

Daily Herald

RESEARCH ANALYSIS | AUGUST 2023

Introduction

When the Daily Herald first circulated a Northwestern University Medill School of Journalism survey to its audience, the news organization wanted to learn more about all its readers. But it was particularly interested in an audience it is targeting for growth: families with children in school. They sent the survey Aug. 1, 2023, to their email list of 118,000, which includes print, digital, former and current subscribers. The survey closed Aug. 11, with 2,852 people responding.

The large number of respondents was encouraging, but the survey was heavily skewed to an older audience, which was disappointing to the Daily Herald team. As part of Northwestern's Local News Accelerator program, the Herald has set a goal to grow digital subscriptions by appealing to a larger percentage of young, suburban families.

They emailed the survey again on Aug. 28, but this time they targeted 38,000 people who are 18-55 who hadn't already taken the survey. After one week, the survey closed with an additional 179 responses for a total of 3,031.

To compare the Daily Herald's younger audience and older audience, the data have been divided into those younger than 55 vs. 55 and older. The older audience comprises the Daily Herald's traditional readers and a large percentage (84%) of respondents. With 375 respondents identifying as younger than 55, the sample size is still large enough to provide actionable results.

As the Daily Herald focuses on the family audience segment, they are cognizant of continuing to serve their large older audience. They are especially interested in the empty-nesters in their 50s, who have disposable income.

Who responded

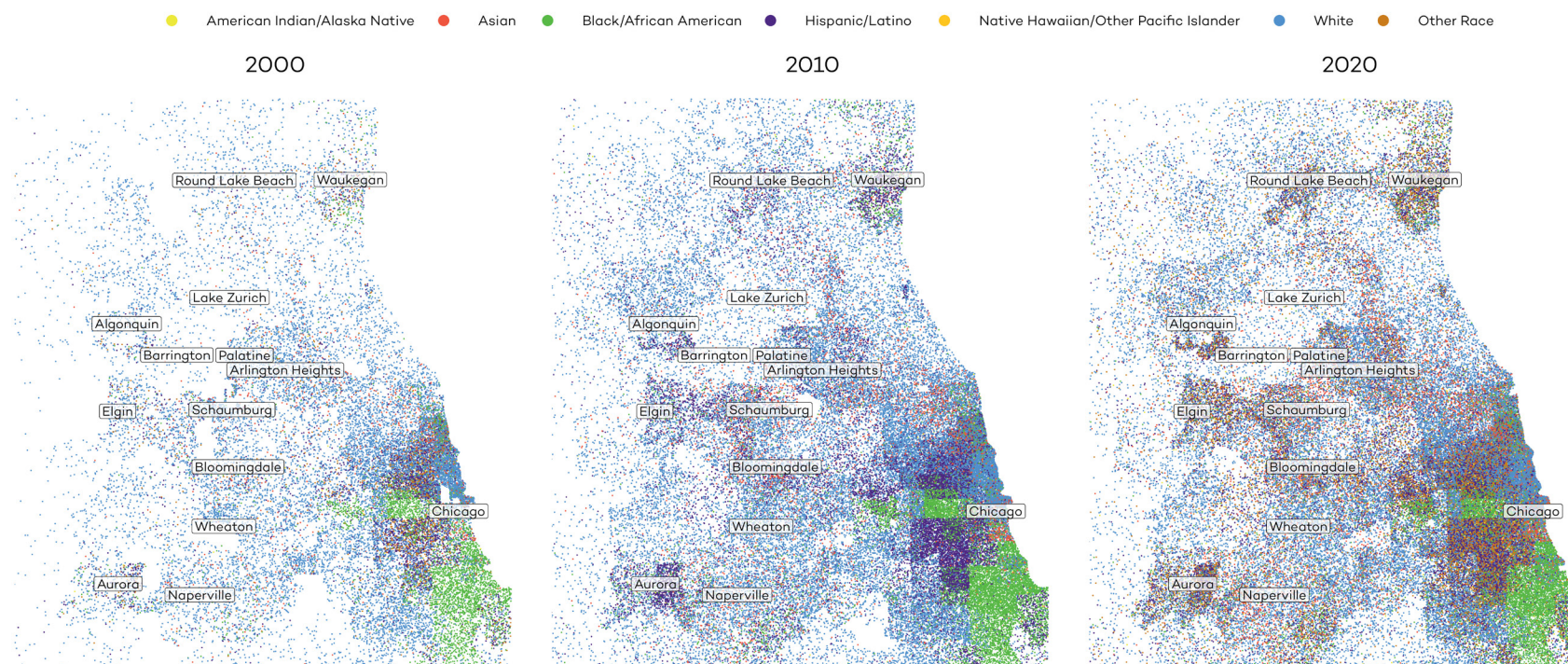
Qualtrics respondents reflected the Daily Herald's long-time audience: In addition to a strong showing of people 55 and older, respondents in all age groups identified mostly as white, but there was slightly more diversity in the younger group, which had 83% white respondents, 4.4% Hispanic/Latino, 4.1% Asian and 1% Black/African American. In the older group, the percentage who chose white was 92, with all others at less than 1%.

