

# Illinois Answers Project

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RESEARCH ANALYSIS | SEPTEMBER 2023

## Introduction

Illinois Answers Project is in the enviable position of having secure funding and a mission that focuses on solutions and investigative journalism, but as a brand that launched less than one year ago, it is looking to build a loyal audience. This quantitative survey, developed by Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism with tools provided by the research firm Qualtrics, is of particular interest to help the nonprofit newsroom increase its understanding of its audience to grow reach. Illinois Answers Project's challenge is to go from producing weekly news stories to creating the type of deep solutions and investigative work that will hold the powerful to account and change readers' lives and laws. The survey will help this still-new news organization with something foundational: understanding its audience.

Research shows:

- Respondents were young, highly engaged news consumers, providing Illinois Answers Project with an excellent foundation for growth.
- This group is willing to pay for news, which is fodder for a conversation about a campaign targeting individual donors.
- Readers' coverage priorities offer a chance to compare to their own priorities and decide how coverage can stand out in a crowded news landscape.
- Respondents were highly engaged with competitors, but this list may spark ideas for future partnerships.

The survey was sent to Illinois Answers Project's newsletter email list, comprising 1,400 subscribers, on July 31, Aug. 1 and Aug. 2. On social media, the survey was shared once on Facebook, twice on Twitter/X, three times on Instagram and once on LinkedIn.

Once results were in, researchers suspected bots accounted for some number of the replies — especially from the social media promotion. They worked to clean up the response list by

examining patterns in answers and comparing geography of respondents with Illinois Answers Project web visitors. In the end, more than 3,000 responses were deemed unconfirmable, and were removed. The number of respondents after removing bots and focusing on just responses from Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin was 1,112. Researchers also narrowed the responses to a about 100 surveys that matched email addresses with Illinois Answers Project's email subscriber list. This analysis will compare the two groups: the larger, made up primarily of social media respondents that passed researchers' scrutiny as credible, and the smaller group of known Illinois Answers Project email subscribers.

## Who responded

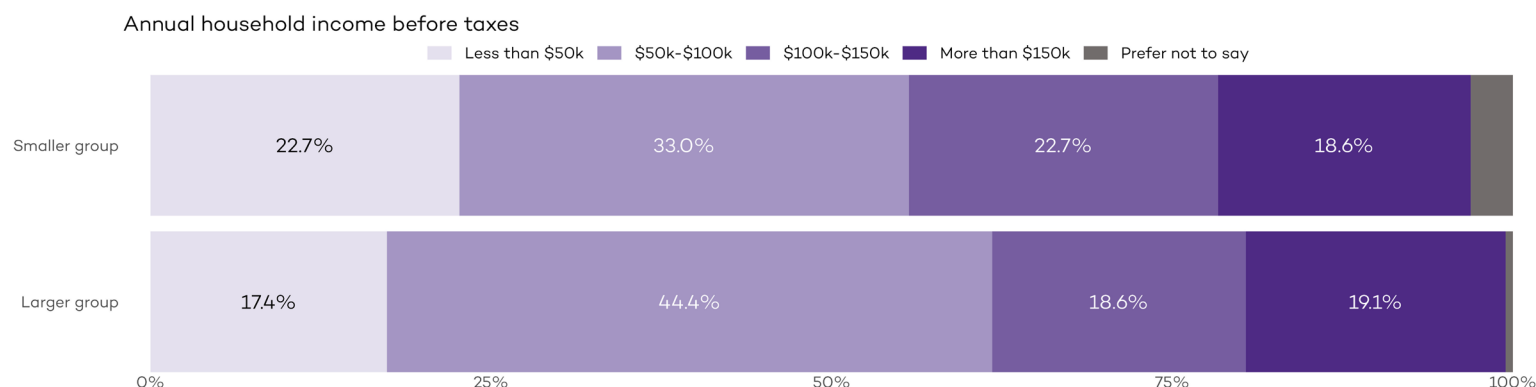
Whichever way researchers sliced the data, Illinois Answers Project has a younger audience than many traditional news outlets. Both the larger and smaller groups of respondents said they were in the 25-34 age range as their top choice, but the larger group skewed younger, with respondents then choosing 18-24. The smaller group of matched emails chose 35-44 next, and 45-54 in third.

Both data sets were about evenly divided among male and female respondents, with the larger group a bit stronger on male respondents. Both identified strongly as white, with all other races/ethnicities for both groups in single digits for percentage of respondents. Illinois Answers Project is beginning in-person outreach to underserved communities to grow diversity of its audience, which is a good strategy considering the respondents' homogeneity.

