



The Medill survey: How the Chicago area gets its news

An examination of the public's
interest in and reliance on local
news, as well as consumption habits

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Northwestern
MEDILL
Local News Initiative

A comprehensive survey of news consumption

We're living through a historic, seismic change in how people consume news and information in America. Smartphones give us instantaneous access to news and the digital platforms that deliver it to us. The advent of AI portends yet another challenge for the news industry in how it will produce, distribute and support its journalism.

Amid this revolutionary period for news, it's critical that media leaders, journalism organizations, philanthropists, entrepreneurs, policymakers, community officials, scholars and, indeed, all citizens understand how news and information is consumed at this time of unprecedented change. Why? The nation's founders understood the central role that an informed citizenry plays in our self-governed democracy.

The Medill Local News Initiative at Northwestern University along with the Chicago-based MacArthur Foundation commissioned this comprehensive survey with the hope that the public could better understand how news is being consumed during this transformational moment.

Medill Associate Dean of Research Stephanie Edgerly, Assistant Professor Yu Xu and I are the authors of this report. We worked with NORC at the University of Chicago on this comprehensive survey of more than 1,000 residents in the 14-county Chicago metropolitan area. Edgerly and Xu designed the survey questions and analyzed the respondents'

answers. This is believed to be one of the most extensive surveys of news consumption behaviors and attitudes in the Chicago region.

This report's findings starkly illustrate the dramatic shifts now occurring in how news is consumed in one of the nation's largest and most diverse metropolitan areas. We hope these results will help inform all of those working to strengthen local news in Chicago and across the nation.

Medill is grateful for the generous support of the MacArthur Foundation that enabled us to do this survey. And we thank our partners at NORC and M. Harris & Co., a Chicago-based marketing and communications agency, for their invaluable contributions to the execution, writing and design of this survey report.

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Exploring the public's relationship with local news



Through the history of journalism, news professionals ranging from media titans to local beat reporters have sought to understand how to attract and retain audiences. Audience tastes and habits have been tracked through indicators such as circulation figures, ratings and, in the digital age, clicks, site visitors and other digital analytics. Along with those quantitative assessments, journalism professionals also rely on anecdotal evidence from letters to the editor or social media comments, as well as their gut instincts about their audience.

Surveys continue to be a reliable method for exploring the motivations and habits of news consumers. Scientific surveys can reach a diverse cross-section of the public that is representative of categories such as age, gender, race and geographic region. In this report, we used a survey methodology to drill more deeply into the daily practices and attitudes of individuals awash in choices about how to keep informed.

For the news industry, studying the fast-shifting behavior of audiences is an essential task. Technology is changing quickly. News organizations are struggling to remain relevant and profitable during a time of extraordinary upheaval in how news is consumed, produced, distributed and paid for. They need to learn, or re-learn, how to deliver news and information to audiences where, when and how they want to consume it. Relying on a seasoned city editor's hunches about what makes a good story isn't enough to save an industry in peril.

This report by the Medill Local News Initiative at Northwestern University is based on a comprehensive survey of more than 1,000 residents in the 14-county Chicago Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). Its goal is to provide detailed data and insight about the public's relationship with local news so that news organizations, journalists and other stakeholders can identify and pursue successful, sustainable paths forward for the creation and dissemination of news content.

We focused on the greater Chicago area, the country's third-largest media market, but the results can be seen as a useful microcosm for news organizations across the country. The 14-county Chicago region, which includes urban, suburban, exurban and rural areas, is a solid proving ground for examining national trends.

This report is divided into sections reflecting the different topics in the survey: News consumption; funding; attitudes and engagement; and news media literacy. A conclusion follows.

The research in this report captures the industry at a seminal moment, confirming the shift from watching news on television and reading newspapers to relying on smartphones. The smartphone's spectacular ascent, displacing TV as the device of choice for news consumers, has profound implications for the news business. It doesn't mean TV news will die, but it does mean all news executives must shift resources to digital if they want to compete.

The results of this survey will concern everyone rooting for a robust news ecosystem. Stark findings do not mean failed futures, however. They merely set out the extent of the challenge. The hope is that this study will provide insights local news organizations can use to better serve their audiences.

**THE MEDILL SURVEY:
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Executive summary



Medill survey: Chicago-area media face dramatic shift in audience habits

The financial pressures on journalism are plain to see in the digital age as the print newspaper industry shrinks, reporting jobs disappear, and online competitors struggle to develop footholds. A news transformation is underway, with many winners and losers to be determined.

More difficult to observe are the changing day-to-day news consumption habits of individuals, from the moment they awake and scan headlines on their smartphones to the late evening when they watch — or perhaps no longer watch — a local news broadcast on their television.

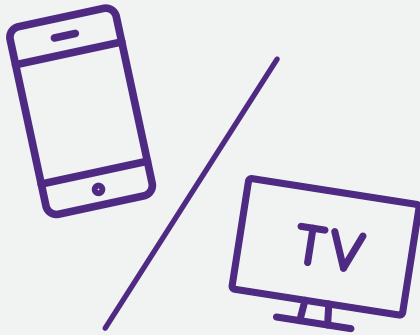
Decisions by news consumers ultimately will determine the financial future of journalism — and thus deeply impact the quality of civic life because a vigorous press is a cornerstone of our democracy.

But what is the level of daily interest in local news, given the weakening journalism ecosystem, the growing allure of social media and other distractions? How do people get their headlines and stories today?

This report by Northwestern University's Medill Local News Initiative, based on a sweeping, in-depth survey of Chicago-area residents, captures the decisive shift to smartphone use from television and print newspapers, and the severe challenge to the sustainability of local news when half of consumers believe no one should pay for journalism.

This survey of 1,004 people, one of the most comprehensive examinations ever of news consumption habits in Chicagoland, can be taken as a microcosm for what is happening locally across the country. It identifies numerous profound challenges to news organizations as the industry struggles to adapt to the digital age.

A few highlights:



Smartphone tops TV

Nearly two-thirds of those surveyed (**62%**) said they frequently use a smartphone to consume local news, ahead of television (**52%**), which was the device of choice for decades.



Struggles continue for print

Print readership continues its inexorable decline. Just 9% of respondents said they read printed newspapers and magazines often, with only **4%** saying they do so “all the time.”



Little appetite to pay for news

Chicago-area residents have a weak financial commitment to news. Only about a fifth of Chicago-area residents (**19%**) pay or donate money for access to local journalism.

The majority (**51%**) said no one should pay for local news.

Lack of awareness of financial issues ...

Most people (**71%**) believe local news outlets are doing “somewhat well” or “very well” financially, despite the crisis that’s been battering the news industry.



... but a devoted following

The public generally remains engaged in following news events — **52%** of adults say they consume local news daily.

This survey was undertaken by Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications, with funding by the MacArthur Foundation. The authors are Medill Professor Stephanie Edgerly, Associate Dean of Research; Assistant Professor Yu Xu; and Tim Franklin, Senior Associate Dean, John M. Mutz Chair in Local News and Director of the Medill Local News Initiative. NORC at the University of Chicago, on Medill’s behalf, surveyed adults throughout the 14-county Chicago metro area, including counties in Indiana and Wisconsin. The margin of error was +/- 4.66%. (See our detailed explanation of the methodology.)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

and listenership habits. News organizations, journalists, philanthropists, entrepreneurs and scholars benefit from a better understanding of news consumers' behaviors during a period of tumultuous change. Armed with these insights, key stakeholders can explore new pathways to better meet the public's needs and explore new business models to support the local journalism our communities need.

Medill's [2023 State of Local News report](#) tracked the steady closure of newspapers since 2005 and rise of news deserts where residents have little or no access to a local news source. This 2024 Medill survey of news consumption habits suggests that traditional local TV news also may be imperiled: While 66% of viewers age 60+ watch local news on TV daily, only 22% of people in the age groups of 18-29 and 30-44 do so. The falloff portends a generational changing of the guard for the advertising-revenue-based TV news model.

