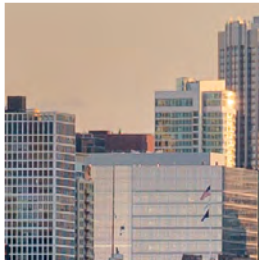
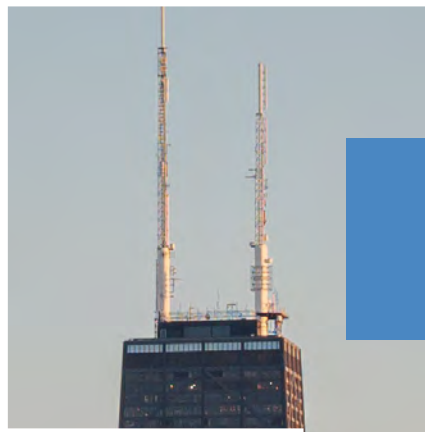


# THE MEDIA ECOSYSTEM **CHICAGO**

A deep dive into the  
Windy City's innovative and  
expansive media landscape



An analysis  
of 245 outlets  
serving the  
Chicago area



**Northwestern**  
MEDILL  
Local News Accelerator



## INTRODUCTION

In early 2025, Project C, an organization that works to equip independent journalists with tools to succeed in the independent creator economy, introduced the News Ecosystem Framework — a visual tool that charts a comprehensive continuum of news industry models. The aim of the framework was to contextualize creator-model journalism as part of a broader and evolving news ecosystem, and to offer a tool for understanding how audiences are served across different types of providers. [See the framework here.](#)

Building on that work, Project C partnered with Northwestern University's Local News Accelerator at the Medill School of Journalism to apply the Ecosystem framework to the Chicago area.

### THE GOALS

- To evaluate how local news sources break down across categories in the News Ecosystem Framework.
- To expand Medill's existing list of Chicago-area outlets by identifying additional creators, micro-newsrooms and other independent sources previously unindexed.
- To analyze the rapidly changing local media landscape in Chicago and highlight traditional and innovative approaches employed by outlets across the region.



# METHODOLOGY

We uncovered about 100 previously unindexed news and information sources providing real service to Chicago-area audiences.

Each source was cataloged and assigned to a category from the News Ecosystem Framework. Because this was the first time the framework was tested against a local market, we expanded the taxonomy where needed – for example, adding a “Community Utility” category to capture hyperlocal information providers that function more as essential resources than traditional newsrooms and “Niche For-Profit” to capture micro-newsrooms that had previously flown under the radar, but were operating on a for-profit model in smaller neighborhoods in and around the city.

Beyond classification, we gathered a range of data on each outlet: its geographic base, whether it advocated for a particular

cause or perspective, what specific audience it sought to serve, its primary business model and other characteristics relevant to sustainability and impact.

To complement this research, we surveyed a selection of outlets across multiple categories. These surveys provided deeper insight into how they operate, fund themselves and engage with audiences. From this group, we selected an even smaller subset of outlets for case studies, allowing us to tell richer stories about how different types of organizations fit into the Chicago area’s news and information ecosystem.

Together, this body of work – cataloging, surveying and case-study development – informs the findings that follow.

## METHODOLOGY AT A GLANCE

**Framework:** Applied Project C’s News Ecosystem Framework to the Chicago area’s media landscape in partnership with Medill’s Local News Accelerator.

**Indexing:** Expanded Medill’s list of local outlets, identifying roughly 100 new sources, including creators and micro-newsrooms.

**Classification:** Assigned each outlet to ecosystem categories, adding new ones where needed.

**Data Collection:** Tracked each outlet’s location, perspective, business model and audience approach.

**Deeper Insight:** Surveyed a sample of outlets and developed case studies to illustrate key trends and practices.



# THE MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

## FOR PROFIT

### ESTABLISHED

New York Times, CNN

AKA “legacy media.” Newspapers, magazines and long-established media companies.

### REVENUE

Ads and subscriptions

### CONTENT/AUDIENCE

National and global coverage

### NEW “NEW MEDIA”

Puck, Semafor, Zeteo

New entrants building media empires, often seeking prestige and paid audiences.

Ads and subscriptions

Opinions, analysis and reporting. Niche and high-value audiences

### NICHE FOR PROFIT

Community, trade news

Small, commercially driven outlets focused on specialized topics.

Ads and subscriptions

Niche-focused

## NONPROFIT

### ESTABLISHED NONPROFIT

Texas Tribune, NPR

Focused on service journalism. Like legacy media, but with a nonprofit business model.

### REVENUE

Fundraising, grants, donors, subscribers

### CONTENT/AUDIENCE

Community-focused and accountability journalism

### NEW NONPROFIT

Outlier Media, MLK50

Locally focused outlets prioritizing community needs and hyperlocal news.

Fundraising, grants, donors, subscribers

Responsive to local issues. Community-focused with deep engagement

## COLLECTIVE

### WORKER-OWNED

The 51st, Hell Gate

Worker-owned ventures focused on collaborative independence.

Subscriptions, profit-sharing

Community-focused

## SOLOPRENEUR

### CONTENT CREATOR JOURNALIST

Emily Atkin (Heated)

Independent journalists creating original content, personal brands and direct audience ties.

### REVENUE

Subscriptions and audience funding

### CONTENT/AUDIENCE

Personality-driven and highly niche-focused

### NEWS INFLUENCERS

Joe Rogan, Hasan Piker

Personalities sharing ‘takes’ on platforms like TikTok; they often reinforce existing beliefs.

Subscriptions, ads and donations

Personality-driven; focused on relatability and accessibility

## OTHER

### COMMUNITY UTILITY

Local newsletters

Outlets whose purpose is to serve a community with practical, reliable information

### REVENUE

Ads

### CONTENT/AUDIENCE

Community-focused service journalism

### STUDENT MEDIA

The Daily Northwestern

News outlets run by students, often tied to schools or universities.

Subscriptions, ads and donations

General coverage of local campus issues for students and staff

## MEDIA IN CHICAGO

We uncovered 245 active outlets serving Chicago-area audiences. Throughout this report, we will profile a handful of the publications — from niche for-profit outlets like La Raza to influencers like Jonah Fialkow.

*The full list of outlets is available at the end of this report.*

### FOR PROFIT

THE HINSDALEAN	→
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### NONPROFIT

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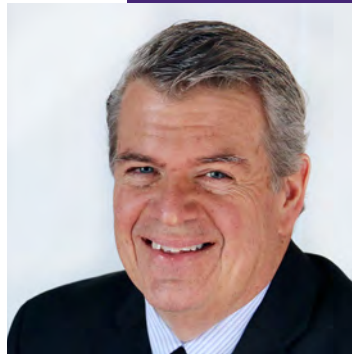
## NICHE FOR-PROFIT

### The Hinsdalean

#### 'Hinsdale really wants a paper about itself'

While Jim Slonoff worked in local journalism in the Chicago suburbs, he watched as his local paper became more regional and less focused on his home of Hinsdale. When he and several colleagues took a buyout in 2006, The Hinsdalean came to be.

