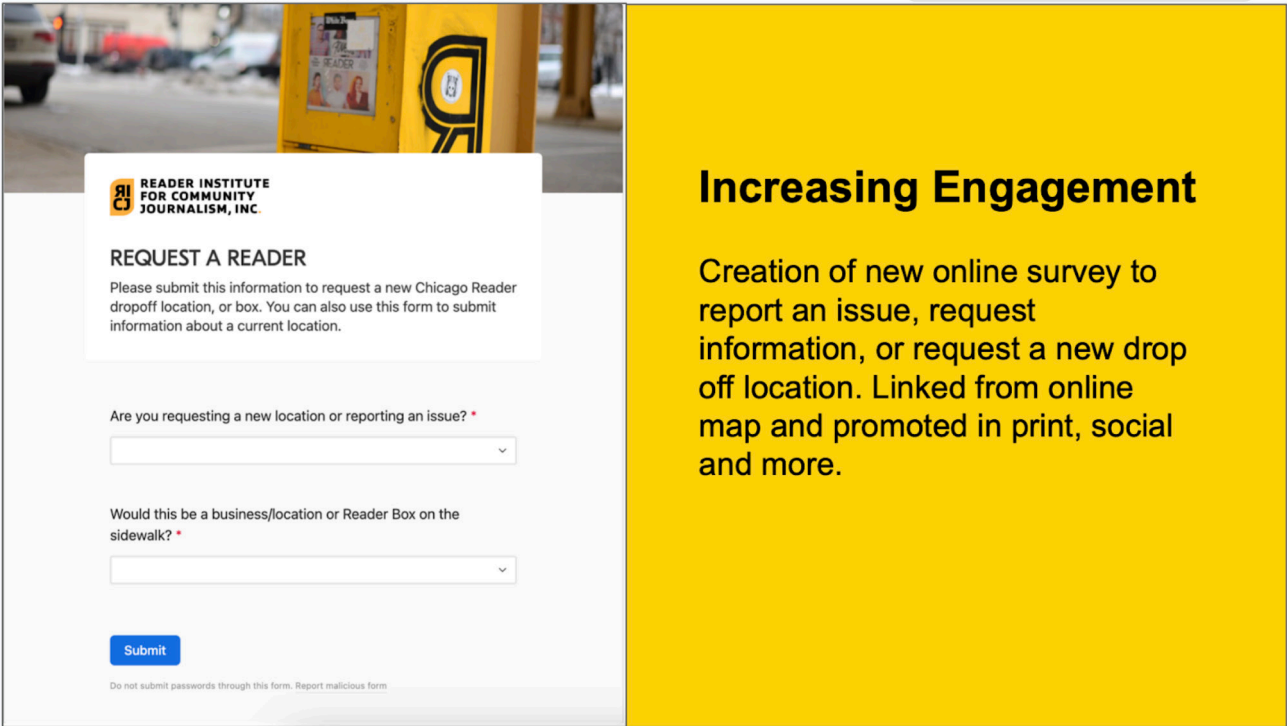
Survey respondents also offered verbal feedback on their relationships with the publication:

"I've always read the Reader, since the 6th grade, I would pick it up on Thursdays and comb through all four sections. I love it! It's quirky, irreverent, and very Chicago!"