The financial crisis in journalism is a direct result of the internet, which democratized and commoditized news by disseminating so much information without charging subscription fees. The click-based, ad-driven business model for news and information battered the industry's traditional approach. Many local news organizations didn't have the reader scale to support newsrooms with click-driven ad revenue, and all outlets were hindered by changing algorithms on digital platforms. Because news organizations struggle to earn enough from selling online ads, they've put up paywalls. This report shows how hard it is to persuade people to spend money for something they were getting free.

Persuading consumers to pay may be hindered by a surprising fact: The public is not aware of the dire state of the news business. Unless consumers recognize the need to financially support newsgathering, why would they do so? The new Medill study found that 71% of respondents

believe local newspapers and other news media are financially healthy, with 54% saying they are doing somewhat well and 17% saying very well. This result, while generally consistent with a new [Pew Research Center national study of local news](#), runs counter to the dire reality facing most local news organizations. The State of Local News Report chronicled an industry in collapse, losing the equivalent of two and a half local news organizations a week, 10 per month.

Some positive indicators

It is not all doom and gloom for local news organizations in the Chicago area. The study identified steady consumer interest in news and open-mindedness about the industry. About half (52%) of adults say they consume local news daily. Generally they feel good about what they consume. About half (54%) trust local news media to get things right, a [higher portion than found nationally \(41%\)](#).

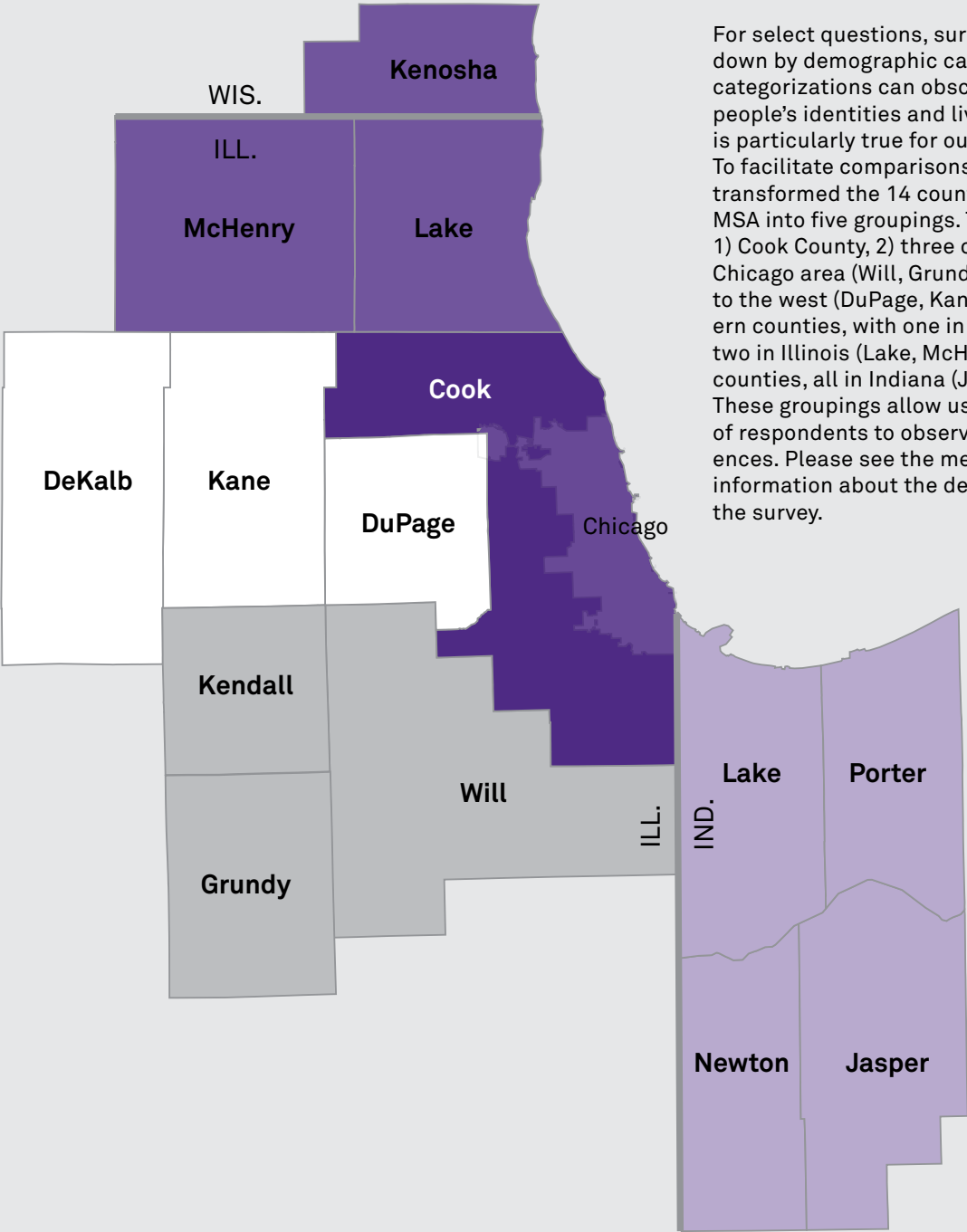
Additionally:

- 38% of Chicago-area residents support giving government tax credits to local news outlets. That's a relatively high share given the limited amount of information known about an idea recently under consideration by Illinois lawmakers.
- While most respondents (85%) have never met a local journalist, close to half (43%) said they were interested in attending a meet-and-greet with local reporters.

Ultimately, the results of the study suggest that for local news media to not just survive but thrive, they need to make local news that is essential to the everyday lives of the public — and they need to convince the public that their financial support is vital to the survival of local news in the Chicago area.

Breaking down the greater Chicago area

For select questions, survey findings are broken down by demographic categories. Demographic categorizations can obscure important nuances in people's identities and lived experiences, and this is particularly true for our treatment of geography. To facilitate comparisons among respondents, we transformed the 14 counties in the greater Chicago MSA into five groupings. This includes groupings for: 1) Cook County, 2) three counties in the southwest Chicago area (Will, Grundy, Kendall), 3) three counties to the west (DuPage, Kane, DeKalb), 4) three northern counties, with one in Wisconsin (Kenosha) and two in Illinois (Lake, McHenry), and 5) four southern counties, all in Indiana (Jasper, Lake, Newton, Porter). These groupings allow us to have a sufficient number of respondents to observe some county-level differences. Please see the methodology section for more information about the demographic composition of the survey.



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Local news consumption

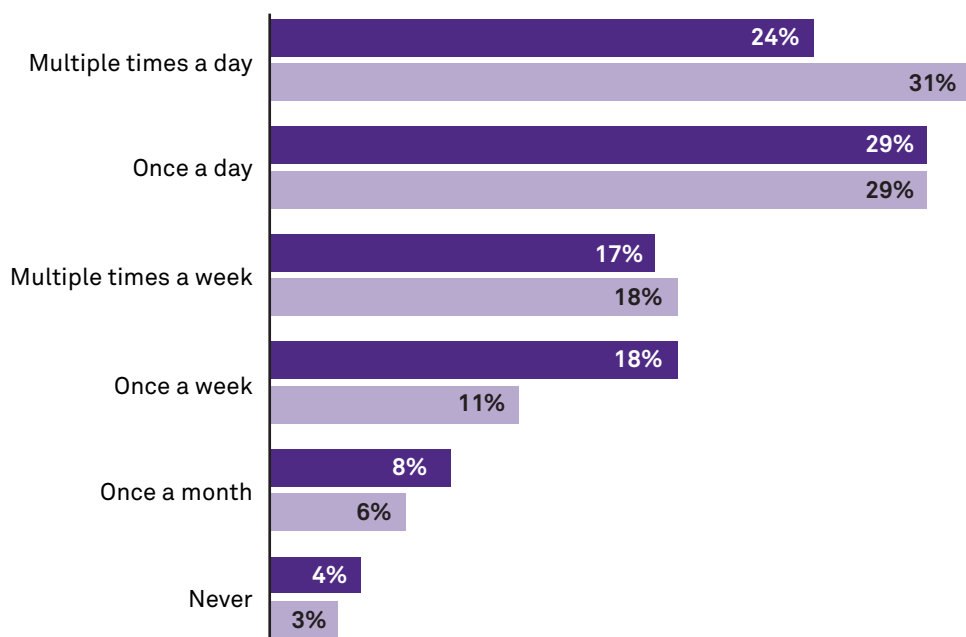
What we found

- About half of adults surveyed consume local news daily.
- The smartphone surpasses television as the device of choice.
- Younger people said they are much less inclined to watch TV news than older viewers.
- Few respondents recognize journalism's contribution to civic life, such as helping them stay informed to be better citizens.