The Daily Herald chose to focus on a younger, more diverse audience, knowing that their future lies with this group. The survey bears out the subtle differences in the younger audience in the question about race, which reinforces that the Daily Herald's direction corresponds with demographic changes in their coverage area.

Trends in the coverage area

U.S. census numbers reinforce the changes in the Daily Herald's coverage area. From 2000 to 2020, racial diversity has increased in the area as a whole.

Racial distribution in Chicago and surrounding suburbs, 2000-2020 One dot + 100 people



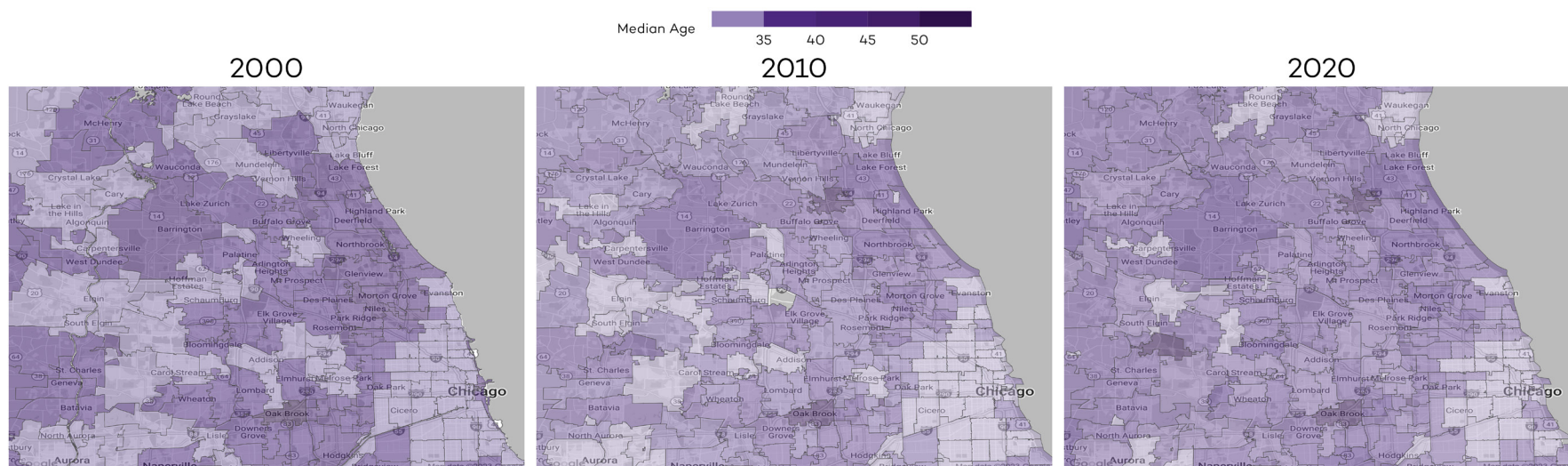
Over the last 20 years, Waukegan, Round Lake Beach, Schaumburg and Aurora have seen an explosion of diversity. In all four suburbs, people identified mostly as white, followed by Hispanic/Latino. In Aurora and Waukegan, Black/African American was third. In Schaumburg,

almost as many people identified as Asian as Hispanic/Latino. In Round Lake Beach, Asian was a distant third, according to the census.