## Other demographics

In terms of education, the email-matched group was better-educated, with about one-third of respondents saying they have a bachelor's degree and one-quarter saying they have a graduate or professional degree. In the larger group, the top response was associates or technical degree (30%), with bachelor's degree as the next highest response (27%).

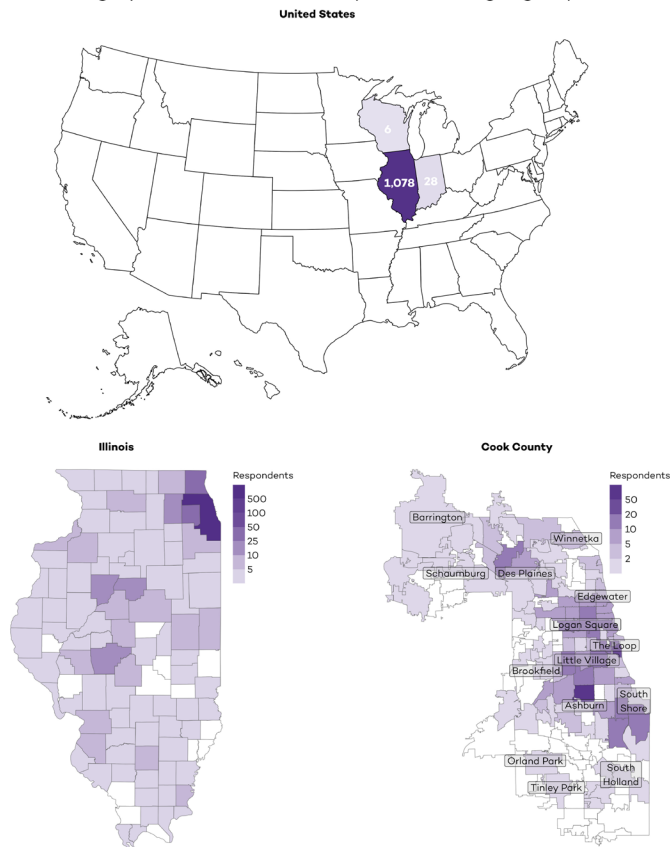
The smaller, email-matched group reported earning more: with 22% choosing \$100,000-\$149,999 annually, and 19% earning \$75,000-\$99,999. The bigger group selected \$50,000-\$74,999 first, with \$75,000-\$99,999 second. Both groups overwhelmingly responded that they work full-time. Most in the larger group shared a home with school-age children (85%), while in the smaller group, most did not (58%).



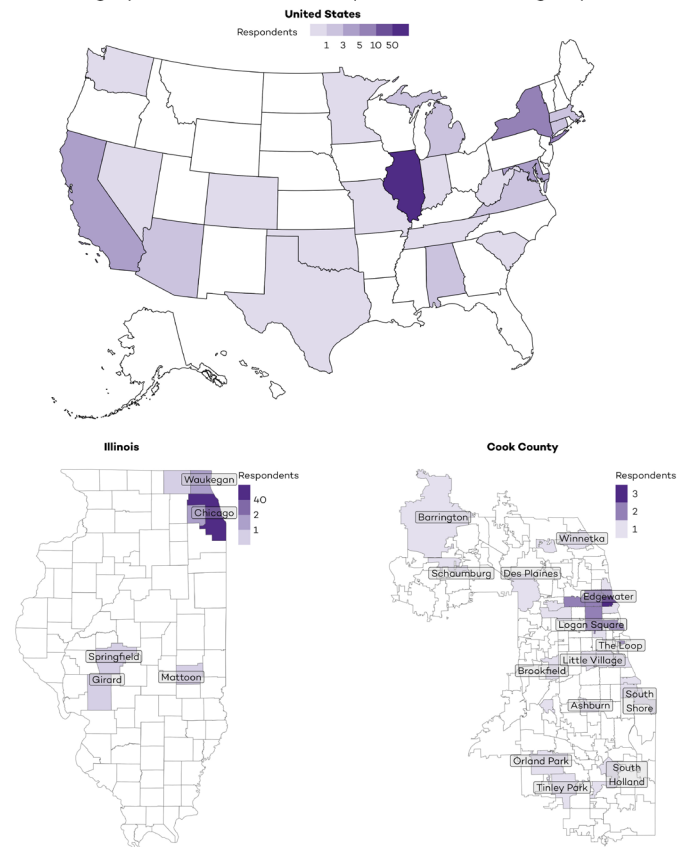
No single industry stood out as the dominant workplace for respondents in the email-matched group. Finance was the top choice, with 9% of respondents, followed by education and utilities. Many chose to write in their profession, with a handful saying they work in government or for a nonprofit. The first choice for the larger group was hospitality at 27%, with education next at 10% and finance after that. Education and finance were on both lists.