How much news people consume

HOW OFTEN RESPONDENTS CONSUME LOCAL VS. NATIONAL NEWS

■ Local news about your local community ■ National news



NOTE: Because of rounding and the omission of missing responses, totals may not add to 100 percent.

News is a daily habit for many

What does it mean when about half of adults in the Chicago metropolitan area said they watch, read or listen to local news daily? It shows that local news continues to play a regular role in people's daily lives, even in the age of fractured media audiences.

According to the survey, about half of adults consume local news daily. Once a day is the most common frequency of consumption (29%), followed by multiple times a day (24%). Only 4% said they never watch, read or listen to local news.

The frequency of local news consumption by those surveyed largely resembles their interest in national news. Respondents reported being just slightly more attuned

to daily consumption (once or multiple times a day) of national news than local news (60% vs 53%).

A new Pew Research Center study found that just [22% of Americans](#) follow local news very closely, a decline of 15 percentage points since 2016. The Medill study's results suggest there may be more enthusiasm for news in the Chicago area than in the nation at large.

Warning: generational divide

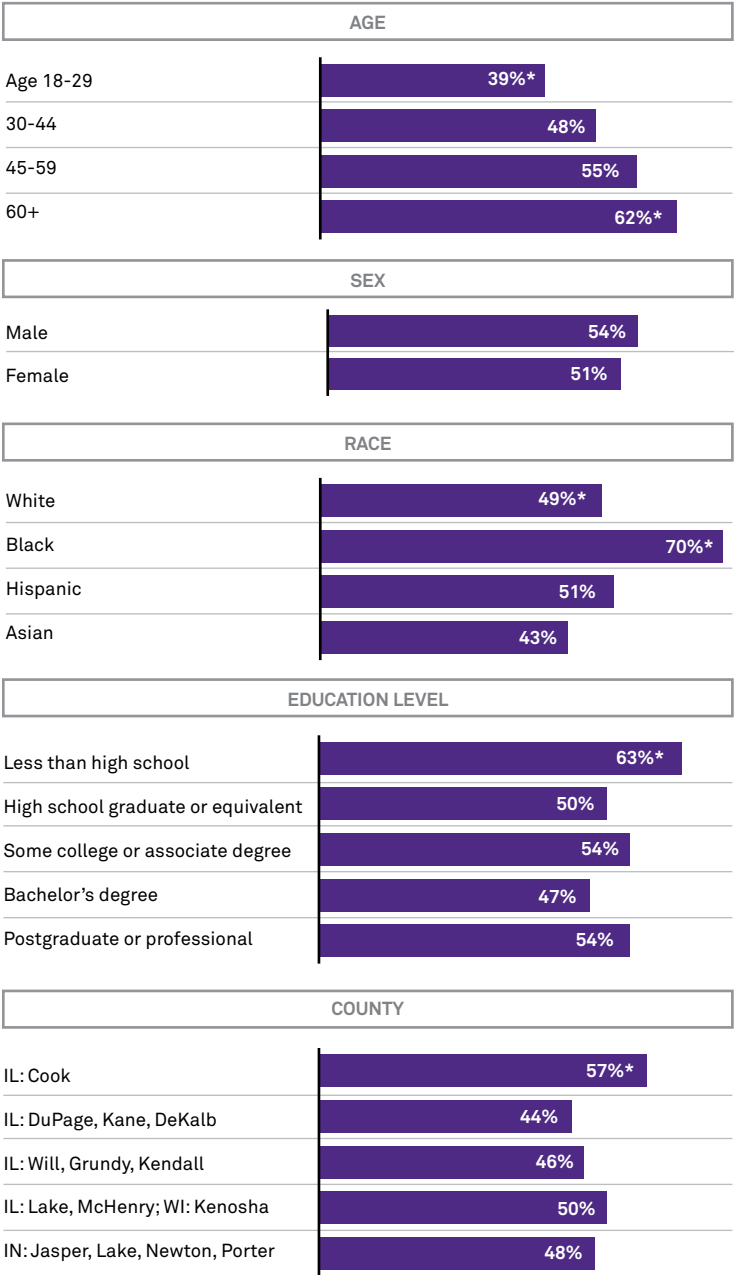
Looking inside the findings, there is a significant generational difference in news consumption, with older adults consuming local news daily in much higher numbers.

Almost two-thirds (62%) of adults ages 60+ consume local news daily, compared to 39% of people ages 18-29. The shares rise from there, with 48% of people 30-44 and 55% of people 45-59 reporting that they consume news daily or multiple times a day.

The generational divide will appear again in decisions about how to consume news.

CONSUMPTION OF LOCAL NEWS ONCE OR MULTIPLE TIMES A DAY

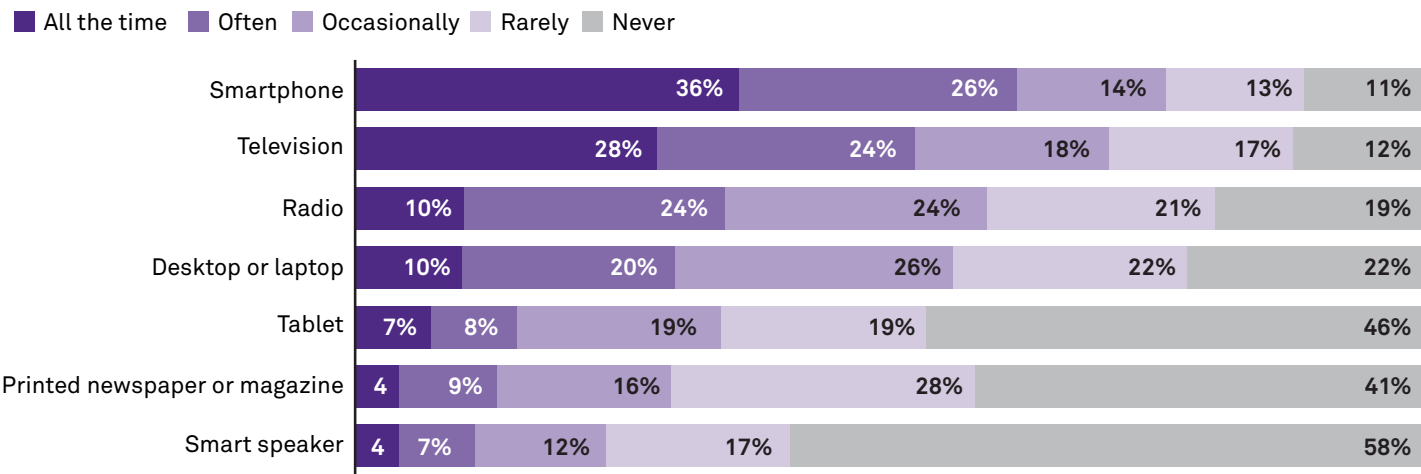
% of respondents in each demographic group



Note: * = Denotes a statistically significant difference between respondents who belong to the given group and those who do not, at least at the 0.05 level.