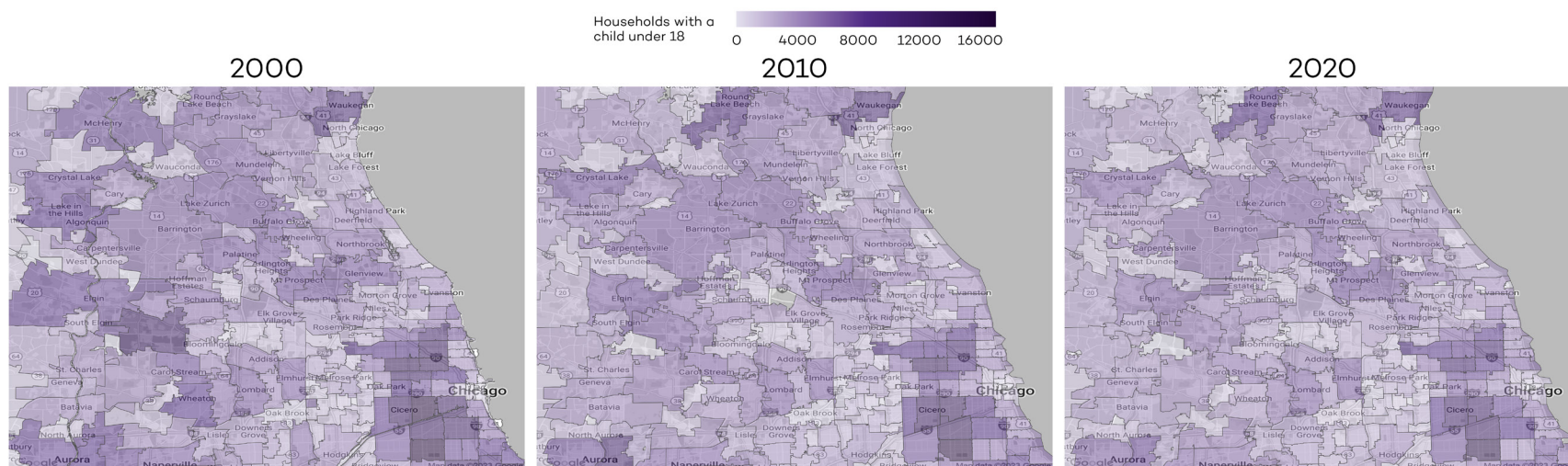
While the Qualtrics survey had a much higher percentage of white respondents, the Daily Herald's strategy of reaching a more diverse audience follows the trends revealed by the census.

In fact, the census also shows the coverage area overall is getting younger, especially compared to the 2000 census. Across the area, age and diversity show a correlation.

Median Age by Zip Code in Chicago and Surrounding Suburbs, 2000-20



Regarding households with at least one child, the census reveals fewer suburban families across the board, although the suburbs that are younger and more diverse – Waukegan, Round Lake Beach, Schaumburg and Aurora – are also most likely to have children in 2020.