As for geography, both groups showed a strong response in Illinois. The distribution of the larger group was limited to Illinois, Wisconsin and Indiana in response to suspected bots. The smaller, email-matched group shows people throughout the country who may have moved away or those who have a strong interest in government. Within Illinois, the email-matched group is focused heavily in Cook County and Chicago specifically, while the bigger group is more dispersed throughout the state. The same is true when we zoom in to Cook County, with the smaller group

Geographic distribution of respondents, larger group



Geographic distribution of respondents, smaller group



heavily concentrated in the city and the larger group also mostly concentrated in Chicago but more dispersed. When Illinois Answers Project looks at city and state news projects, these maps of survey respondents will offer some guidance to focus projects.

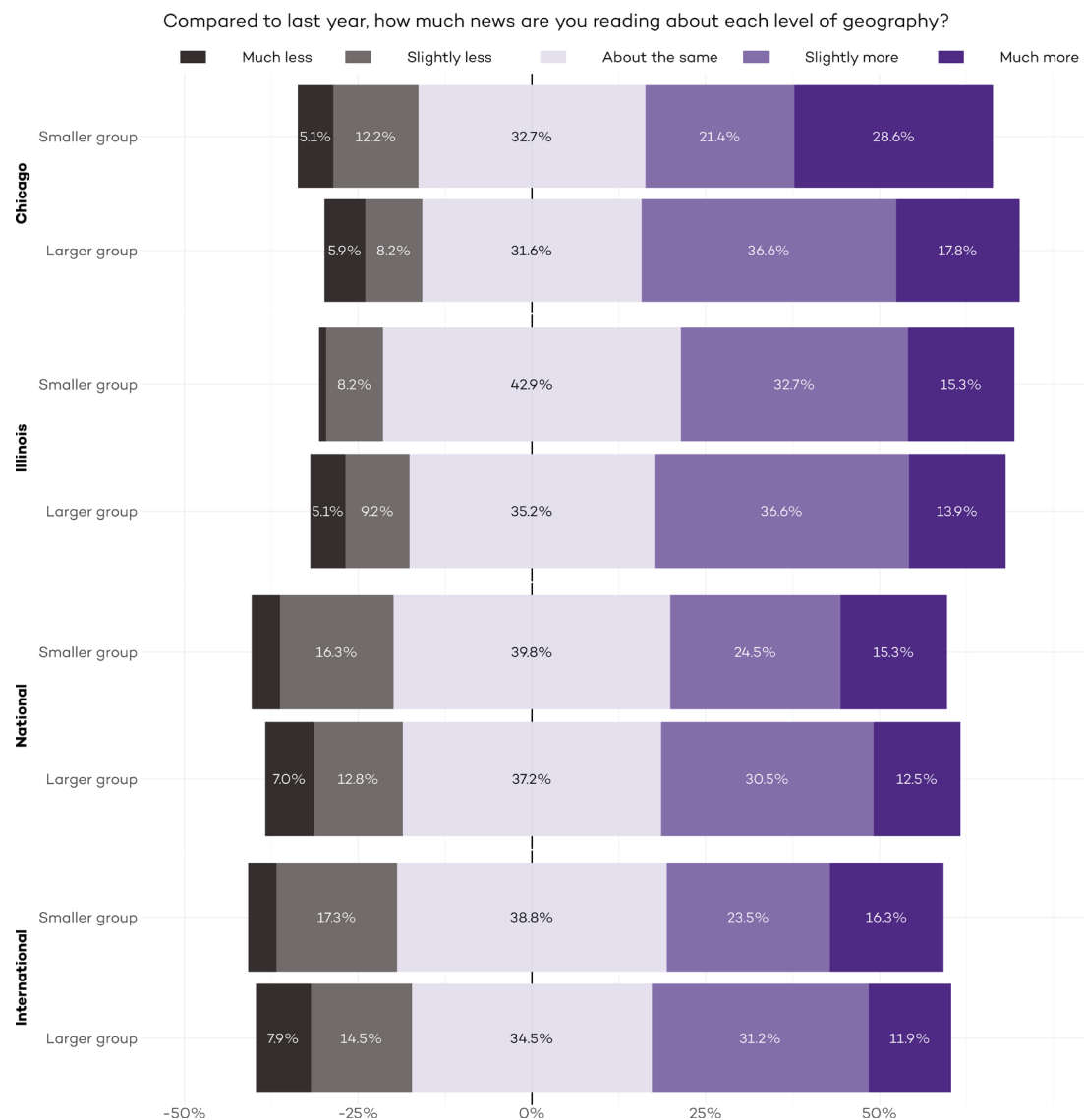
## How much respondents consume news

Most respondents were highly engaged with local news, with over two-thirds of the email-matched group reporting that they consume news at least once a day (65%). In the larger group, over half of respondents checked news at least once a day.

When asked how often they consumed news from Illinois Answers Project specifically, respondents checked just a few times a week, which is less than they checked local news overall. The answers make sense since the news organization publishes less frequently than traditional daily news sites to give reporters time for investigative work.

This response is great news for Illinois Answers Project. While they are still growing audience, the people who know them or even those who found them on social media are dedicated news consumers.