How local news is consumed

HOW OFTEN RESPONDENTS USE EACH DEVICE TO CONSUME LOCAL NEWS



NOTE: Because of rounding and the omission of missing responses, totals may not add to 100 percent.

Smartphones surpass television

For decades, Chicago-area audiences wanting local news turned on their TVs. Television was the medium of choice, ahead of newspapers or radio, generating significant profits for station owners and often making local news anchors celebrities. Newspapers had their profitable niches, but the advent of the digital era heralded dramatic changes in consumer habits and industry revenues.

The Medill survey confirms that the transition to the smartphone era of local news is in full swing.

Smartphones and television are the most frequent options for getting local news, but more people (62%) said they use their phones to get local news all the time or often than watch television all the time or often. The smartphone trend comes in sharp contrast to the slide in print newspaper readership.

This survey on local news in the Chicago area is among the first studies that show smartphones surpassing television as the device of choice for consumption of local news. News industry executives have understood for at least a decade that the ubiquitous, easy-to-use smartphone combined with faster download speeds would pose a significant challenge to television and print news. Now it's clear the majority of people are consuming news on smartphones, not on television.



Tablets not the answer

Just 13% of those surveyed said they get local news from a print newspaper or magazine all the time or often. Print is hanging on as a business mainly due to older readers maintaining lifelong habits. With generational change, the print newspaper and magazine industry is declining steadily. The Medill Local News Initiative has been closely tracking the financial crisis in local news and slow demise of the print newspaper business.

News organizations have responded with different strategies, shifting resources and content to the web and experimenting with new technology. For example, some news organizations embraced the tablet as a potential replacement for print newspapers, but the Medill survey shows the limitations of any device besides a smartphone. Nearly half of respondents (46%) said they “never” use a tablet.

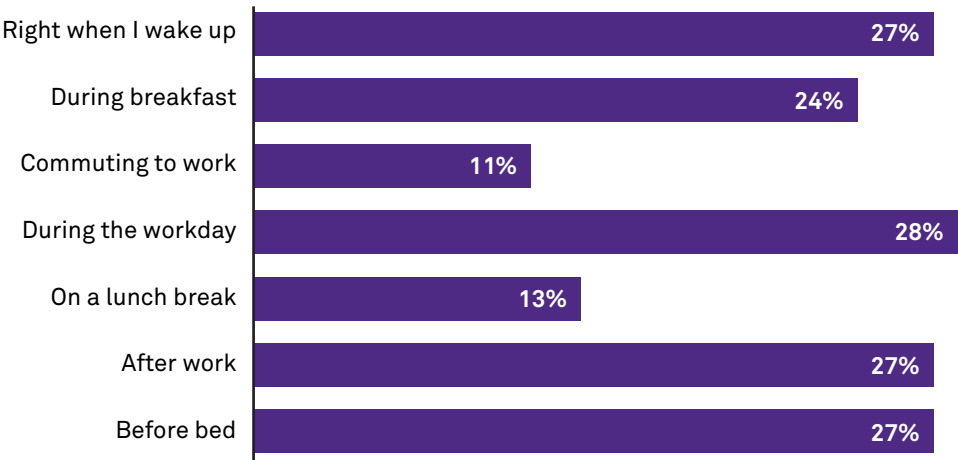
Mixing new and old devices

Medill Professor Stephanie Edgerly, Associate Dean of Research, had this to say about the devices that news consumers use:

“Reality is more complicated than saying new media are the clear winners among audiences today and old media the clear losers. Yes, there are certainly shifts, largely driven by generational differences, that will likely continue to play a role. But what we observe now is that people are using a mixture of new media (smartphones) and old (television) to consume local news. And that new devices are not automatically adopted for news use, as the low rates for tablet usage indicate.”

A deep look at when and how people consume news

WHEN RESPONDENTS CONSUME LOCAL NEWS



NOTE: Percentages indicate a “yes” response. Multiple responses permitted.

No clear favorite time for news

Respondents said they consume local news at different points throughout the day, from right when they wake up (27%) to before bed (27%). There was no clear favorite time to consume local news.

To dig more deeply into this tendency, we examined the relationship between how often individuals said they used a specific device (e.g., smartphone, TV, radio, computer) to consume local news and during which parts of their day they reported consuming local news. Overall, several significant correlations were found. In this report, we highlight only the significant associations among respondents who used a specific device “all the time.”

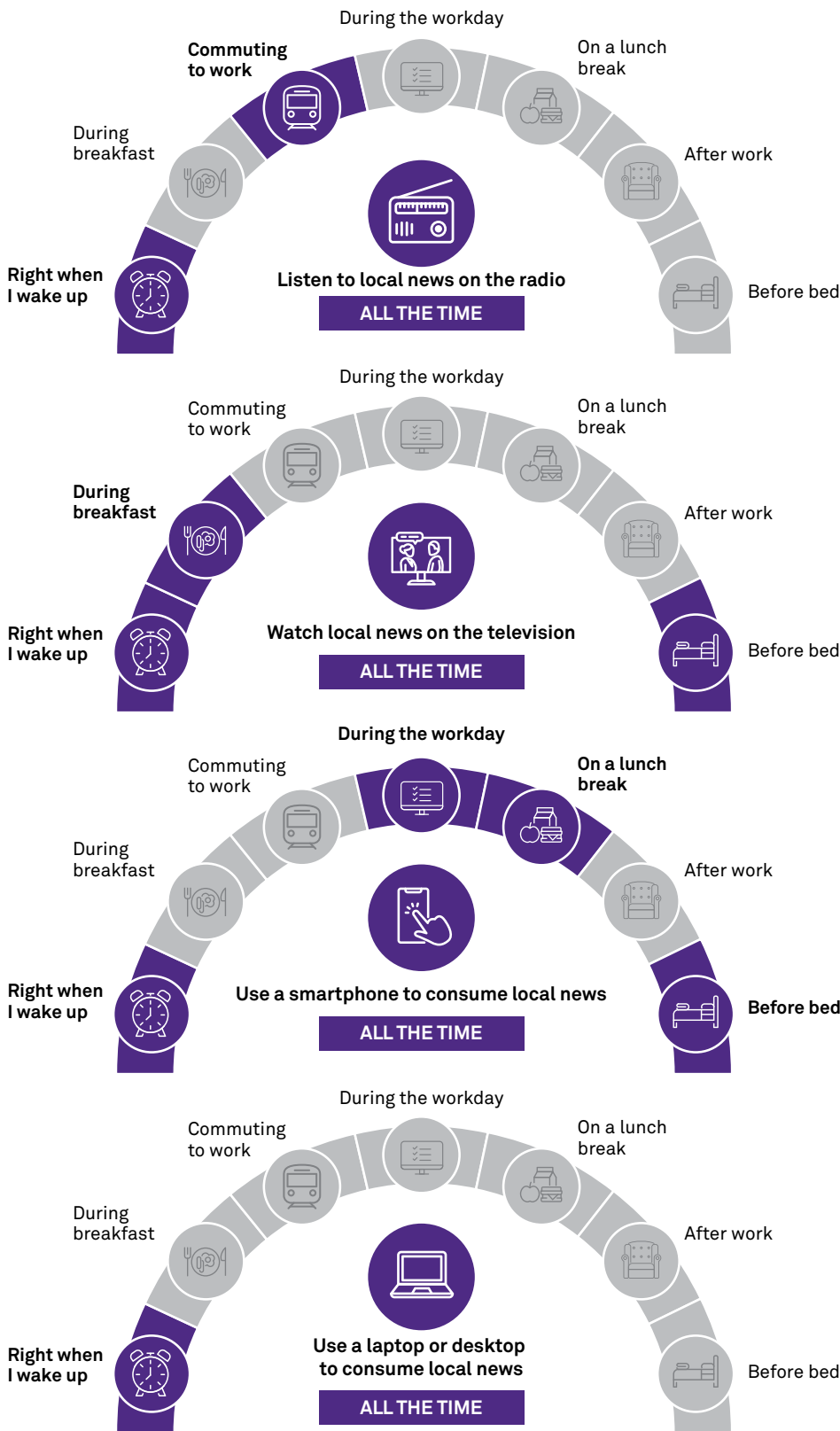
For example, respondents who consumed local news on a radio “all the time” were also likely to say they consumed local news right when they wake up and when commuting to work.