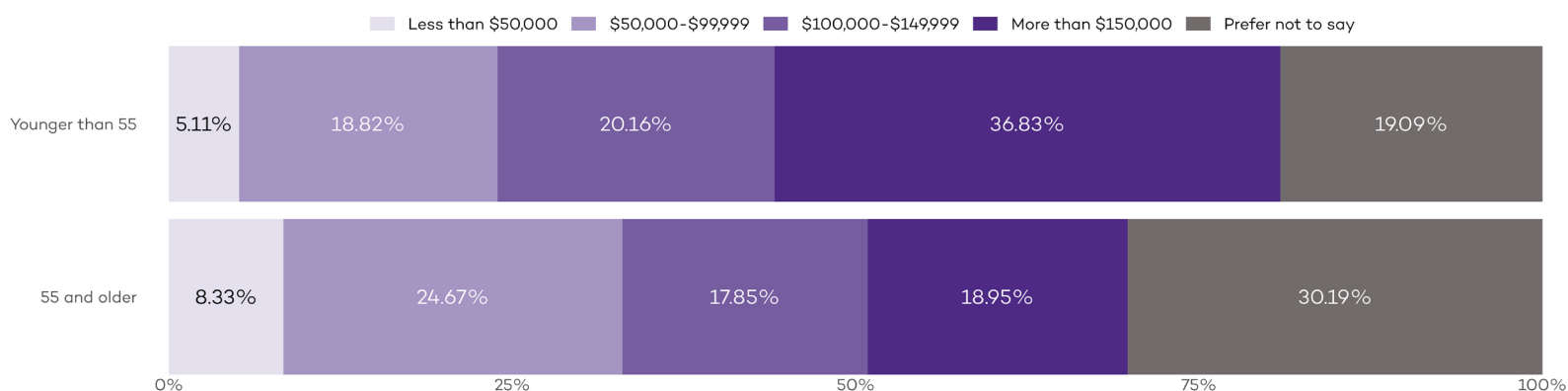


In terms of trends, those four suburbs appear to match the Daily Herald's goals most closely.

Qualtrics: Other demographics

The gender of respondents differed between the two age groups. In the older age group, male and female respondents were about even, while in the younger age group, almost two-thirds of respondents were female.

Overall, respondents were well educated, with bachelor's degrees or higher (67%). Their household income before taxes followed suit, with almost 39% earning \$100,000 or more. About 30% preferred not to disclose their income. Interestingly, fewer of the under-55 group chose not to disclose their income (19%), and more of those who responded (almost 57%) reported earning more than \$100,000. In the older group, 36% said they earned \$100,000 or more, with 31% choosing not to answer. The lower income among the older group may be due to the high number of retirees (67%), but the earning power among the younger group makes the family audience a desirable demographic.



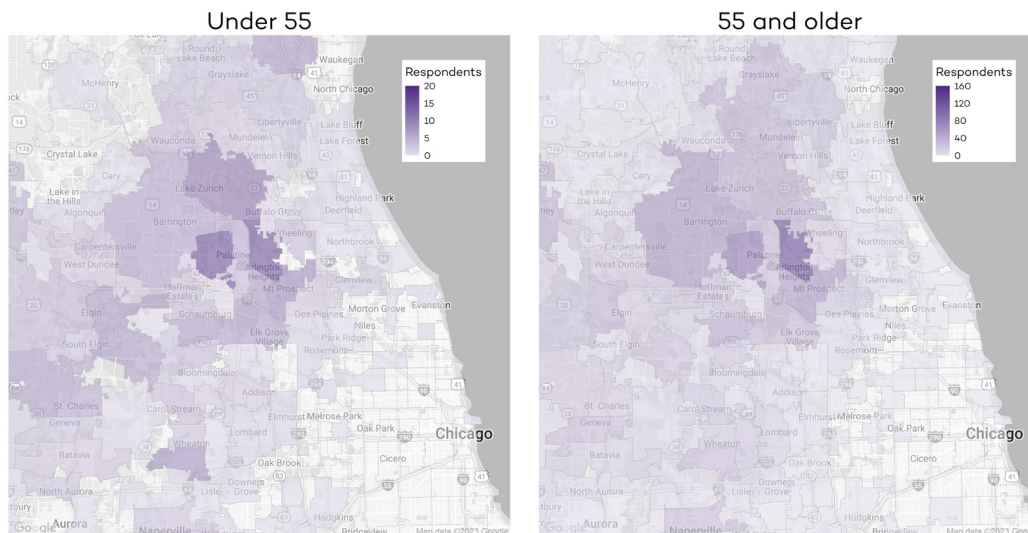
The younger audience had more people living in their household, with most respondents saying the household had 4 people living there, and the next most popular choice was 3. Among the older group, most said 2 people lived in the household. This further supports the family audience among the under 55 group.

The suburban footprint

Respondents' answers on where they live show a lot of similarities between the under-55 and the 55-and-older groups. The Daily Herald is based in Arlington Heights and covers a number of suburbs north and west of the city. Because it has had to prioritize its resources, the news organization focuses on suburbs with large circulation. The Qualtrics research may point to areas with greater potential for future growth.