"We said, 'You know what? Hinsdale people really care about Hinsdale,' and I think this is a situation that applies to many towns that are next to each other, suburban towns," Slonoff said. "So we said, 'We think we can do this on our own.'"



**"We provide a foundation and a place for people to go that helps build identity."**

Jim Slonoff, co-owner and publisher

With a staff of eight — four full-time — The Hinsdalean prints weekly, with a circulation of 6,500. It is delivered free to every home and most businesses in the community. They also have a new website.

For 19 years, Slonoff's focus has been the same.

"Our motto is '[Community] journalism the way it was meant to be,' and we just really focused on the community and cover the school boards, cover the village board, and we're lucky we don't have half a dozen different boards to cover," he said. "We focus on local news. ... We haven't really deviated much from that."

The outlet's revenue comes from display advertising and classifieds, which come from a vibrant business district, including a hospital, churches, independent realtors and banks.

And, he added, it's important to not lose sight of why the community newspaper still holds value.

"I also think we provide a foundation and a place for people to go that helps build identity."



## TAKEAWAYS

At the start of this project, there was a sense that the Chicago area's local media landscape is large and diverse. But, there had never been much work done to fold creators and influencers into the equation.

As such, this project further underscored that the city and region's local media landscape is remarkably diverse, with many outlets created to provide more accurate and accessible information to more micro and/or niche audiences than what's available from mainstream sources.

"These news providers are seeing opportunities to step up and serve communities that were underserved in previous eras," said Tim Franklin, Medill's John M. Mutz Chair in Local News and founding director of Medill's Local News Initiative. "At the same time, we've seen an unprecedented splintering of news audiences across many

digital platforms. We're all living through a historic transformation in how news is consumed, produced, distributed and paid for. This is creating opportunities for news providers to inexpensively build loyal, dedicated audiences around specific interests and geographic areas in ways that didn't exist before. A news provider no longer needs to own an expensive printing press, a fleet of trucks or an elaborate TV studio to build a sustainable audience."

Our research uncovered about 100 additional previously unindexed news and information sources, the bulk of which are serving audiences traditionally

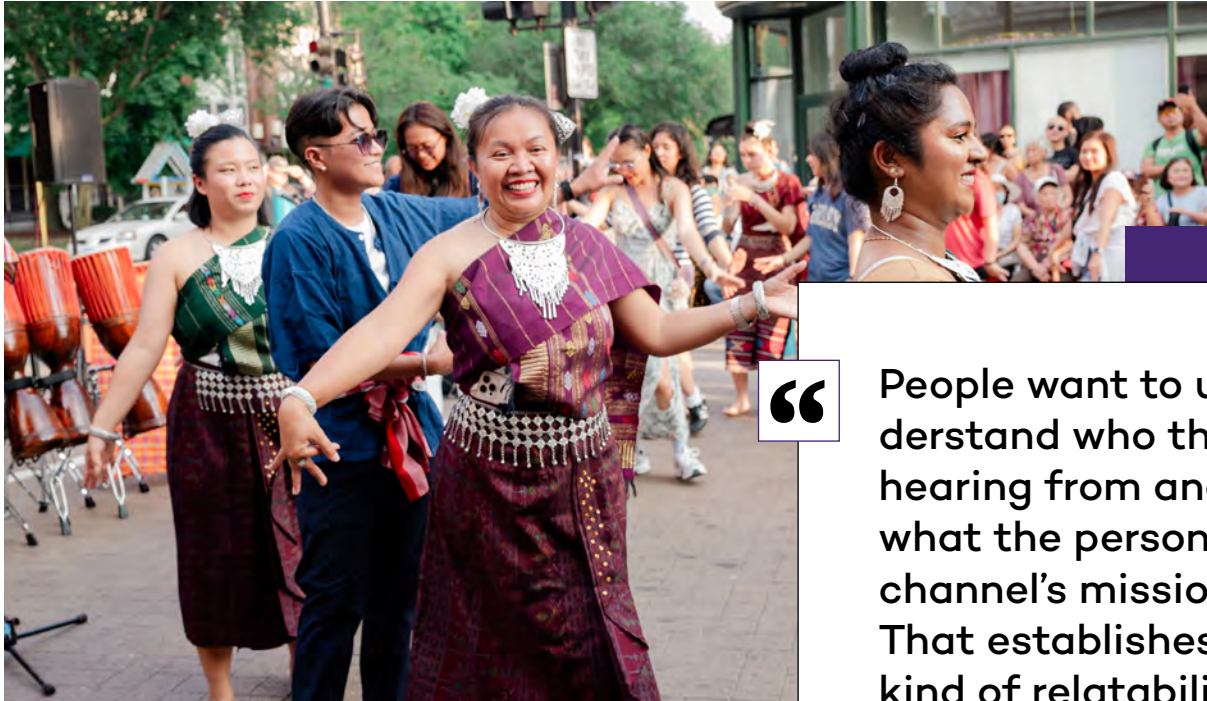
underrepresented in mainstream media – everything from food influencers who showcase Chicago's many dining establishments to policy experts equipping subscribers with the information they need to spur change where they live. Many wouldn't be considered journalists by a traditional definition, but are increasingly seen as trusted sources of news and information by their audiences. They are not always unbiased, but that aligns with larger audience trends demonstrating that audiences are more likely to place trust in sources who are transparent about their lived experience or stance on a given issue.

“

These news providers are seeing opportunities to step up and serve communities that were underserved in previous eras.”

Tim Franklin, John M. Mutz Chair of Local News, Medill School of Journalism





“

People want to understand who they're hearing from and what the person or channel's mission is. That establishes a kind of relatability.”

Joy Mayer, executive director,  
Trusting News

The media landscape in Chicago, and across the country, is rapidly evolving to the point that it felt irresponsible to not only acknowledge the newer ways people are working to stay informed about what's happening in their communities, but also explore why niche for-profit publications, creators and influencers are having success and what lessons more traditional outlets can take from their work.

Among the key themes that emerged was the shifting placement of trust. Whether trying to understand why influencers have gained popularity, or even why the Chicago area has so many different publications targeted at particular audiences, understanding why people trust or distrust information sources provides guidance for the industry as it navigates an abundance of change.