A different set of associations exist for television. Respondents who consumed local news on a TV “all the time” were also likely to say they consumed local news during the morning hours (e.g., right when waking up, during breakfast) and before bed. For these frequent TV users, local news bookends their days.



LOCAL NEWS CONSUMPTION

THE HOW AND WHEN: MOST COMMON PARTS OF THE DAY AND DEVICES FOR CONSUMING LOCAL NEWS



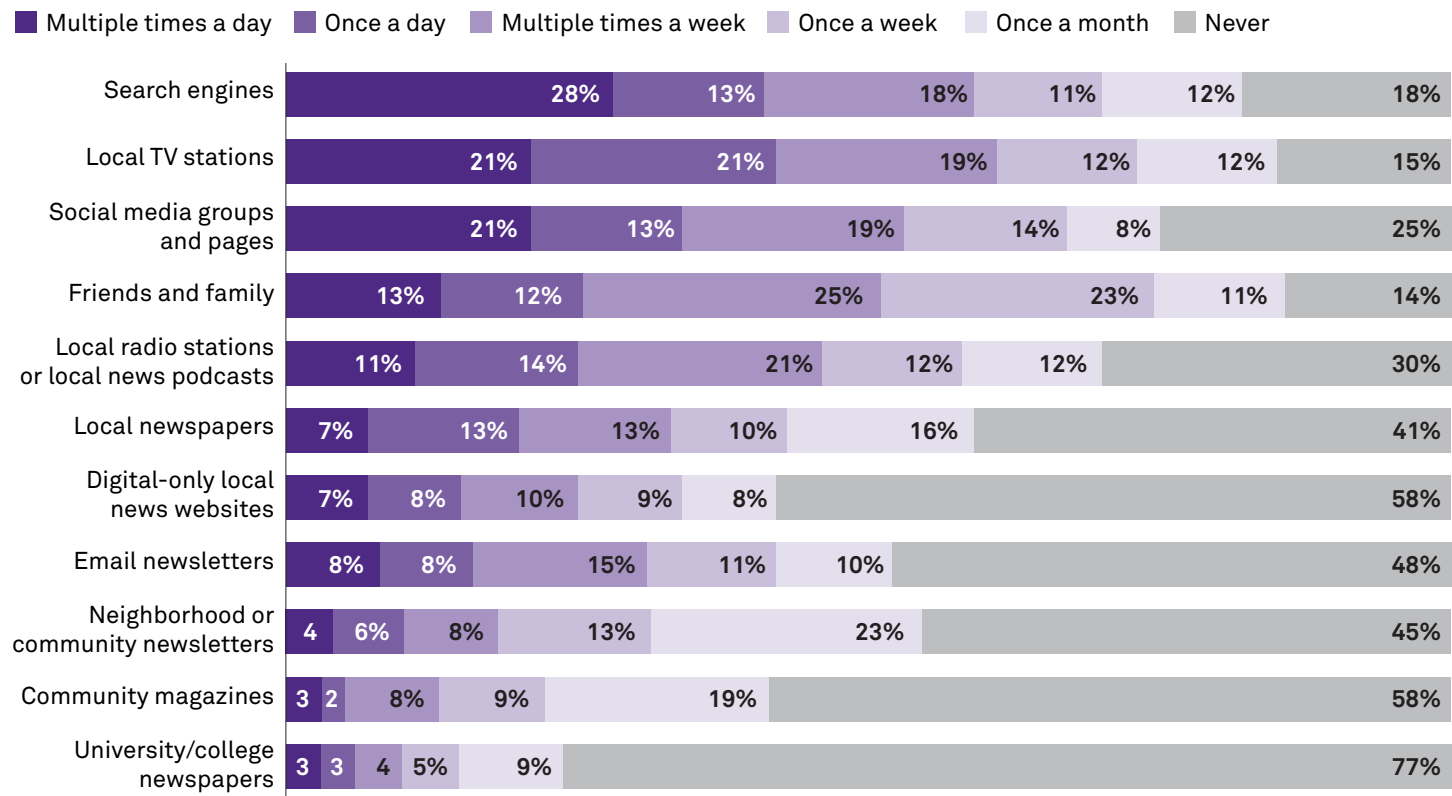
For smartphones, the pattern of significant associations speaks to the tendency for local news to be consumed throughout one's day. Respondents who consumed local news on their smartphones "all the time" were also likely to say they consumed local news in the morning and evening (e.g., right when waking up, before bed), and during the day (e.g., when at work, on a lunch break).

The only significant relationship for using a computer "all the time" for local news was consuming local news right when waking up.

Note: Combinations are significantly related as determined by a Chi-Squared test (device frequency usage by daypart) and analysis of standardized residuals scores.

Sources of local news

HOW OFTEN RESPONDENTS CONSUME LOCAL NEWS FROM DIFFERENT SOURCES



NOTE: Because of rounding and the omission of missing responses, totals may not add to 100 percent.

Differentiating between news sources and devices

While smartphones are the most-used devices, the survey also asked about specific sources of local news to find out how people access news and information.

About four in 10 respondents said they get local news at least once a day from local television stations (42%) and search engines (41%). This was followed by social media groups and pages (34%). Local newspapers came in at 20%.

When using the survey data to analyze news consumption habits, it's important to acknowledge that people can consume local news on various devices (e.g., smartphones), platforms (e.g., search engines) and from specific news organizations.

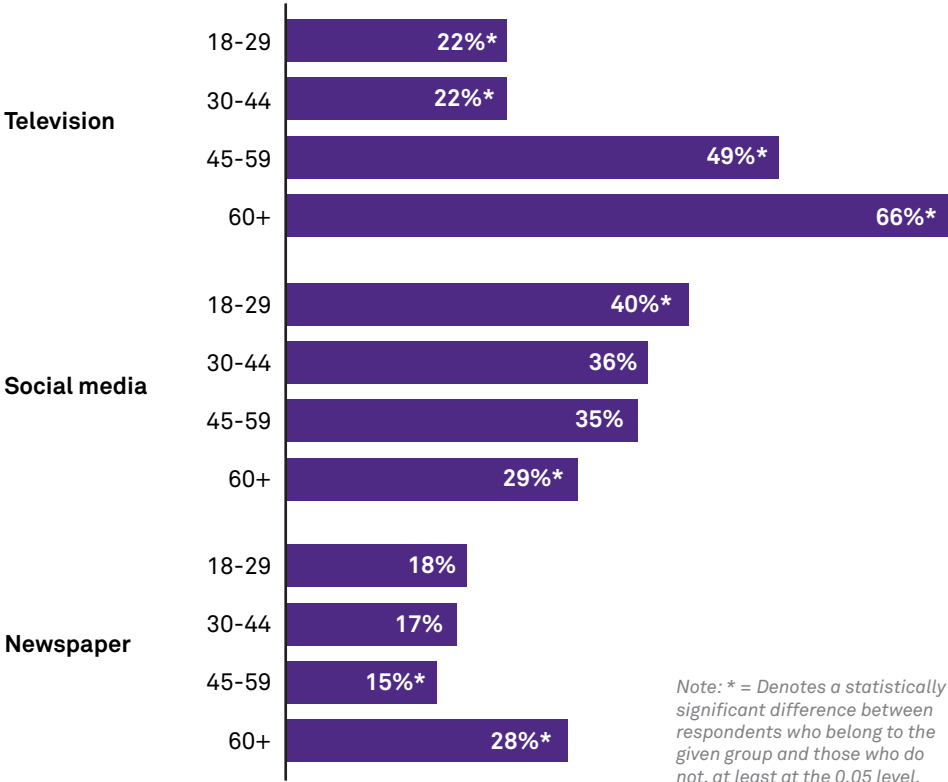
In today's dynamic media environment, traditional newspapers and TV news organizations reach audiences via a range of digital devices