## News consumption compared to last year



## Devices used to consume news

In both groups, respondents did not use smart speakers or tablets to consume news in significant numbers. In the smaller group, people reported not using TV or radio much to consume news. In the larger group, respondents said they used TVs and computers a moderate amount or a lot. Both groups said they used smart phones a lot to consume news. This raises questions about how Illinois Answers Project's in-depth content appears on small screens.

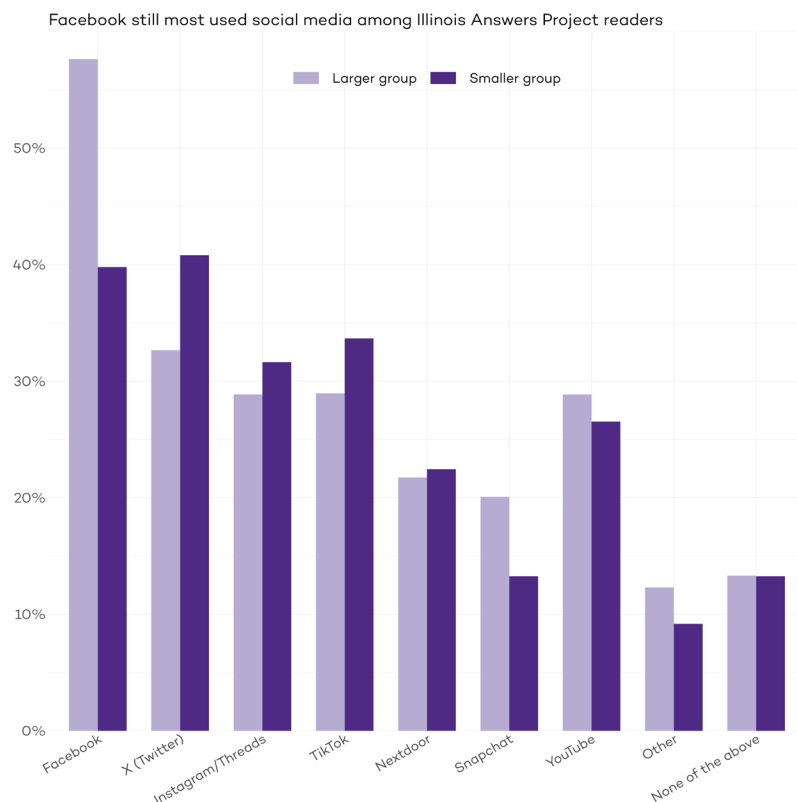
Here's more detail around devices:

- **Television:** Some of the email-matched (smaller) group respondents used TV a moderate amount, but more often they used it a little for news. In the larger group, most respondents viewed news on TV a moderate amount or a lot. Partnerships with TV stations to promote work might reach a new audience.
- **Smart phone:** The smaller group most frequently checked their phones for news updates, saying they consumed news on their phones a lot or a great deal. The larger group used their phones a lot or a moderate amount. Because Illinois Answers Project is focused on producing long-form journalism, they need to continue to ensure the mobile experience is clean and easy-to-read. At this point, they don't have a lot of clutter.
- **Computer:** Both groups of respondents used the computer a lot or a moderate amount to check news.
- **Printed newspaper:** Strongest responses for the smaller group were not at all or a little. The larger group read newspapers a moderate amount or a little. In terms of partnerships, most of Illinois Answers Projects readers would be online readers of print/online publications.