“People want to understand who they're hearing from and what the person or channel's mission is. That establishes a

kind of relatability,” said Joy Mayer, executive director of Trusting News, a nonprofit that works with news providers to both understand how trust is built and better foster it. Recently, Mayer's work has expanded beyond working with traditional news organizations to understand how creators build trust. “There's also an authenticity to the ‘trusted friend’ approach, when a human you have something in common with is telling you what you need to know. A caveat is that authenticity often leads to assumptions of honesty and expertise. Good creators demonstrate those factors explicitly and don't take audience trust for granted.”

A recent study published by Medill's Local News Initiative found that in a 14-county radius in and around Chicago, nearly one-third (30%) of respondents said they consume local news from content creators on a daily basis, compared to just 18% who turn to local newspapers.

While Medill's survey respondents demonstrated a shift toward content creators, the largest number of previously un-indexed news sources in the area are niche for-profit sites serving specific geographies, audiences or topic verticals. Many of the niche for-profit sites live up to their name, reaching small niche audiences with deep knowledge and connection, while content creators are able to reach a wider audience on distributed platforms like TikTok and Instagram.

“This is an empowering time in the information space — for both providers and consumers,” Mayer added. “It's also a confusing time. I'd love for people to be more mindful and cautious about where they place their trust. But ultimately, the onus is on information providers to demonstrate credibility and actively earn trust, whether they're part of a traditional news brand or launching something on their own.”

## Austin Berg | The Last Ward

**‘I could not work for a straight-up newsroom’**

Austin Berg’s never considered himself to be a journalist. He’s the executive director of the Chicago Policy Center and vice president of marketing for the Illinois Policy Institute, and his background is in political science and economics.

But in March 2025, he launched The Last Ward newsletter on Substack, and his weekly in-depth analysis of Chicago politics touches on everything from the city’s debt crisis to the Chicago Teachers Union to what Zohran Mamdani’s victory in the New York City mayoral primary means for the Windy City.

He’s surpassed 100,000 subscribers already, thanks mostly to the giant platform he already works on — the Illinois Policy Institute sends an email out to 1.5 million people each week, and the newsletter is run through the institute.

“Our vision is super clear: It’s that Chicago has the most effective, accountable and transparent big city government in the United States,” Berg said. “There are many things preventing that, but one of the most

insidious things is just apathy. And oftentimes, I think in Chicago, there’s this pathology that says, basically, ‘It’s all corrupt,’ throw up my hands like, ‘What are you gonna do about it?’ That’s not to say,



**“I could not work for a straight-up newsroom because I think the entire point is to generate attention toward an action, to fix something... That’s why I love the advocacy space.”**

Austin Berg, executive director, Chicago Policy Center

though, that people aren’t curious, and I think if you’re able to meet people where they’re at, talk about issues that they’re interested in at the city level, people would be surprised by how much positive feedback you can get from that.”

Berg’s still in the process of figuring out how to monetize this massive new audience. He wants to find a way for people’s support to fund the entire Chicago Policy Center, not just the newsletter. But ei-

ther way, his goal remains to bring his expertise and analysis of Chicago politics straight to the inboxes of his subscribers to enact positive change across the city.

“I could not work for a straight-up newsroom because I think the entire point is to generate attention toward an action, to fix something,” Berg said. “And so that’s why I love the advocacy space because you’re actually giving people a concrete step to take to do something.”



## Chalkbeat Chicago

### Topics of civic importance

The Chalkbeat Chicago bureau launched in 2018, further expanding the nonprofit education newsroom's footprint. Now with eight bureaus across the country, the publication provides comprehensive coverage of schools and the education system.

"I think that having a population of people who have knowledge and information makes for a better society," said Becky Vevea, Chalkbeat Chicago's bureau chief.

that's not the case for all outlets in the city.

"It's really important to have topic-specific media outlets, especially on issues that are of, I think, really significant civic importance like education," she said. "Public safety and justice I think also are like that. Injustice Watch does a lot of good topical reporting, and so I think that it is important to have media in a more mainstream media landscape or broader land-

scape is helpful because not all other newsrooms dedicate the same level of resource to the topic."

Most of Chalkbeat Chicago's financial support comes through grants with most of the rest from individual reader contributions. But, the outlet is also expanding a corporate sponsorship setup for ads and earned revenue on the outlet's website.

With a team of four that's part of the larger Chalkbeat network of 150 staff, Vevea said her organization has support, especially when it comes to fundraising. Still, with a small group that has boots on the ground in Chicago, it's a never-ending challenge to tell all the stories affecting education in Chicago.

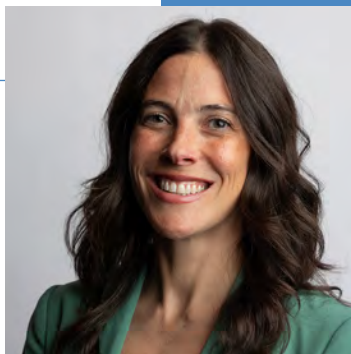
"It's really hard, but I think Chicago is lucky in a lot of ways," Vevea said. "I think we have a thriving local news ecosystem. I also think the journalists who are still in it and doing the work, most of them are incredible people doing incredible work, and the biggest threat is them burning out and there not being enough of them. Whether you are at a small outlet, start-up, legacy, whatever, I'm just rooting for all of us."

“

**I think Chicago is lucky in a lot of ways. I think we have a thriving local news ecosystem... Whether you are at a small outlet, start-up, legacy, whatever, I'm just rooting for all of us."**

Becky Vevea, bureau chief,  
Chalkbeat Chicago

Vevea formerly worked as a reporter for WBEZ, Chicago's NPR station, so she's seen the evolution of how much newsrooms invest in coverage of specific beats like education. While WBEZ's team continues to cover the topic significantly — and the two publications partner on different stories —



scape that is focused on topics."

She added: "Our existence in the media land-

# MAJOR FINDINGS

As part of this project, we broke down the trends taking place across Chicago's vast local media ecosystem as news outlets innovate to meet changing audiences and an evolving industry.

## SCALE AND ECOSYSTEM DIVERSITY

Our work uncovered 245 active outlets serving Chicago-area audiences - a significant expansion beyond traditional counts.

Most notably, 52% of outlets serve niches beyond general news, showing the ecosystem's evolution toward topic-specific coverage.

## A PREVALENCE OF ADVOCACY-DRIVEN JOURNALISM

Much of Chicago's expanded news ecosystem is advocacy-driven rather than traditional "objective" journalism.

34% of outlets explicitly advocate for particular causes or perspectives.