and platforms. The smaller number of young people saying they consume local news on a television doesn't necessarily mean they've tuned out local stations. People also access TV news programming on their smartphones and through search engines and social media sites. The same goes for print-based organizations, which also have robust online presences. The survey attempts to capture the complexities of modern news consumption by assessing it in several ways. The source question, for example, asked respondents to self-report how often they get local news from specific sources and platforms, considering all the devices they may use.



SOURCE OF CONSUMING LOCAL NEWS
ONCE OR MULTIPLE TIMES A DAY BY AGE

% of respondents in each age group



TV viewership is trending down

One stark finding is the generational divide: While 66% of adults 60+ watch local TV news daily, that number drops to only 22% for 18- to 29-year-olds. The numbers flip, though less dramatically, for social media: 40% of people 18-29 said they consume local news daily on social media, compared to 29% of people 60+.

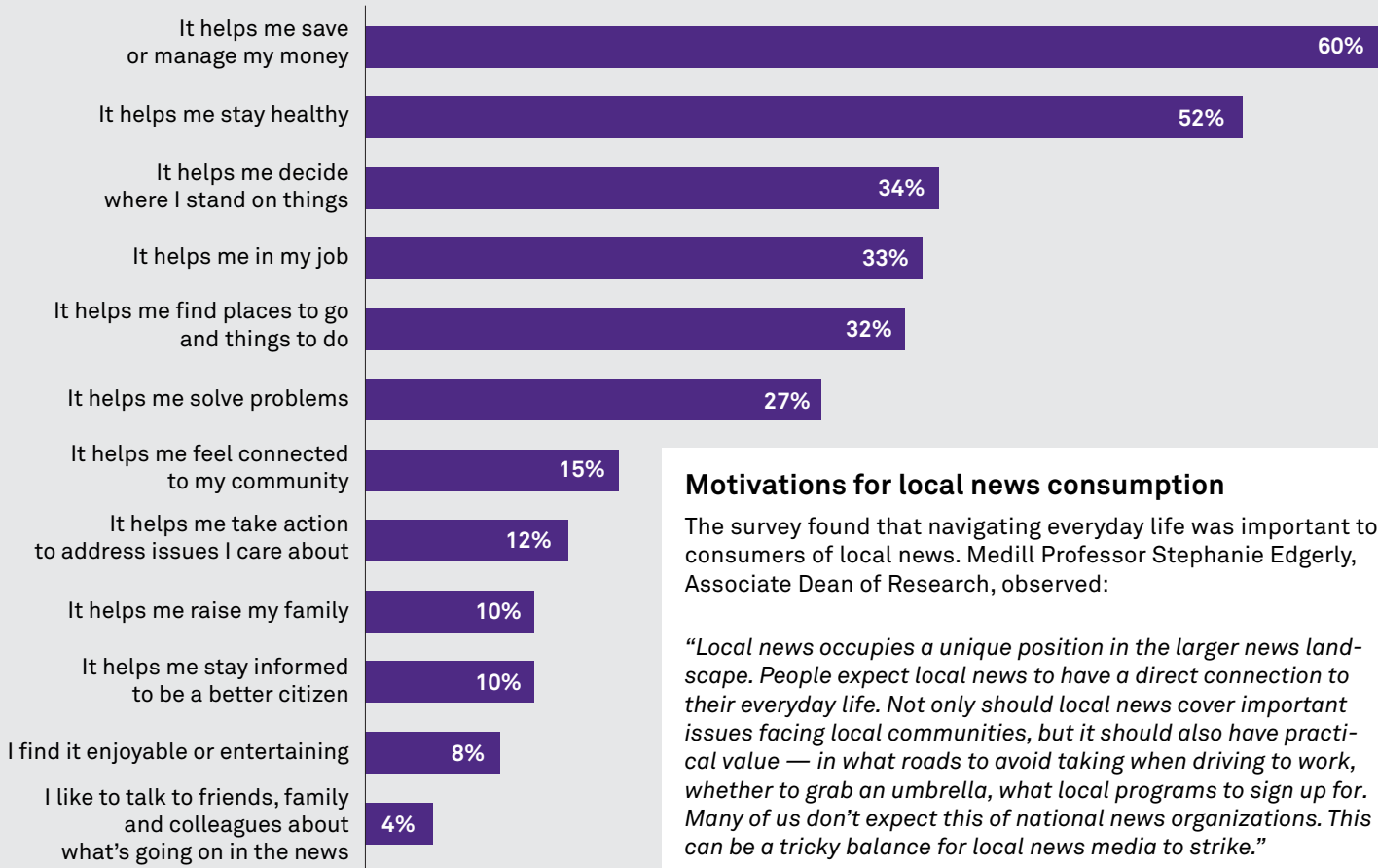
This finding suggests that television news, reliant on older viewers, will need to speed its transition to digital to attract younger audiences

and make up for lost revenue as the generational tide turns. In this way, TV may be following print media into a period of financial upheaval due to technology and generational shifts.

About a quarter, 28%, of respondents ages 60+ said they read a newspaper daily. This is already a low share compared with those in this age group who consume television daily (66%). Comparing the oldest and youngest groups, the difference in print readership is a relatively slim 10 percentage points (28% to 18%). The same cannot be said about TV, where the difference is quite large (a 44-point dropoff). This is another indication that television viewership may be headed for a significant decline.

Motivations

REASONS RESPONDENTS CONSUME LOCAL NEWS



NOTE: Percentages indicate a “yes” response; multiple responses permitted.

Motivations for local news consumption

The survey found that navigating everyday life was important to consumers of local news. Medill Professor Stephanie Edgerly, Associate Dean of Research, observed:

“Local news occupies a unique position in the larger news landscape. People expect local news to have a direct connection to their everyday life. Not only should local news cover important issues facing local communities, but it should also have practical value — in what roads to avoid taking when driving to work, whether to grab an umbrella, what local programs to sign up for. Many of us don’t expect this of national news organizations. This can be a tricky balance for local news media to strike.”



Consumers value news to improve everyday lives

It’s important to know the different motivations people have for consuming local news. The study found that the main reason people said they consume local news is to meet the needs of everyday life.

Continued on next page



Motivations

Continued from previous page

Specifically, the study found that 60% of respondents said they consume local news because it “helps me save and manage money,” while 52% consume local news because it “helps me stay healthy.” Less common are motivations like it “helps me feel connected to my community” (15%), and “helps me stay informed to be a better citizen” (10%). The implication: Audiences turn to the local news media primarily with transactional expectations rather than to strengthen connections to their community or stay involved as citizens of a democracy.

The public’s interest in “news you can use” reflects the enduring value of the practical advice offered by reporters, columnists and other experts. These are valid parts of journalistic tradition. And they can be the foundation for increased audience connection and loyalty.

Journalism addresses a host of values

One important journalistic innovation is the rise of nonprofit newsrooms, which gather funding from memberships, donations and, notably, philanthropic giving. Often these philanthropies provide money for local news in a framework of supporting civic engagement and democratic ideals. But the survey results show that people are not motivated primarily by these high ideals when they think about news consumption. They are thinking about their own lives and the very real role that local news plays in it.