## A younger audience's use of social media

Respondents in the two groups differed a bit in terms of checking local news on social media, where they were asked to select all answers that applied. The smaller group chose Twitter/X most, with Facebook close behind. Among the larger group respondents, Facebook was a clear leader.

### Social media use



Respondents in the larger group said they preferred to consume news on social media, while the smaller group chose email newsletters. This latter group comprises the email-matched responses, so the result isn't surprising. Even among respondents in the smaller group, social media was a popular response.

With regard to “off-platform” distribution, Illinois Answers Project is positioned favorably compared to commercial outlets. Whereas commercial outlets must constantly weigh the audience-development and advertising trade-offs of distributing their content through channels they do not own and operate, Illinois Answers Project's pure journalistic and public service mission encourages an unapologetically aggressive off-platform strategy to maximize reach.

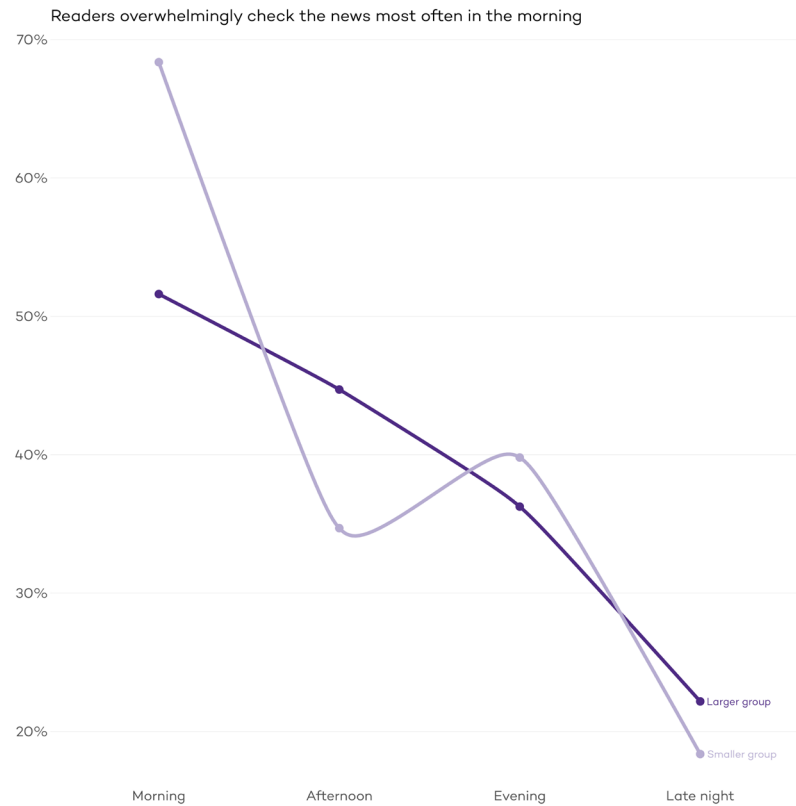
## Other sources for news

Respondents in both groups use a variety of sources to find news, from national newspapers/their digital sites to Chicago-area TV stations or newspapers and their digital sites. The email-matched group seemed to gravitate toward news that's closer to home (Chicago-based sources), although not much separated the responses.

## When respondents were hungriest for news

Both groups checked news most in the mornings, but the larger group's second choice was afternoons, followed by evenings and late night. For the smaller group, second choice went to evenings. As with the larger group, late night was last. Given that Illinois Answers Project only

publishes a limited number of articles, selecting the right publishing times to maximize reach is worth an informed discussion every time.