## CONTENT SPECIALIZATION PATTERNS

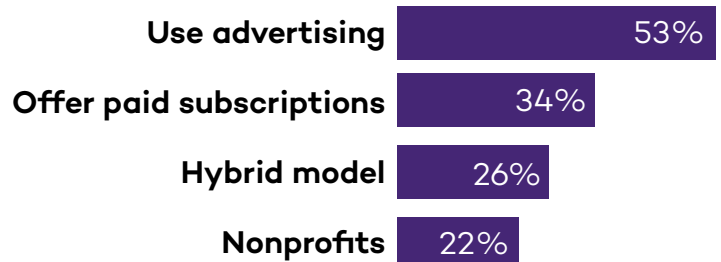
General news still dominates but the remaining landscape is highly fragmented



The second largest non-general news category, reflecting Chicago's cultural vitality.

## REVENUE MODEL INNOVATION

The data reveal sophisticated revenue diversification strategies



Notably, at least nine outlets combine nonprofit status with subscription revenue, suggesting innovative sustainability approaches.

## Chicago News Weekly

### ‘Black Chicago is amazing’

As Chicago News Weekly (CNW) celebrates its third year of print publication (and eighth year overall), it’s looking ahead at the changing media landscape, even as it continues to spend \$30,000 a month on printing.

Launched in 2017 by Cheryl Mainor Norman and Kai EL’ Zabar, CNW aimed to be a modernized Black media outlet, building off their time as publisher and editor-in-chief of the Chicago Defender, respectively. They honed their digital presence first, but added a print product during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many Black Chicagoans struggled for internet access.

Still, managing editor Laura Miller noted, their print product differs from more established entities like the Chicago Tribune: It’s free, and as a small independent Black-owned news outlet, they don’t have the same access to advertising dollars.

The paper prints weekly (though they pause printing over the summer), and it has a circulation of 47,000, with distribution along the CTA Red Line and in hubs like Walgreens.

As much as CNW focuses on its print offering, Miller’s leading the charge to

help the publication think about reaching younger demographics who might engage with news differently than older readers.

“You want to make sure

Yes, there are structural inefficiencies. Yes, there is pollution and damage there. There is that component about Black life, but the vibrancy of Black

**“Black Chicago makes you want to change your hair, makes you want to stand more proudly or stand more boldly.”**

Laura Miller, managing editor,  
Chicago News Weekly



that we’re able to get [to that] business person or construction worker that may not have the time or desire to read the news as a tangible paper or watch CNN or MSNBC all day,” Miller said. “They want to be able to do it while driving, they want to be able to consume it in a group.”

This has led to the development of CNW Digital, a platform that Miller said will help address this shifting demand.

Regardless of how it’s distributed, Miller emphasized the importance of having a publication that can serve the roughly 800,000 Black Chicagoans.

“It’s not all Black pain,” Miller said. “Yes, there are systematic barriers.

Chicago is not that. ... Black Chicago is amazing. Black Chicago makes you want to change your hair, makes you want to stand more proudly or stand more boldly, and it’s not without understanding that those things that I mentioned do exist, but it is also more solution based to identify where the changes are happening, who those people are and how our readership can get connected in alongside those.”

”



## Jonah Fialkow

### ‘Storytelling is so important’

For 11 years now, Jonah Fialkow’s worked as a beer and hotdog vendor at Wrigley Field, the historic home of the Chicago Cubs. In 2022, he was selling merchandise at a Harry Styles concert when he decided to make a TikTok video about the day in the life of a merch vendor. It received around 5,000 views, and Fialkow thought he might be onto something. Entering the 2023 baseball season, he started filming more videos about his job.

so important,” Fialkow said. “And there’s so much history at Wrigley Field and people care so much about the sport and the team and the city, and no one has been working at Wrigley or a part of the Cubs franchise longer than the vendors. The guys at the front of the seniority line have been working at Wrigley for 60 years, and there’s no player, no owner, maybe a few fans, but no one involved in the organization that’s been there longer.”

to for news, information and, in Fialkow’s case, entertainment.

“It seems like we’re going into an era that’s much more digital and social media-focused in short-form ways,” he said. “But I think that people love to learn more about the everyday person. And I think that’s what a lot of news stories do well, too, when highlighting some of these local feel-good stories.”

Fialkow stands to gain financially from this endeavor, too. He said it’s not uncommon for fans to buy a beer from him because he’s “the TikTok guy,” and he’s landed a number of branding deals with Shake Shack, Lou Malnati’s, Five Hour Energy, DoorDash and others.

His enthusiasm for the Cubs, Wrigley Field and his colleagues is what really drives his platform.

“I had some [fans] from California, some from Minnesota come up to me, they’re like, ‘Oh yeah, this is how I keep up with Cubs news,’” Fialkow said of his account. “So, in a way, I mean, I’m kind of like this micro Cubs sportscaster posting the ins and outs and also the actual results of the games on a daily basis.”

“

**I’m kind of like this micro Cubs sportscaster posting the ins and outs.”**

Jonah Fialkow, Chicago Cubs vendor + TikToker

Fast forward more than two years and Fialkow (better known as @jewishjonah on TikTok) has more than 50,000 followers and videos that have received hundreds of thousands of views. In addition to posting day-in-the-life content, he also takes fans behind the scenes at Wrigley, featuring interviews with vendors who’ve worked at the ballpark for decades, clips from games and more.

“I think storytelling is



Fialkow doesn’t pretend to be a reporter — it doesn’t take long to see just how big of a Cubs fan he is — but his platform is just one example of a shift in the sources people turn

## HOW CHICAGO'S 245 OUTLETS FIT INTO THE MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

- NONPROFIT/COLLECTIVE
- SOLOPRENEUR
- FOR PROFIT
- OTHER

**WBEZCHICAGO**

Public radio station with news, talk and arts programming

Worker-owned collectives

14%

**Established nonprofit**

A quarter of all media were part of a non-profit or collective model (blue squares).

**Student media**

6%

**Content creator journalists**



News for people who still believe Chicago can work

45%

**Niche for-profit**

The majority of Chicago-based media, 52%, are for-profit outlets (purple squares).

**Chicago Tribune**

Founded in 1847, it's the most-ready daily in the city

5%

**Established**

**CHALKBEAT**

Reporting on schools and education across Chicago

15%

**News influencers**

Creators and influencers make up 21% of Chicago's media ecosystem.