For example, Lake Zurich, Wheaton and Gurnee all skewed a bit younger in the research, and those towns may be opportunities to target a family audience. Lake Zurich had 3.6% of respondents under 55, compared with 2.3% of the 55 and up respondents. Wheaton's under 55s were at 3% vs. 1.6% of the older group. And Gurnee had 2.5% of respondents under 55, with 0.5% 55 and up.

In the maps (below), the younger group (on the left) shows Lake Zurich in the darker pink, while the older group is more concentrated in Barrington in the large pink area north and west of the two most concentrated groups overall, which are Arlington Heights and Palatine.



Editors were surprised by some of suburbs that had higher numbers of respondents than they would have expected, such as Elgin (56 respondents), where the Daily Herald doesn't offer much coverage.

How the Daily Herald covers its large footprint in the north, northwest and northern suburbs is a central question for the newsroom. Some adjustments may be in order to find the suburbs with people engaged with them in their younger demographic.

How respondents consume news

Most respondents were highly engaged with local news for their community. In both the under-55 and 55-and-over groups, the most popular response was that they checked local news once a day, and the next most popular was more than once a day. In the older group, 83% said they checked at least once a day. In the younger group, the percentage was 70% who checked at least once a day.

Compared to last year, most respondents across the two age groups said their media consumption – whether for Chicago area, Illinois, national or international – remained about the same.

In terms of the devices respondents used to check news, both the under-55 age group and the 55-and-older group said they do not use smart speakers to consume news. Tablets were rare for all age groups, too.

Here are some other findings on devices used to consume news:

- **Printed newspapers:** Used either not at all or a little by the younger group.
- **Smart phone:** Used either a moderate amount or a lot by the younger group. Used a little or a moderate amount by the older group.
- **Computer:** Used a little to a moderate amount by all respondents.
- **TVs:** Used just a little by the younger group, while they were used a moderate amount to a lot by the older respondents.
- **Radio:** Used only a little by both groups.

Where respondents find news

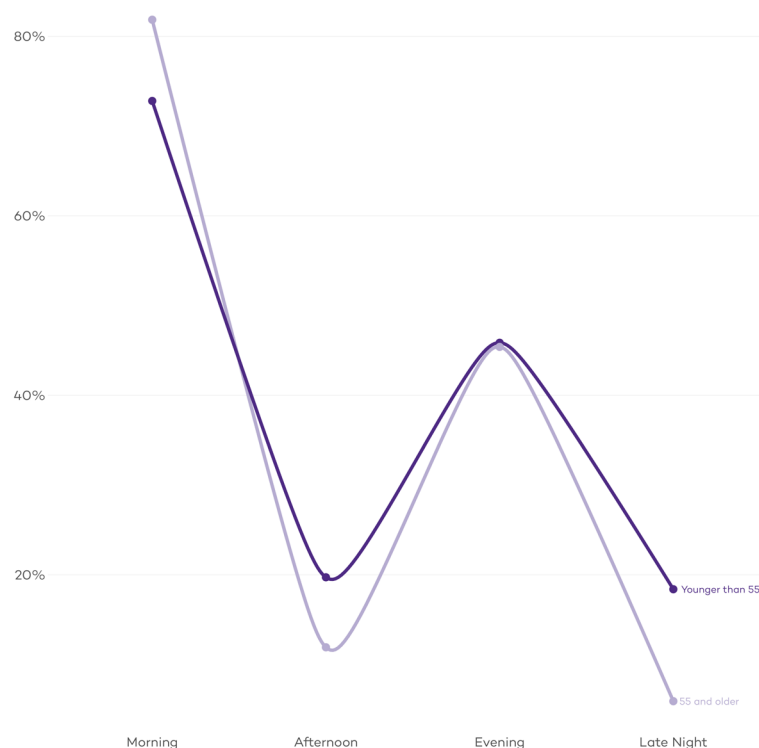
Both the younger and older groups of respondents said they rely on a Chicago-area newspaper or its digital site as their top choice for news. The second choice was a Chicago-area TV station or its digital site. The older group chose a national TV broadcast third, while the younger group stuck with a local source, picking a Chicago-area radio station.