This is a sobering finding for news leaders and journalism supporters, but it shouldn’t be seen as a defeat. First, the survey answers may help news organizations attract audiences by experimenting with different programming. Clearly there is a strong appetite for advice-driven stories, perhaps much stronger than many editors and reporters long presumed.

The results of the survey also need to be taken in a broad context. Audiences aren’t necessarily rejecting the high ideals of journalism. Rather they are emphasizing the personal value of news. Local news occupies a unique position within journalism because it serves a panoply of interests, from watchdog reporting to traffic updates. Because there are so many motivators for consuming news, it may not be surprising that the public doesn’t reflect on the civic role of journalism. Still, it will be up to news leaders and others to convince the public that news matters in different ways to all.

Missing the democracy message

The survey found only weak support for the idea that local news is vital for democracy. Tim Franklin, Medill Senior Associate Dean, Professor and John M. Mutz Chair in Local News, observed:

“The big push by philanthropy and policymakers right now to provide money for local news is in a democracy framework: More robust local news helps improve the democratic institutions of a community and the country. This survey suggests that message isn’t taking hold with the public yet and there’s more work to do to make the public aware of what’s at stake with the loss of local news. While we as journalists attach altruistic reasons for our work and why people come to local news, many of them are tuning in or reading in a transactional way.”

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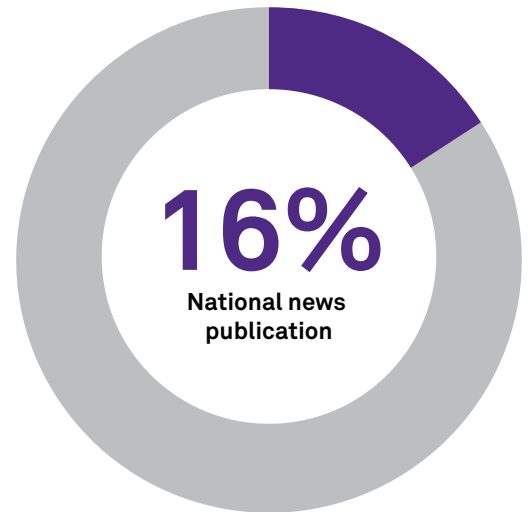
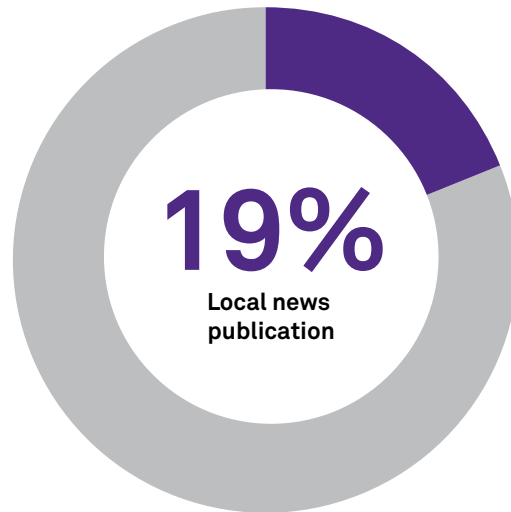


Funding local news

What we found

- Just one in five people pays for local news.
- Half of people believe no one should pay for local news.
- Most people think local news organizations are doing well financially.
- More than a third of respondents support giving tax credits to local news outlets.

RESPONDENTS
WHO SUBSCRIBE
OR DONATE
TO LOCAL OR
NATIONAL NEWS



Getting more people to pay

Many news organizations and websites rely on revenue from subscriptions, memberships and donations to fund their operations, but only a small segment of respondents say they pay for local news.

In this section, the survey identified a series of related challenges facing the news industry and its paramount task of persuading audiences to pay for news when so much digital content is available free.

Historically, the newspaper industry counted on display and classified advertising to generate the lion's share of revenue. Subscriptions and street sales represented a small piece of the print business. In the digital age, online advertising is an overabundant, inexpensive commodity product, so news organizations are shifting to paywall or donor models. Yet not only are most people not paying for news, half of people surveyed said no one should pay for news. There is also little recognition of the fact that the news industry is in a financial crisis, which may explain why so few people feel compelled to pay for what they consume. This is a big interlocking problem.

Just 19% of respondents said they currently pay for local news, slightly more than the share who pay for national news. These figures are in line with other estimates. A [Reuters Institute survey](#) said 21% of U.S. consumers paid for online news. In this Chicago-area survey, just 9% of consumers said they pay for *both* local and national news.

Willingness to pay

The financial crosswinds for local news are troubling. Yu Xu, a Medill Assistant Professor of Integrated Marketing Communications, observed:

"The journalism industry operates in a dual-product marketplace, where news organizations generate revenue from consumers subscribing to content and marketers allocating advertising spending. If very few consumers are willing to pay for content, local news organizations will be forced to rely solely on advertising revenue for survival or seek alternative funding to compensate for the loss in the content market. Without adequate funding support, the quality of local journalism could decline, further reducing consumers' willingness to pay."

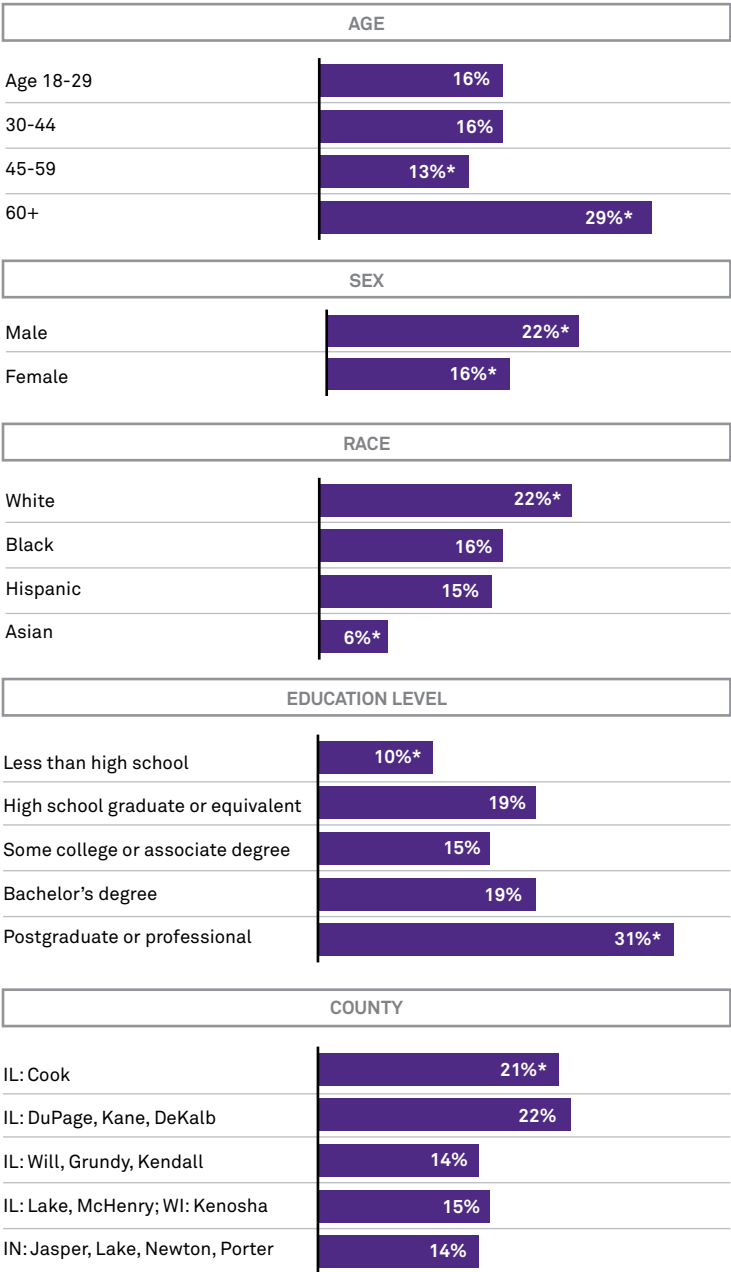
The generational divide and other differences

Respondents age 60+ were most likely to pay for news: 29% in that age group vs. only 16% for 18-29. This could in part reflect that reading the paper is a longtime habit for older residents who have long paid subscription costs. Besides age, the survey also found that paying for news varied by education. There is a notably higher percentage of people who pay for news among those with postgraduate or professional degrees, especially when compared with people who have less than a high school degree.