**New 'new media'**

**LaRaza**

Spanish-language news for Chicago's Latino community

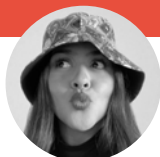
**CHICAGO**  
NEWS WEEKLY

News and events affecting progressive Black communities

10%

**New nonprofit**

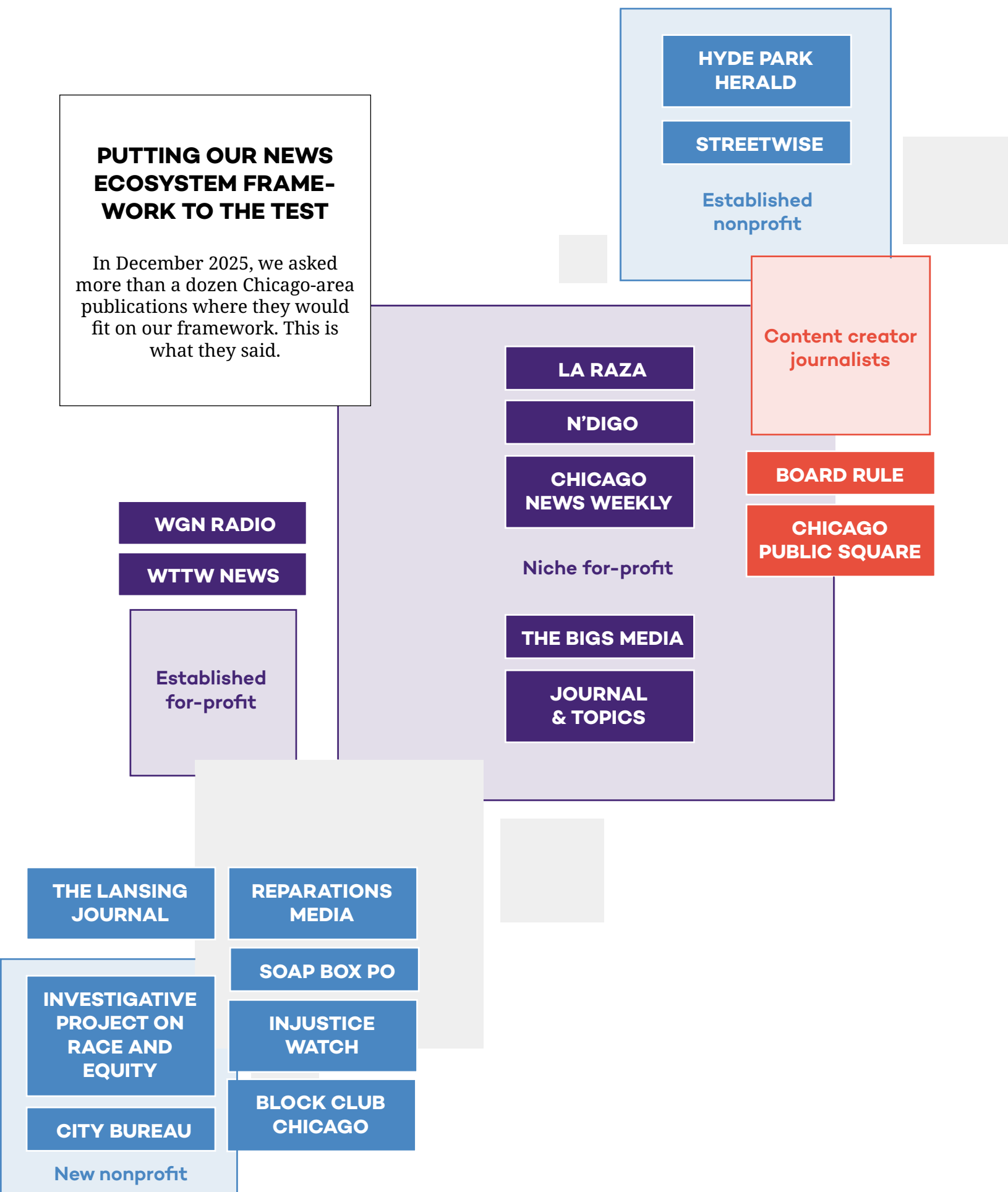
**Community utility**



Influencer Erica Noblecilla

## PUTTING OUR NEWS ECOSYSTEM FRAMEWORK TO THE TEST

In December 2025, we asked more than a dozen Chicago-area publications where they would fit on our framework. This is what they said.





## Polish Daily News

**‘It’s kind of our responsibility to keep it going.’**

Polish Daily News (Dziennik Zwiazkowy) has served the Polish community in Chicago since 1908. With more than 900,000 people in the Chicago area with Polish ancestry, it’s recognized as the largest Polish metropolitan area outside of Poland.

The publication covers local news, but also writes about what’s happening in Poland and across the U.S. They distribute 10,000 copies weekly at 250 locations across five counties at various Polish grocery

Before COVID-19, Polish Daily News printed five days a week; during the pandemic, they cut back to three times weekly, before moving to the once-a-week schedule. The decline in display advertising has hit the outlet particularly hard, and they’re now increasingly reliant on classified ads, though those numbers are also diminishing.

But the organization has no plans to shift from its for-profit model. A nonprofit setup wouldn’t

berships.”

One positive has come from the Polish government, which distributes grants to news outlets outside of Poland. Dudka said they’ve received close to \$100,000 this past year alone, though he noted that the support is determined by which party is in power. Either way, he’s determined to keep this outlet — that’s spanned generations of Polish history — moving forward.

“The fact that the paper [has been] around for 117 years now, that’s a huge responsibility, honestly,” he said. “We would love to continue that, especially [since] a number of papers folded in recent history ... so we feel that it’s kind of our responsibility to keep it going.”

How will he do this? A more focused digital presence and an expansion of other offerings like person of the year editions, inserts for sporting events and a conference organized for Polish American youth in Chicago are among the options.

“We try to do more than just publish newspapers to create that brand, to widen our reach,” Dudka said. “But again, funding is something that’s going to be difficult.”

**“The fact that the paper [has been] around for 117 years now, that’s a huge responsibility, honestly.”**

Lukasz Dudka, general manager, Polish Daily News



stores, liquor stores and gas stations, but as general manager Lukasz Dudka noted, that number will be declining in the near future.

work for them.

“I know the Polish population do not see a newspaper as an institution that is working for the benefit of the public,” Dudka said. “They see that as a for-profit business, as a company that somebody established to make money. When I spoke with other ethnic media, they feel the same, like, it’s going to be hard to rely on just donations and mem-

## Chicago Public Media

### Focusing on younger audiences

Chicago Public Media (WBEZ + Chicago Sun-Times) centers “service journalism” that connects diverse audiences and holds power to account, with WBEZ leaning into in-depth second-day audio storytelling (“why it happened”) and the Sun-Times moving faster on the what happened news of the day. The 2021 acquisition of the Sun-Times created one newsroom with complementary strengths and far broader reach – particularly to younger, more diverse, working-class Chicagoans, said Tracy Brown, WBEZ’s chief content officer.

Before the merger, WBEZ’s high-impact investigations often didn’t reach the communities most affected. Publishing WBEZ series (e.g., on water debt) in the Sun-Times and co-reporting stories began to close that gap.