When respondents are hungriest for news

While the patterns were the same for when people consumed news, with both groups consuming news most in the mornings, then evenings, then afternoons, then late nights, the groups showed some differences that are interesting.

In the younger group, afternoons and late nights are more popular than they are for the older groups, with 20% checking news in the afternoons and 18% in late nights. In the older group, those percentages drop to 12% in afternoons and 6% late at night.

Younger readers consume news at night more often than older readers, but overall time of day patterns match



Trust in news and paying for it

In general, the respondents trust local news (55%) more than national news (22%) and those they follow on social media (3%).

Significant percentages of the two audiences also agreed that no one should pay for local news, with 37% of the older audience and 45% of the younger audience choosing that response. The older audience's second choice was everyone should pay, with 24% choosing that answer. Meanwhile, 65% of the older audience subscribes to get access to local news. In

the younger audience, one quarter thought those who can pay should pay. And the top choice for the under 55s was that they do not subscribe to local news (52%).

Among Daily Herald subscribers specifically, most of the younger respondents said they subscribed to digital (41%), both print and digital (38%) or print only (20%). The older subscribers said they subscribed to digital and both digital and print at 35% each. Print-only came in at 28%.

When asked if they had ever subscribed to the Daily Herald, the younger audience was split evenly between yes and no, while the older audience said they had at some point subscribed (73%), with just 26% saying they never had. The survey asked an open question about why they stopped subscribing, and the most common answer across all categories was cost. Younger families often said they didn't have time to read it. Respondents in the older group also cited news bias and news wasn't relevant, with many saying they lived in a different suburb. Some people pointed to delivery or billing problems.

As for what would bring people back, many comments focused on lowering the cost, and some in the 55-and-older group suggested a senior discount. Many people's comments reflected the opposite of the problems (get a new editorial staff, fix leftwing bias, run fewer stories from outside publications, more content). In some cases, respondents had bad experiences with the editorial department, and some respondents seem disconnected.

The Daily Herald has some work to do to make the case to both audiences for why they need to pay for local news. A paying audience is key to the Daily Herald's growth and its future.

Content priorities

The most specific question on the survey related to content was how satisfied or dissatisfied respondents were with the way the Daily Herald serves suburban families. Both older and younger readers said they were somewhat satisfied. Among the younger group, the second most selected answer was neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (25%), then extremely satisfied (21%), and somewhat or extremely dissatisfied (12%). Among the older group, 23% said they were extremely satisfied, and 22% said they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, while 15% said they were somewhat or extremely dissatisfied.

In other topics, when asked to choose up to five most important issues facing their neighborhoods, both chose crime/law enforcement first. A strong second for the under 55 group is education, whereas for the 55 and older group, environment and health care topped education.

MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES LISTED IN ORDER BY EACH AGE GROUP

Under 55

Crime and Law Enforcement
Education
Business & Employment
Environment
Housing, Zoning & Land Use
Health Care
Transportation
Cultural Opportunities

55 & older

Crime and Law Enforcement
Environment
Health Care
Education
Housing, Zoning & Land Use
Business & Employment
Transportation
Cultural Opportunities

Coverage gaps

Both groups thought local media was doing moderately well or very well at covering their priorities. Of the people who didn't think the media was doing well, here are the main reasons:

1. **Crime:** Bias or they don't reflect the experiences of my community (older group); coverage is incomplete or gets crucial facts wrong (younger group).
2. **Health care:** Both groups said local news doesn't cover the issue frequently enough.
3. **Business:** The younger group cited bias or not reflecting their community's experience. The older group said coverage is incomplete or gets facts wrong.
4. **Transportation:** Both groups said the problem was lack of frequency of coverage.
5. **Education:** The younger audience said lack of frequency, and the older group cited bias.
6. **Environment:** Both groups said the problem was lack of frequency of coverage.
7. **Health care:** Both groups cited lack of frequency, but the younger group also said coverage was biased or not reflective of their experiences.
8. **Cultural opportunities:** Both groups pointed to lack of frequency.

How respondents engage with the Daily Herald specifically

When asked to choose up to four features they use the most, both the younger and older groups chose the same top 3:

1. Local news for their community
2. Suburban news
3. Breaking news

The under 55s picked Things to do as their fourth choice. And the older group chose state news.