Results

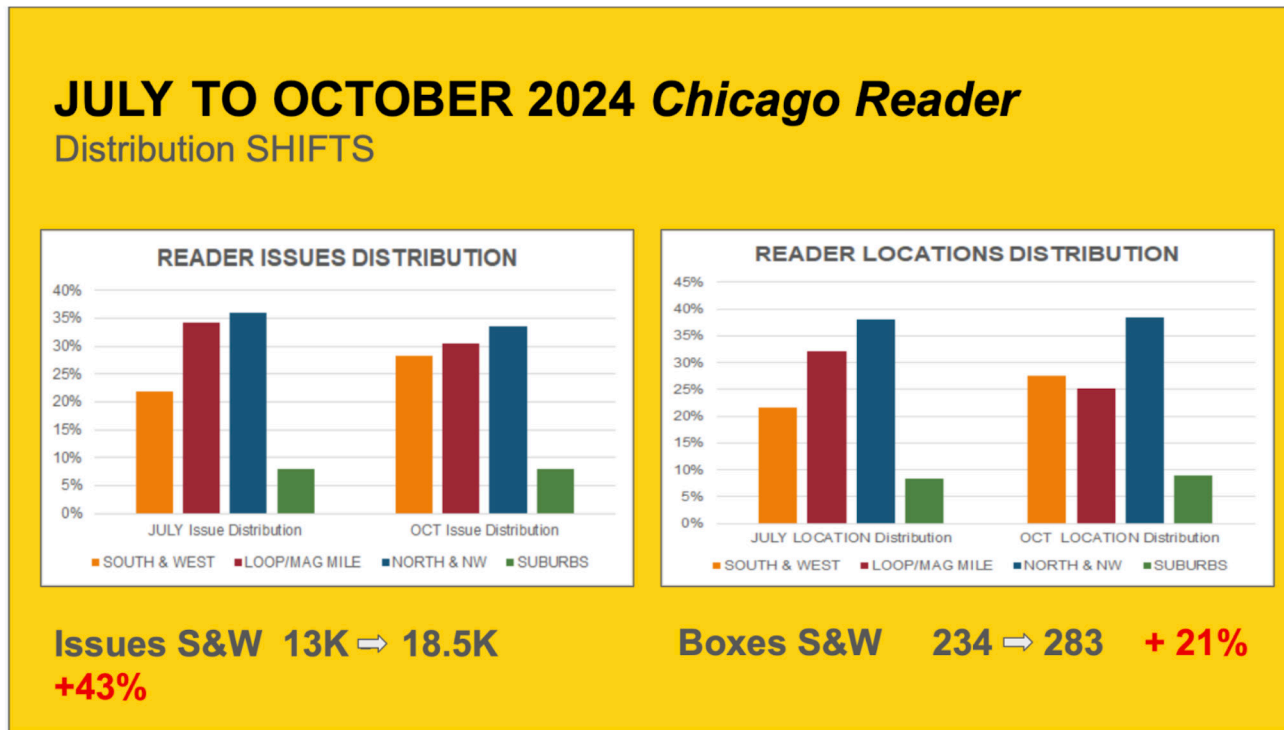
By the close of LNA, the Chicago Reader successfully transitioned from biweekly to weekly publishing, added 45 new distribution points to the South and West Sides of Chicago, and boosted circulation from 60,000 papers per distribution cycle to 63,000 papers per week. Unlike its previous distribution map, the Reader's new agile distribution plan can be continuously reviewed and altered as new audience data and research become available.

To facilitate continuous improvement, the Reader designed and implemented a crowdsourcing page for distribution point suggestions to integrate its audience into the ongoing decision making process of identifying new distribution points.



The image shows a screenshot of a web form titled "REQUEST A READER" from the Reader Institute for Community Journalism, Inc. The form includes a dropdown menu for "Are you requesting a new location or reporting an issue?" and another for "Would this be a business/location or Reader Box on the sidewalk?". A blue "Submit" button is at the bottom. To the right is a yellow box with the text: "Increasing Engagement. Creation of new online survey to report an issue, request information, or request a new drop off location. Linked from online map and promoted in print, social and more."

By October, the Reader's distribution points in Chicago's South and West Sides made up more than 25% of both total papers and total distribution locations.



What worked?

Research-based approach: The Reader team knew that the process of physically relocating the distribution points would be labor intensive, and they wanted to ensure that the new distribution map was firmly grounded in knowledge. Through the Local News Accelerator program, the Reader team was able to access audience surveys that provided insights into the audience sectors they were already serving, as well as the sectors that they wanted to break into.

“I think that was a really big key– having access to the research, having a partner that had the ability to pull some research that we would not have been able to, and [having Medill researchers] really analyze it. That was huge–expanding outside of our own organization.” Chastity Cooper, Director of Marketing for Chicago Reader

Communicating values: The decision to redesign the distribution map was fueled by the Reader’s values. The Reader’s legacy of producing a free, equitable, accessible publication informed the team’s decision to focus on better serving communities that previously had few or no distribution points, and the communications team kept the Reader’s audience informed of the underlying reasons for overhauling the map.