#### HOW THEY REACH AND BUILD TRUST

- **In-community listening:** A dedicated engagement team set a goal of weekly “touch points,” then expanded to recurring listening sessions across Chicago’s 77 community areas –

often moving the newsroom’s daily meeting into public spaces so residents could “see how the sausage is made.” Feedback is transcribed, categorized and routed to editors and beat reporters; it has yielded both story tips and course corrections in coverage.

- **Transparency in practice:** The newsroom uses “trust scores” and, when needed, editor’s notes that proactively explain potential conflict-of-interest concerns – steps that, in at least one case, increased audience trust after publication.
- **Next-gen channels:** Experiments include Subtext groups during the DNC, WhatsApp messaging on migrant coverage, and platform-native explainers on Instagram and TikTok. A veteran Washington bureau chief now hosts straight-talk TikToks that resonate with younger audiences because they are authentic and plain-spoken.

Recognizing that many Chicagoans now encoun-

ter news via individual creators, Chicago Public Media has begun partnering with local creator-historians and is mapping a broader roster of Chicago creators for future collaborations – aiming to pair newsroom rigor with creator reach.

Brown described the city’s media ecosystem as unusually collaborative – from data-sharing to co-published investigations with outlets large and small (e.g., ProPublica). With fewer reporters across the city than a decade ago, collaboration is treated as an operational necessity to sustain watchdog coverage (education, public safety, justice) and avoid uncovered beats.

#### WHAT’S NEXT/ BIGGEST NEEDS

- Rebuild trust in a polarized environment saturated with misinformation – by staying embedded in communities and explaining reporting choices.
- Evolve the business model beyond legacy ad dependence to something financially durable for local, public-service journalism.

# IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL NEWS RESEARCH

These findings strongly support our hypothesis that the Chicago news ecosystem extends far beyond traditional outlets, with new models emerging to serve both broad and niche audience needs through innovative operational and revenue approaches.

“Consumers now have more choices than ever to get their news and information,” Franklin said. “And if you live in Chicago and have a particular interest in what’s going on in your own neighborhood, for example, you’re able to access more news more quickly than ever. Or if you’re in Chicago and have a specific interest in a topic like education, you have many more sources of information to keep you informed. If you have narrower geographic and subject interests, you’re probably thinking that the Chicago news ecosystem is the best it’s ever been. The large metro newspapers of the past served a mass regional audience, and they weren’t built to deliver hyperlocal news.”

## SUSTAINABILITY EXPERIMENTATION

The high prevalence of hybrid revenue models (26%) suggests outlets are actively experimenting with multiple income streams rather than relying on single revenue sources.

## COMMUNITY-CENTRIC APPROACH

The combination of advocacy focus (34%) and identity (26%) indicates much of the ecosystem serves as community infrastructure rather than just information providers.

## DIRECT AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIPS

Newsletter popularity (49%) shows a shift toward owned media channels and direct subscriber relationships.

## EXPLORING NEW MODELS

Roughly half of Chicago’s news ecosystem operates outside established for-profit structures, validating the News Ecosystem Framework.

*\*These numbers are approximate because data were unavailable for some outlets in our database.*





## Erica Noblecilla | Erica Eats Everything

**‘It comes down to trust’**

Looking for your next favorite restaurant? You might find yourself watching Erica Noblecilla, better known as Erica Eats Everything. With over 100,000 followers on TikTok and nearly 200,000 on Instagram, her videos provide insights, and stories, about Chicago’s dining establishments.

Influencer has been her full-time job for more than two years, and most of her revenue comes from brand partnerships.

Of all of the Chicago “influencer” spaces, food and dining is among the most crowded. Yet, Noblecilla’s cultivated a sizable following which she credits to just being herself.

“I just create content that feels authentic to me at that time, at that day,” she said. “I do think that the passion that I have for the restaurants and the stories to tell and the food and businesses, I think it’s really transparent, and it comes through in my videos — so I’ve been told.”

Noblecilla is in many ways the modern-day food critic. While she’s swapped out a written review with short snippets woven into a 90-second video, she’s part of the trend that’s by no means

specific to Chicago but is certainly exacerbated because of the litany of restaurants across the city.

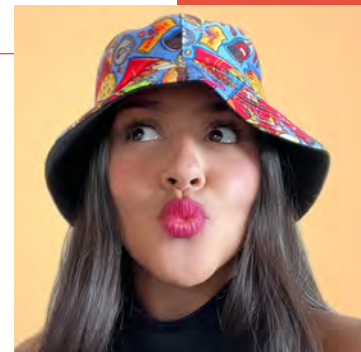
Working on her own, she might not be held to the same journalistic standards that a Chicago Tri-

tional news organizations.

“Honestly I think it comes down to trust,” she said. “The media that we see on TV, we don’t necessarily feel as close to the reporters or the medium if you will. But then on so-

**“I just create content that feels authentic to me at that time, at that day. I do think that the passion that I have for the restaurants and the stories to tell and the food and businesses, I think it’s really transparent, and it comes through in my videos.”**

Erica Noblecilla, food influencer,  
@EricaEatsEverything



bune food reviewer would be, but she said that fewer than 10% of her videos are at restaurants she was invited to.

“I do really, really like that balance of going to a lot more places on my own, walking in as just a regular customer because I am representing my audience in that sense,” she said.

That authenticity, she added, is key to why she thinks influencers like her have continued to gain popularity, sometimes at the expense of more tradi-

tional media, thinking about content that I have created and then also thinking about it as a consumer of content, I genuinely just trust their opinion, and I do really seek out content that comes off organic and authentic.”

## La Raza

### ‘In Spanish, Chicago is a large news desert’

In English, La Raza editor-in-chief Jesús Del Toro said, Chicago is an oasis for news. Not so much in Spanish.

“In Spanish, Chicago is a large news desert,” he said. La Raza aims to help.

and Belmont Cragin.

The publication prints weekly, while also maintaining a website, Facebook profile and YouTube channel. With a small staff of just four, including two who work on the editorial

you can find information,” he said, “but even if you find that information, it will be information or content that portray our communities not necessarily fairly or [in an] authentic or culturally competent way.”

La Raza is a free publication, but its revenue model has shifted significantly. It used to derive significant revenue from inserts, coupons and catalogs, Del Toro said, but now his team is even more heavily dependent on advertising, and they’ve also received support through grant funding.

Moving forward, Del Toro hopes to see the expansion of Spanish-speaking journalists to help serve communities like those La Raza covers who feel left behind and misunderstood by English publications.

“As a journalist, I believe that we need to preserve and try to rebuild the Spanish journalist ecosystem to serve our communities to preserve the profession,” he said, “and give opportunities to the current and older and also to the younger future journalists.”