## Trust in news

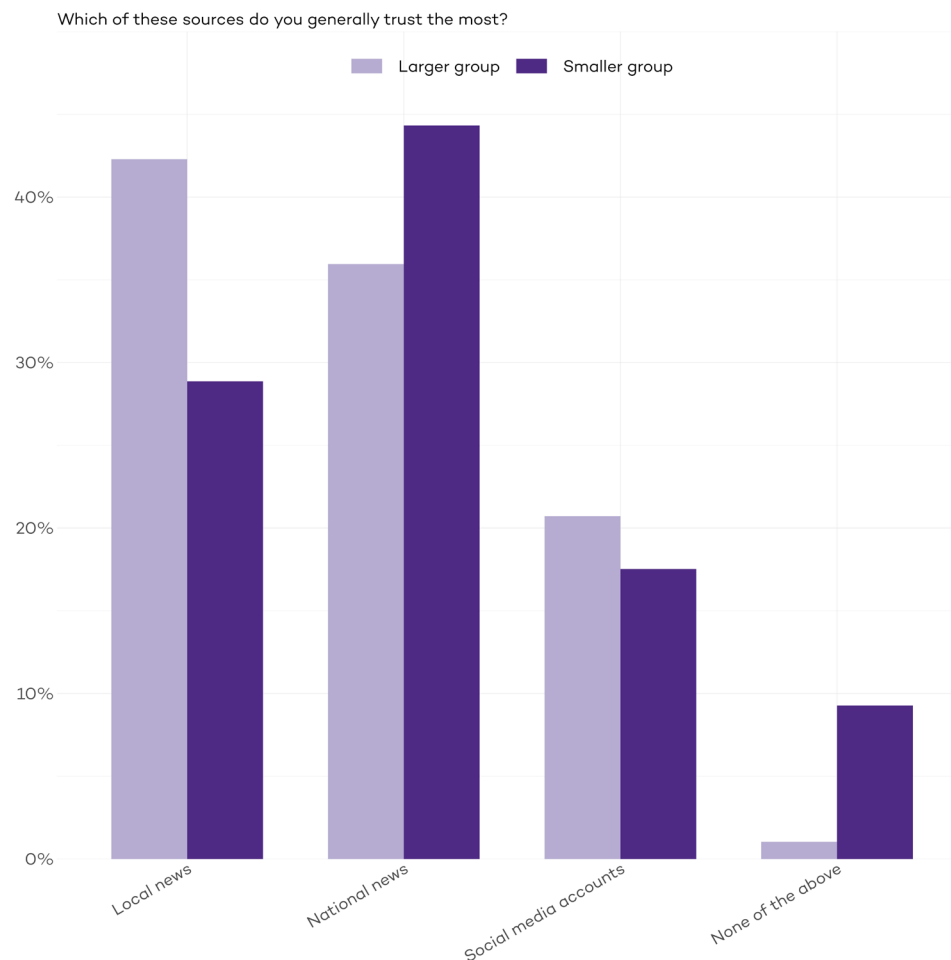
Respondents' trust in news was about the same or a bit higher this year compared to last year, with a digital-only news site tying with a Chicago-area newspaper or its digital site as most trustworthy. Both groups were about the same in responses, although the larger group chose a digital-only site more frequently in terms of trust in local news.

One big difference between the two groups was in answering the question about trust in news more generally. The larger group found local news most trustworthy. Respondents in the smaller group chose national news outlets first.

As a nonprofit, Illinois Answers Project doesn't charge for news, although people have the option to donate. On the survey, both groups said people who can pay should pay as their top choice, which might refer to donation or membership funding models.

In fact, almost three-quarters of the email-matched smaller group said they pay for local news, and more than half of respondents said they paid for two or more local news subscriptions. The larger group resoundingly said they do not pay (65%), but the other 35% mostly pay for multiple subscriptions.

The email-matched group seems willing to pay, which is something worth exploring for Illinois Answers Project in terms of a campaign targeting individual donors.



## Content priorities

When asked to choose up to five of the most important issues facing their neighborhoods, the top content areas for the smaller group were education and housing/zoning/land use. In the larger group, the top choice was health care.

### MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES FOR EACH GROUP

| Smaller group              | Percent | Larger group               | Percent |
|----------------------------|---------|----------------------------|---------|
| Education                  | 16      | Health Care                | 19      |
| Housing, Zoning & Land Use | 16      | Crime & Law Enforcement    | 13      |
| Environment                | 14      | Business & Employment      | 13      |
| Crime & Law Enforcement    | 13      | Education                  | 13      |
| Business & Employment      | 12      | Environment                | 12      |
| Health Care                | 11      | Housing, Zoning & Land Use | 12      |
| Transportation             | 9       | Transportation             | 10      |
| Cultural Opportunities     | 5       | Cultural Opportunities     | 5       |

## Coverage gaps based on these topics

Depending on the topic, both groups thought local media was doing slightly well, moderately well or very well at covering their priorities (the extremes of not well or extremely well weren't chosen much). Of the people who didn't think the media was doing well, here are the main reasons (note: the completion rate was very small in the smaller group):

1. **Crime:** Coverage is incomplete or gets crucial facts wrong (smaller group); local news doesn't cover the issue frequently enough or reporting is not available in languages

spoken in my community (larger group).