Other interesting differences:

- The younger group chose high school sports over pro sports. The older group picked pros over high school sports.
- Newsletters were last for both groups. More detail to come on newsletters later in this document.
- Only 2% of respondents chose dining as one of their top four features that brought them to the Daily Herald for the 55-and-older group, and 3.4% chose it from the younger group. This is popular top-of-funnel content on the Daily Herald's website, but maybe it's just not what paying customers turn to the news organization for. The content is more clickable when they come across it.

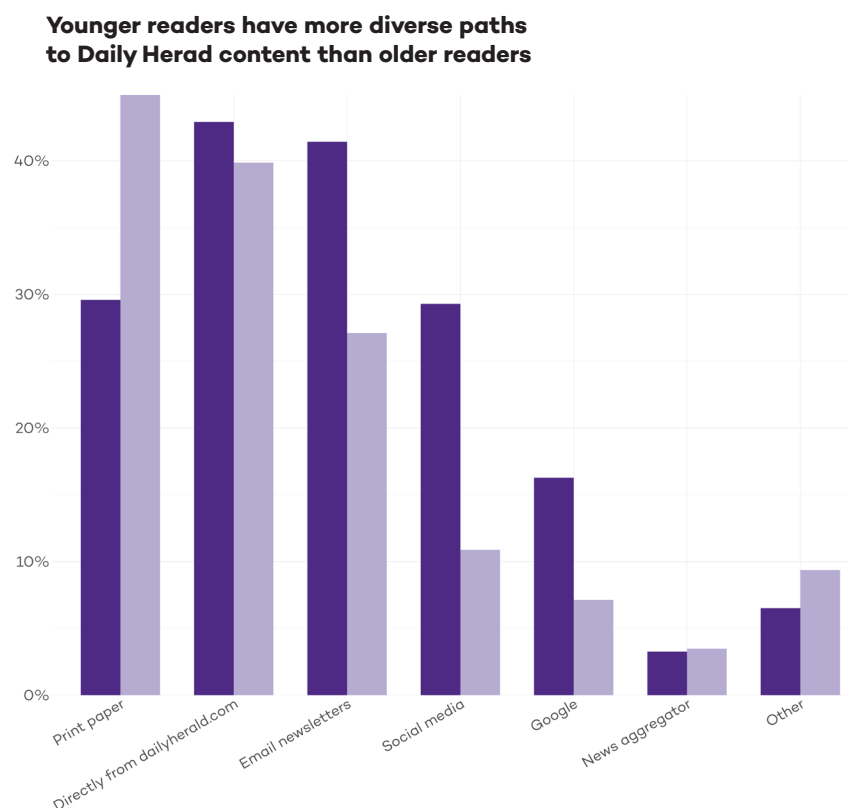
How people get to the Daily Herald content

People were asked to choose all the ways they get to the Daily Herald content, and the younger and older respondents had different paths to content.

Forty-three percent of the under-55 group headed directly to dailyherald.com. Email newsletters were important for this group at 41%. Social media and the print paper both had 30%. In comments, some said e-edition or mobile app.

In the 55-and-older group, the most popular answer was the print paper (51%). The next most popular response was directly from the website (40%), and third was email newsletters (27%).

In terms of Daily Herald newsletters specifically, the younger group was more likely to subscribe (47%) than the older group (33%).



Email newsletters

Depending on age, some people seemed confused about email newsletters. In comments, some people in the 55-and-older group said they didn't know what newsletters referred to, and they didn't know this was an option. In a separate survey question, 15% of the younger audience wasn't sure if they got any of the Daily Herald newsletters, and 21% were unsure in the older group. This perhaps speaks to a saturation of users' in-boxes, the power and precision of spam or junk filters and thus the need for the Daily Herald to cultivate email newsletter products that demonstrate their value to readers through higher open rates in the coming months. One of the Daily Herald's tactics is a newsletter overhaul, followed by a campaign to drive newsletter subscriptions. The survey seems to support this tactic.