“

**I believe that we need to preserve and try to rebuild the Spanish journalist ecosystem to serve our communities to preserve the profession... and give opportunities to the current and older and also to the younger future journalists.”**

Jesús Del Toro, editor-in-chief, La Raza

Founded in 1970, the publication has spent the last 55 years covering stories — from immigration, healthcare and education, to housing, civil rights and elections — of relevance to Chicago’s Latino community. Most of its focus is on southwest and northwest Chicago neighborhoods including Little Village, Pilsen, Back of the Yards, McKinley Park, Gage Park, Logan Square



side, Del Toro said he feels a responsibility to deliver information in Spanish that fairly represents the Latino perspective.

“If you can read English,

# CHICAGO MEDIA: INCLUSION CRITERIA

The compiled list of outlets is by no means exhaustive; our goal was to paint a picture of the evolving Chicago-area local media landscape.

Particularly in the world of creators and influencers, there's a number of individuals who may not have made our list but contribute in some way to the Chicago area's understanding of its politics, sports, food and dining, entertainment, culture or any number of other categories.

Our goal was to be representative. The list could likely have included upwards of 300 publications and individuals if we so chose, but we aimed to identify people in different subject matters of the creator and influencer world who represent a variety of backgrounds. We did not include any individuals or outlets that engage in hate speech, peddle dis- or misinformation or were AI generated.

Our list includes Jonah Fialkow, a beer and hot dog vendor

at Wrigley Field better known as @JewishJonah on TikTok and Instagram. Why did he make the cut? Well, his account includes any number of videos with content about the Chicago Cubs and the people who work at their historic ballpark. He interviews some of his colleagues who've worked there for decades, and he'll even provide clips of key moments in games. He doesn't pretend to be a reporter, but he provides insight into a team that's of major interest in the city.

There was no express formula for how many subscribers or followers an individual needed to have to make our list. Among other reasons, a person might have 10,000 followers, but that could be because a single video went viral, while the rest of

their videos average only a few hundred views. Still, we aimed to add people who have a sizable following and who positively contribute to helping people in the Chicago area better understand and appreciate where they live.

There are also other ways people get information about their communities and lives in the Chicago area, and this one study was not able to track and capture all of them. For instance, in the course of our research we came across a Telegram channel for Chicagoans from Kyrgyzstan and a number of community newsletters. Those were not all included in our list.

Our full list is available on the next page. Did we miss a source? Share it with us at [localnewsaccelerator@northwestern.edu](mailto:localnewsaccelerator@northwestern.edu).

“

Consumers now have more choices than ever to get their news and information.”

Tim Franklin, John M. Mutz  
Chair of Local News, Medill  
School of Journalism





# CHICAGO MEDIA

## FOR PROFIT

### ESTABLISHED

- [ABC 7 News Chicago WLS](#)
  - [CBS 2 Chicago WBBM](#)
  - [Chicago Magazine](#)
  - [Chicago Tribune](#)
  - [Crain's Chicago Business](#)
  - [Fox 32 Chicago](#)
  - [NBC 5 News Chicago WMAQ](#)
  - [Telemundo Chicago](#)
  - [Univision Chicago](#)
  - [WBBM NewsRadio 780 AM/ 105.5 FM](#)
  - [WGN 720 AM](#)
  - [WGN 9 TV](#)
- Click on an outlet to go to its website.

### NEW “NEW MEDIA”

- [Axios Chicago](#)
- [City Cast Chicago](#)
- [Patch Chicago](#)
- [Suburban Chicagoland](#)

### NICHE FOR PROFIT

- [Amor 106.7](#)
- [Beverly Review](#)
- [Black Information Network](#)
- [Braidwood Journal](#)
- [Bronzecom](#)
- [Bronzeville Life](#)
- [CHGO](#)
- [Chicago Chinese News](#)
- [Chicago Classical Review](#)
- [Chicago Crusader](#)
- [Chicago Daily Law Bulletin](#)
- [Chicago Defender](#)
- [Chicago History Podcast](#)
- [Chicago in Arabic](#)
- [Chicago Korea Times](#)
- [Chicago Latina Magazine](#)
- [Chicago Music Guide](#)
- [Chicago News Weekly](#)
- [Chicago Parent](#)
- [Chicago Southsider](#)
- [Chronicle Media](#)

- [Citizen Newspaper Group](#)
- [Coal City Courant](#)
- [Crib Chatter](#)
- [CWBChicago](#)
- [Daily Chronicle](#)
- [Daily Herald](#)
- [Daily Journal](#)
- [Desi Talk Chicago](#)
- [Dziennik Zwiazkowy \(Polish Daily News\)](#)
- [E3 Radio](#)
- [Eater Chicago](#)
- [El Dia](#)
- [Enchufate](#)
- [eNews Park Forest](#)
- [ESPN Chicago 1000 FM](#)
- [Evanston Now](#)
- [Farmers Weekly Review](#)
- [Final Call News](#)
- [Herald News-Joliet](#)
- [Herscher Pilot](#)
- [Homewood-Flossmoor Chronicle](#)
- [Inside Online](#)
- [Inside Publications](#)
- [Irish American News](#)
- [Journal & Topics](#)
- [Juneteenth Productions](#)
- [Kane County Chronicle](#)
- [Kankakee Valley Post News](#)
- [Kendall County Now](#)
- [Kenosha News](#)
- [La Ley 107.9 FM Radio](#)
- [La Porte County Herald-Dispatch](#)
- [La Raza](#)
- [Lake County Journal](#)
- [Latino Mix 93.5/103.1 FM](#)
- [Latino News Network](#)
- [Lawndale News](#)
- [Lombardian](#)
- [Loop North News](#)
- [McKinley Park News](#)
- [MidWeek](#)
- [Monitor Chicago](#)
- [Morris Herald-News](#)
- [Muslim Journal](#)
- [My Suburban Life](#)
- [Nadig Newspapers](#)
- [Negocios Now](#)

- [Newcity](#)
- [News-Tribune](#)
- [Newton County Enterprise](#)
- [Northwest Herald](#)
- [Pinoy News Magazine](#)
- [Polish Weekly Program](#)
- [Polski FM](#)
- [Polskie Radio](#)
- [Qué Buena 105.1 FM](#)
- [Rensselaer Republican](#)
- [South Shore Current Magazine](#)
- [Southwest Regional Publishing](#)
- [Sports Talk Chicago](#)
- [Suburban Life - DuPage and Cook](#)
- [Taylor Media](#)
- [The Arab Daily News](#)
- [The Bear Report](#)
- [The Bigs](#)
- [The Daily Line](#)
- [The Earlville Post](#)
- [The Free Press Advocate](#)
- [The Gary Crusader](#)
- [The Hinsdalean](#)
- [The Mendota Reporter](#)
- [The Real Deal](#)
- [The Times](#)
- [The Times of NW Indiana](#)
- [The TRiiBE](#)
- [The Vedette](#)
- [The Voice](#)
- [The Woodstock Independent](#)
- [Third Coast Review](#)
- [TimeOut Chicago](#)
- [Ukrainian People Magazine](#)
- [Uptown Update](#)
- [Urbanize Chicago](#)
- [VIA Times](#)
- [Villa Park News](#)
- [West of the I](#)
- [Windy City Times](#)
- [WVON Radio 1690 AM](#)