2. **Housing, Zoning & Land Use:** Both groups said local news doesn't cover the issue frequently enough, although the larger group said coverage is inaccessible behind paywalls (this doesn't refer to Illinois Answers Project because the website is not paywall protected) or not delivered to their community.
3. **Business:** Both groups said local news doesn't cover the issue frequently enough. The smaller group also said coverage is incomplete or gets facts wrong. The larger group also said coverage is inaccessible behind paywalls or not delivered to their community.
4. **Transportation:** The smaller group chose infrequency of coverage, inaccessibility of coverage behind paywalls or not delivered to their community, coverage is incomplete or gets crucial facts wrong and news reports are biased or do not reflect the experiences of my community. The larger group cited inaccessibility of coverage behind paywalls or not delivered to their community.
5. **Education:** The smaller audience cited lack of frequency and incomplete coverage or getting crucial facts wrong, and the larger group said reporting is not available in languages spoken in their community.
6. **Environment:** The smaller group cited lack of frequency. The larger group said reporting is not available in languages spoken in their community.
7. **Health care:** Both groups cited lack of frequency, but the larger group also cited inaccessibility of coverage behind paywalls or not delivered to their community, and reporting is not available in languages spoken in their community.
8. **Cultural opportunities:** The larger group cited inaccessibility of coverage behind paywalls or not delivered to their community. The smaller group said it wasn't covered frequently enough, coverage is incomplete or gets crucial facts wrong and news reports are biased or do not reflect the experiences of their community.

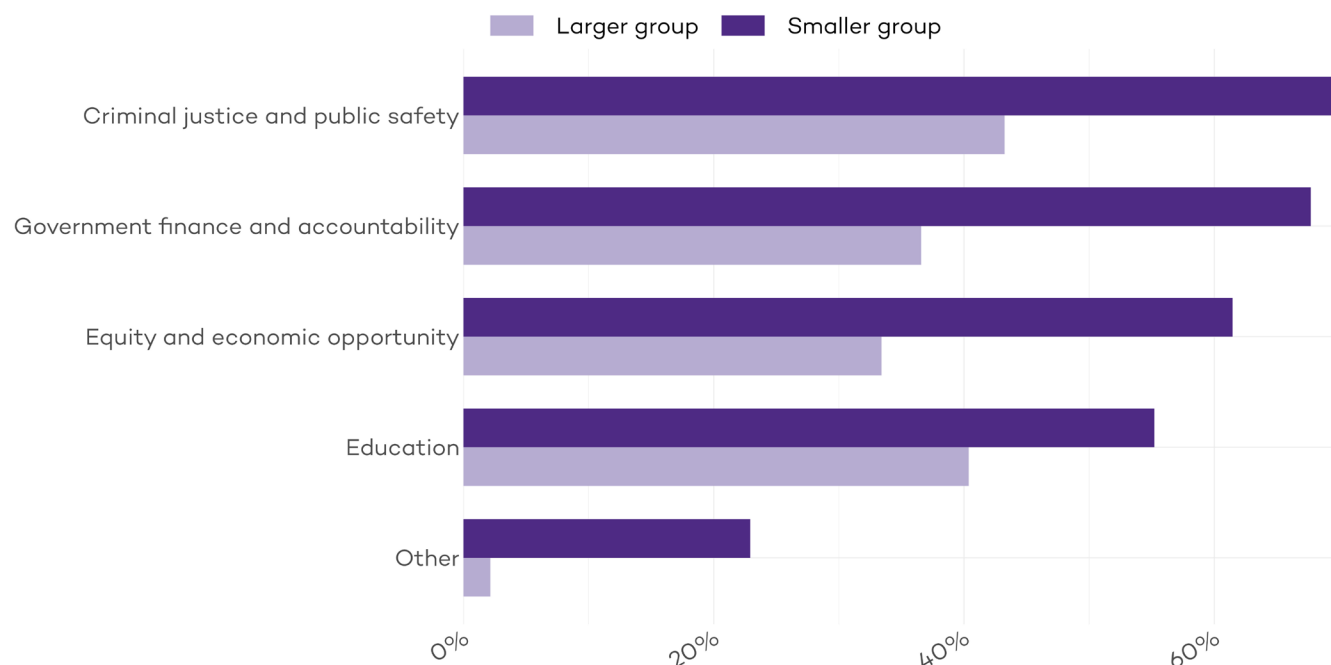
Illinois Answers Project focuses on covering these four content areas:

- Government Finance & Accountability
- Education
- Equity & Opportunity
- Criminal Justice & Public Safety

Among those topics, respondents both groups prioritized Criminal Justice and Public Safety, with slightly different priorities after that.