Community outreach: The team used crowdsourcing strategies to source suggestions for distribution points from current and prospective audiences. By opening up the project to the Reader’s audience, they were able to select new distribution points that were already embedded in communities, while also making audiences feel connected to their product by directly contributing input.

Synchronized projects: At the beginning of the Local News Accelerator program, the Reader was in the process of transitioning from a biweekly print calendar to a weekly calendar. The team devised an LNA project that was closely related and reinforced the message both within the Reader team and among the audience that the publication was committed to making continuous improvements to their print product.

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

During the process of identifying locations across the city to partner with for distribution, the Reader team encountered a variety of challenges. After identifying a large collection of potential distribution points, including “third spaces” that took the form of community centers, businesses like cafes and music venues, libraries and grocery stores, the Reader team initiated contact via emails, phone calls and in-person visits.

The team received mixed responses. Some contacts responded with enthusiasm, while others did not want Reader racks inside of their establishments. In the second stage, contacts were asked to fill out paperwork to move forward with the distribution point placement. At this point, some contacts failed to fill out the forms or became unresponsive. In communities where the Reader may not have had a visible presence previously, the lack of brand recognition may have been one factor in the lack of interest.

While the form yielded some new partnerships, the Reader team used additional approaches, like canvassing and phone calls, to nurture relationships with contacts who were unreceptive to initial outreach.

What was surprising or challenging?

The process of sifting through research on the Reader audiences yielded unexpected insights into audience preferences. Interviews with survey respondents revealed that readers want more coverage of intersectional issues in the Chicago Reader, and want coverage that highlights intersecting identities including neighborhoods, cultures, gender identities, sexualities, age cohorts and religious communities and ethnic heritages.

Respondents expressed beliefs that they felt that media generally catered to the “majority,” and wanted to see more coverage of neighborhoods outside of Chicago's North Side.

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

Prepare for challenges: In a constantly changing news landscape, unforeseen challenges can disrupt operations in ways that can help and hinder project development. During the Local News Accelerator, a collection of multi racks in Chicago's downtown area were removed in advance of the Democratic National Convention, which caused an unexpected disruption in the Reader's distribution plan. The team was able to leverage this unforeseen development to help determine which points to permanently remove from the downtown area.

Embrace iterations: The abundance of data that the Reader team had access to gave endless opportunities for data analysis, and the research component continued for the duration of the project. A strong foundation of knowledge is necessary in order to create a fact-based plan, but action and failure are necessary parts of the process of prototyping and iterating. When the Reader team took decisive action and began implementing carefully devised plans, the project gained momentum and began to take shape.

Expect hurdles: The Reader team encountered unexpected challenges throughout the LNA program. One recurring challenge involved working with key stakeholders outside of the program, whose collaboration was needed for the project to succeed. Coordinating ride-alongs with the distribution company, confirming the placement of boxes and figuring out the logistics of relocating boxes posed challenges when outside individuals were unresponsive, had misaligned with the Reader team or had conflicting plans. Dealing with individuals outside of the newsroom required more preparation and lead time than anticipated, so getting a jump on outreach and coordination became an important strategy in the home stretch.

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

The agile distribution point assessment tool developed by the Reader team can be used to evaluate the distribution map going forward. The distribution map will continue to evolve. The tool evaluates the quality of distribution points based on categories that include walkability, engagement with the arts and proximity to other distribution points on the map. During LNA, the Reader’s team used the tool to divert racks and boxes from areas that were oversaturated with distribution points to neighborhoods with lower concentrations of points.

Although the South and West side community feedback has been positive overall, the real results of the project must be assessed in the upcoming Nielsen Scarborough data which will hopefully show increased diversity in race, ethnicity, occupation and median outcome.

Additionally, with the goal of increasing equitable circulation of the Reader’s print product, the Reader team will shift its focus from distribution points to circulation, expanding efforts toward the number of papers circulated in each area in Chicago.



To really look at equity, we’re all still looking at boxes, but we should be looking at the number of papers distributed in those areas. We just have to update the process and put it into a database so we can really track it. We’re still, and are always going to be, cleaning up the number papers that go to different places.

Ann Scholhamer, Vice President of Operations, Chicago Reader