## NONPROFIT

### ESTABLISHED NONPROFIT

- [Austin Weekly News](#)
- [Capitalisn't](#)
- [Chicago Reader](#)

- [Chicago Reporter](#)
- [Chicago Shimpo](#)
- [Chicago Sun-Times/Chicago Public Media](#)
- [Chicago Talks](#)
- [Draugas](#)
- [Evanston Roundtable](#)
- [Forest Park Review](#)
- [Hyde Park Herald](#)
- [In These Times Magazine](#)
- [Kartemquin](#)
- [La Voz del Paseo Boricua](#)
- [Lumpen Magazine](#)
- [Lumpen Radio 105.1 FM](#)
- [Lumpen TV](#)
- [National Public Housing Museum Podcast](#)
- [North Lawndale Community News](#)
- [PBS Chicago WTTW 11](#)
- [Public Narrative](#)
- [Rebellious Magazine](#)
- [Riverside-Brookfield Landmark](#)
- [South Side Weekly](#)
- [Streetsblog](#)
- [StreetWise](#)
- [Substance News](#)
- [True Star Media](#)
- [Village Free Press](#)
- [WBEZ 91.5 FM](#)
- [Wednesday Journal of Oak Park and River Forest](#)
- [WNIJ](#)

### NEW NONPROFIT

- [AirGo Radio](#)
- [Block Club Chicago](#)
- [Borderless Magazine](#)
- [CAN TV](#)
- [Capital B Gary](#)
- [Chalkbeat Chicago](#)
- [Chinatown Spotlight](#)
- [CHIRP Radio 107.1 FM](#)
- [Cicero Independiente](#)
- [City Bureau](#)
- [Free Spirit Media](#)
- [Harvey World Herald](#)
- [IL Latino News](#)
- [Illinois Answers Project](#)
- [Injustice Watch](#)
- [Investigative Project on Race and Equity](#)

- [Invisible Institute](#)
- [N'Digo](#)
- [OTV | Open Television](#)
- [Pigment International](#)
- [Radio UA Chicago](#)
- [SoapBox Productions and Organizing](#)
- [The Culture](#)
- [The Lansing Journal](#)
- [The Record North Shore](#)
- [Ukrainian Independent Radio](#)
- [Vocalo](#)

## COLLECTIVE

### WORKER-OWNED

- [Sixty Inches From Center](#)

## SOLOPRENEUR

### CONTENT CREATOR JOURNALIST

- [BlogABull.com](#)
- [Board Rule](#)
- [Chicago Public Square](#)
- [Chicago Show Calendar](#)
- [Chicagoverse](#)
- [Eric Zorn: The Picayune Sentinel](#)
- [Food Is Stupid](#)
- [I'm Fat Podcast](#)
- [Improv Nerd](#)
- [Living Landmarks of Chicago](#)
- [The Chicago 312](#)
- [The Hunger](#)
- [The Last Ward](#)
- [The Party Cut](#)
- [Unraveled](#)
- [Vanished Chicagoland Stories](#)

### NEWS INFLUENCERS

- [350 Chicago](#)
- [77 Flavors of Chicago](#)
- [A Girl About Chicago](#)
- [Andrew Kammerer](#)
- [Chef Bri](#)
- [Chicago - Ken](#)
- [Chicago By Ren](#)

- [Chicago Contrarian](#)
- [Chicago Does](#)
- [Chicago Food Authority](#)
- [Chicago Food Guide](#)
- [Chicago Food HQ](#)
- [Chris Dolo](#)
- [Cori in Chicago](#)
- [Dean Lauvina](#)
- [Emilia Marie Home](#)
- [Erica Eats Everything](#)
- [Explore with Chase](#)
- [Grace Andrews](#)
- [Hunter Haines](#)
- [Jen In Chicago](#)
- [Jonah Fialkow](#)
- [Kat Abughazaleh](#)
- [Jonathan Zaragoza](#)
- [Kaylee Jo Chicago](#)
- [Lavish Food Life](#)
- [Mauna Eats Chicago](#)
- [Megan Schibelka](#)
- [Sassy Confetti](#)
- [Shermann Dilla Thomas](#)
- [Still Gotta Come Through Chicago](#)
- [Take 1 With Bill Cameron](#)
- [The Haute Seeker](#)
- [The Hoodoise](#)
- [Whats the Word](#)
- [Windy City Breeze](#)
- [Wrigleyville Nation](#)

## OTHER

### COMMUNITY UTILITY

- [Belmont Cragin Newsletter](#)
- [TCP Weekly](#)

### STUDENT MEDIA

- [ChiBus](#)
- [The Chicago Maroon](#)
- [The Daily Northwestern](#)
- [The DePaulia](#)
- [The Loyola Phoenix](#)

## ABOUT US

This report was written by Liz Kelly Nelson and Eric Rynston-Lobel in association with the Medill School of Journalism and Project C.

**Northwestern**  
MEDILL  
Local News Accelerator



The Local News Accelerator at Northwestern University's **Medill School of Journalism** works to spur a more economically robust local news ecosystem. The Accelerator maximizes Chicagoland residents' access to the information they need to be civically engaged.

**Project C** empowers journalists and independent creators to build sustainable, credible media ventures through education, community and strategic support. We're helping journalism survive society's tectonic shifts to ensure that trustworthy info reaches the next generation.

*All photos, except headshots for the media profiles, are by Hannah Carroll for the Medill Local News Initiative.*



### LIZ KELLY NELSON

Liz Kelly Nelson is a leader in journalism innovation dedicated to helping independent journalists and media creators build sustainable careers in a rapidly evolving media landscape. As the founder of Project C, she is focused on empowering journalists to embrace new models, find sustainable revenue and create impactful work outside of traditional media structures. Previously, Liz led teams at Vox, USA Today, Gannett and AOL.

### ERIC RYNSTON-LOBEL

As part of the Local News Accelerator, Eric Rynston-Lobel helps newsrooms conduct and analyze research and strategize how to expand their audiences. He also writes for the Local News Initiative's website, taking deep dives into trends and successes of local media organizations around the country. He received his BSJ from Medill in 2022.