When asked which newsletter or newsletter category respondents read the most, all respondents pointed to morning alerts, breaking news and afternoon alerts as their top three choices. Given that a significant number of respondents say they are less apt to consume news in the afternoon, and there appears to be a glut of emails coming at them, perhaps the Daily Herald has an opportunity to streamline by curtailing the afternoon update, or re-focusing the product on softer, less time-sensitive content.

The things-to-do newsletter was a top choice for the younger demographic. Suburban newsletters from my town resonated with both groups. And the dining newsletter was more popular with the under-55 group. The prep sports newsletter wasn't popular with either demographic, but the Daily Herald is beginning to revamp it. While the focus on something that didn't show up as a priority among survey respondents might seem counter-intuitive, the Daily Herald knows that the preps audience is a small and mighty

piece of the family audience. What they lack in numbers, they make up for in loyalty, especially during football season. They are likely to pay for subscriptions to read about their children. In fact, the sports department has been reorganized, with a leader and reporters who are excited to grow digital subscriptions.

Competitors

When it comes to subscribing to other publications, the Chicago Tribune was the most popular choice for both the older group (27%) and the younger group (15%). Most respondents (60%) said none of the above. All other choices were in single digits: Shaw Media, Chicago Sun-Times, The Athletic, Journal & Topics and Arlington Cardinal.

Opportunities

- Use the ZIP codes and maps to explore suburban coverage. Pick up to three areas with more respondents in the under 55-age group to target with family coverage. Use census data to cross-check to find the young family audiences.
- Develop a comprehensive newsletter strategy. Respondents appear to be confused about what's on offer and even what an email newsletter is. Create a campaign to educate readers. Using the survey maps, determine which town newsletters to focus on and which will remain automated.
- Think about offering younger readers a bundle of newsletters: the family newsletter

(which just launched and isn't reflected in the survey), and the things to do and dining newsletters, which were both popular with younger respondents. If these are weekly newsletters, you would want to be sure they don't all land in inboxes the same day.

- According to the survey, the Daily Herald has a highly engaged, well-educated, well-off readership. That's great fodder for advertisers.
- The Qualtrics survey found that younger people didn't subscribe because they didn't have time to read. Experiment with quick-hit bullets at the top of stories (TL;DR, but don't call it that). The Daily Herald has also done training on writing crisper copy. Continued training and feedback will help reporters write more engaging stories.

Biggest threat

- The Daily Herald has an aging readership. About 75% of respondents are over 65. Time is of the essence to grow a new family audience.

Challenges

- The survey points to information about the ways the Daily Herald's under-55 audience differs from its 55-and-older audience. A temptation might be to use a lot of resources to develop that young family audience at the expense of the older audience. The Daily Herald can find ways — supported by the research — to maintain its longtime readers, while growing the coveted family audience. One example is an email newsletter education campaign that helps customers understand what's available, how to sign up, what is in the newsletters and how often they would receive them.

- While the survey doesn't focus specifically on retention of digital subscribers, we know this has been a problem for the Daily Herald. One predictor of strong retention is regular use of the website. Dr. Larry DeGaris of the Medill Spiegel Research Center points to the significance of reader regularity and habit to retain local news subscribers and to grow subscriptions. What drives reader regularity? Social experience. The key to creating habits is to encourage readers to share and talk about news stories, DeGaris says. Using Facebook, which was most popular among respondents, the Daily Herald can target readers with can't-miss content. A newsletter campaign can keep people engaged in the middle of the subscriber funnel.

Conclusion

The Daily Herald has chosen to grow digital subscriptions by focusing on a younger, family audience. The following areas, supported by the Qualtrics research, reinforce some work they've started and give them some fresh detail and new ideas to get there quicker:

- Geographies to challenge the status quo and determine what suburbs to prioritize based on younger respondents.
- Email newsletters, which the younger demographic use to access local news (47%), can be an even bigger part of the Daily Herald's plan for growth. Respondents across the board would benefit from knowing what newsletters exist.
- Reminders for readers that the Daily Herald is covering topics families must know about in their area: house ads (did you know you can find everything you need to know about back to school, haunted houses and pumpkin farms, etc.); occasional editor columns timed to publish during big subscription drives that point to great coverage and why it's important to subscribe.