While respondents seemed enthusiastic about all four of the broad coverage areas, perhaps the priorities among known users of their site vs. priorities among people who viewed the survey on social media will help prioritize coverage topics. For example, crime is first for both groups, education is second for the larger group and last for the smaller group. If the survey is viewed through the lens of the small number of current readers, Illinois Answers Project would go heavier on government, not education. Then again, education was the top choice of the smaller group in the earlier questions about local news in general.

## Priorities based on Illinois Answers Project's coverage areas



The larger group limited the amount of time it would spend on a lengthy but revelatory piece of journalism to 2 to 5 minutes (top choice at 35%), while 61% of the smaller group said they would spend more than 5 minutes or as long as it takes to get to the end.

Illinois Answers Project should keep in mind that their longer pieces, even their very best journalism, will probably not see very many people reading the entire stories.

## Competitors or partners

Illinois Answers Project regularly co-publishes stories in other news outlets in the Chicago area, and sometimes reporters work with other news outlets on important stories. While the Chicago area teems with news organizations, and the Illinois Answers Project wants to set itself apart, it also looks for opportunities to extend its reach through its partners. When a co-publishing partner republishes Illinois Answers Project's work, it runs code that enables the nonprofit to track metrics.

In the smaller group, respondents said they regularly read many Chicago-area and national news outlets.

- Block Club Chicago was the most popular choice (46.9%)
- The Chicago Tribune and Sun-Times (both 45.8%)
- The New York Times (43.8%)
- ProPublica Illinois (38.5%)
- The Washington Post (37.5%)
- Daily Line (33.3%), Injustice Watch (28.1%) and Axios Chicago (26%) also garnered responses.

In the larger group, respondents also indicated they read a wide variety of news sources.

- The Chicago Sun-Times (28.8%)
- Chicago Tribune (25.9%)
- ProPublica Illinois (24.8%)
- New York Times (24.4%)
- Block Club Chicago (24%)
- Washington Post (23.8%)
- Daily Line (20.1%), Injustice Watch (12.2%) and Axios Chicago (10.8%) also garnered responses.

## Opportunities

- The Qualtrics research points to respondents who are a highly engaged news audience in a younger demographic than many other news outlets, with most respondents identifying as 25-34. For a still-new brand, this small but engaged group provides an excellent starting point for Illinois Answers Project to grow its audience and reach, which will help the organization tell an important story to its funders.
- While Illinois Answers Project doesn't charge for its news and keeps its website free from the noise of popup and takeover ads, Qualtrics respondents are willing to pay for news, and some are paying for multiple news subscriptions. This willingness to pay is something worth exploring for Illinois Answers Project in terms of a campaign targeting individual donors. In addition to the money that would bring, increasing donors would indicate a level of engagement and commitment.
- As a fledgling news brand in the Chicago area's crowded news ecosystem, Illinois Answers Project now has Qualtrics data about respondents' priorities for coverage, from Illinois Answers Project's four coverage areas to a wider list of possible priorities. Illinois Answers Project can now dig into this data to determine whether those four priorities remain the focus for its investigations and solutions journalism work. With respondents' top priority on Criminal Justice and Public Safety, for example, Illinois Answers Project has an opportunity to carve a niche to create stories that stand out amid the noise of a crowded news landscape, in terms of depth and solutions-based coverage.
- Illinois Answers Project already partners with some of the news organizations on the competitors' list, but perhaps that list will point to some new opportunities.

## Biggest threat

The sheer number of news outlets and options for Chicago-area news consumers poses the biggest threat to a new brand, so it's imperative that Illinois Answers Project continues to deliver work that sets it apart.

## Challenges

- The lack of racial diversity of respondents is a huge challenge in a city with so much diversity. But perhaps this is simply an opportunity in disguise. The organization is taking steps to reach out to an underserved area with help from a funder.
- Respondents used a variety of social media to find their news, with the smaller (email-matched) group relying most on Twitter/X, and both groups of respondents choosing Facebook first or second. Social media can be unpredictable for news outlets.
- The survey found that respondents are using their smartphones to consume news, and with the length of many of Illinois Answers Project's stories, this might present a problem.

## Conclusion

Illinois Answers Project has chosen to set itself apart from other Chicago-area journalism outlets by holding the powerful to account, changing lives and laws, and focusing on solutions journalism and investigative work. The Qualtrics survey shows that respondents have a big appetite for news, and that they consume a lot of news, which means Illinois Answers Project's challenge is to build its brand by doing journalism that will stand out.