There were also differences by geographic area. When grouping the 14 counties into 5 groups, respondents in Cook County, along with those in the group that includes DuPage, Kane and DeKalb counties, reported paying for news at a higher rate, compared to those in the other counties.

DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES IN PAYING FOR LOCAL NEWS

% of respondents in each demographic group



Note: * = Denotes a statistically significant difference between respondents who belong to the given group and those who do not, at least at the 0.05 level.

An unwillingness to subscribe or donate

One of the most important findings of this study is that half of respondents believe no one should pay for local news.

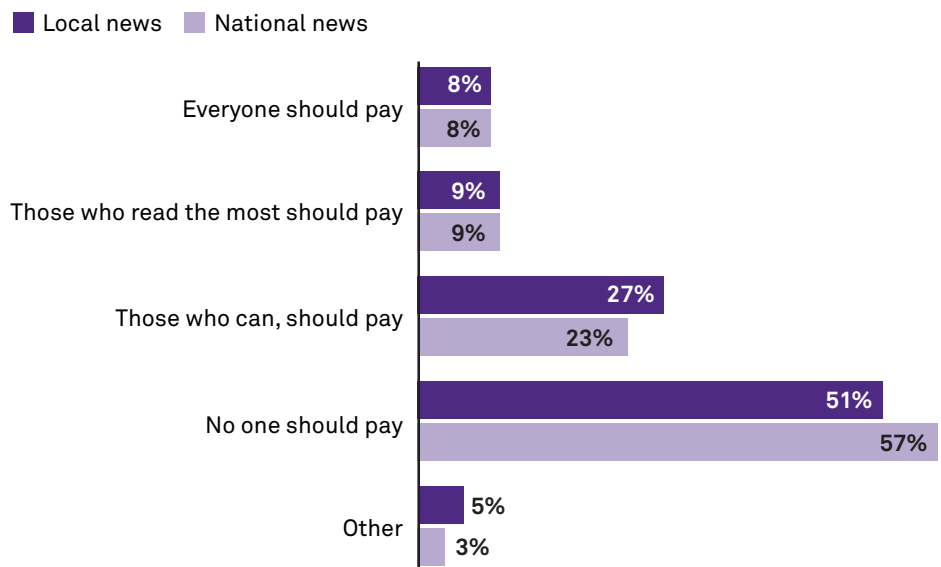
Newsrooms, as well as other professionals writing for subscription audiences, appear to be running up against a deep unwillingness to pay at a time when the news industry is committed to paywall strategies. About half (51%) of Chicago-area residents said no one should pay for news. A separate 27% of respondents said those who can pay should pay. Much smaller numbers said that those who read the most should pay or that everyone should pay.

The news industry's failure to recruit more paying subscribers, members and donors is linked directly to the earlier era of the internet when newspapers and other media thought online advertising revenue would replace the offline model. So they gave away their product. The arrival of social media brought even more free content. Ad revenue is elusive, however, and now that news leaders recognize the need to retrain the public to pay for content, many consumers are unwilling to do so. Whenever a business gives away something free, it's an uphill battle to change tactics and require payment.

The disconnect between news organizations and the public is evident in social media exchanges between news organizations and the public. When publications or reporters post stories that are behind paywalls, readers without access often express frustration at not being able to access the content. The reporter or other advocate retorts that news isn't free. Both sides go away frustrated.



ATTITUDES ABOUT PAYING FOR LOCAL VS. NATIONAL NEWS

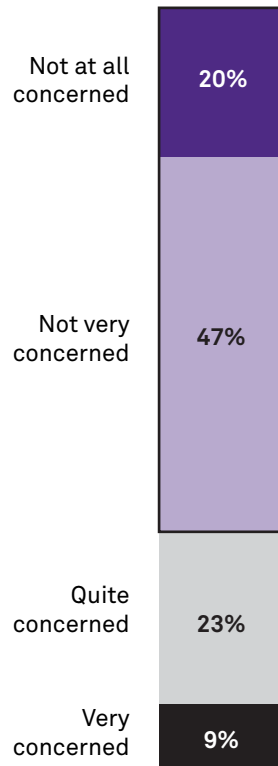


NOTE: Because of rounding and the omission of missing responses, responses for each question may not total to 100.

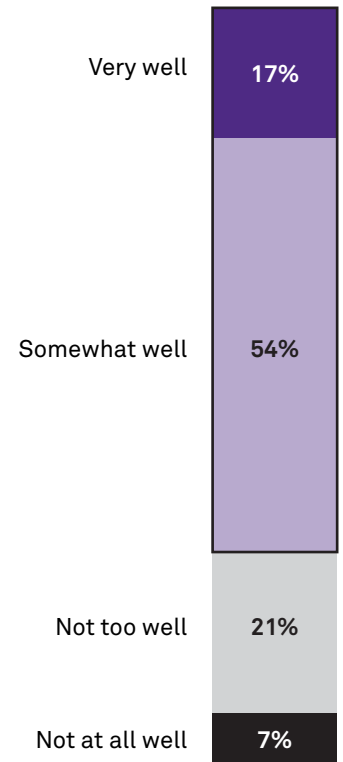
FUNDING LOCAL NEWS

HOW CONCERNED ARE RESPONDENTS ABOUT THE FINANCIAL STATE OF LOCAL NEWS OUTLETS

NOTE: Because of rounding and the omission of missing responses, responses for each question may not total to 100.



HOW RESPONDENTS THINK LOCAL NEWS OUTLETS ARE DOING FINANCIALLY



Crisis? What crisis?

For the local news industry, developing new business models that rely on payment for content might be easier if consumers recognized the need to financially support news organizations. They do not.

About half of those surveyed (54%) believe that local news outlets are doing “somewhat well” financially. A separate 17% said they are doing “very well.” In total, 71% of respondents don’t know the news business is in crisis. Without steady revenue from subscribers and other institutions, the ecosystem of newspapers and digital news providers is retrenching.

When asked if they were concerned about the financial state of local news, only about

one-third of respondents shared the sense of doom that pervades much of the industry. Just 9% said they were “very concerned” about the financial state of local journalism, while a separate 23% said they were “quite concerned.” A combined 67% said they were either “not at all concerned” (20%) or “not very concerned” (47%).

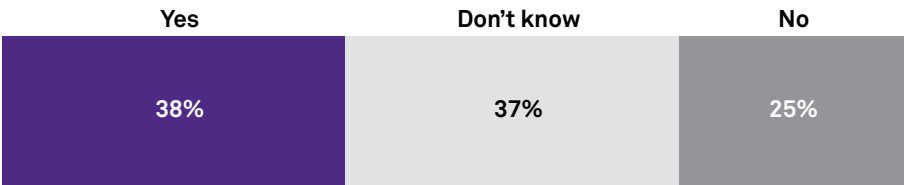
News headlines about news outlets closing or laying off reporters don’t seem to be resonating with the public.

The TV effect

The revenue model for local television is different from the print model, and healthier. For one, when readers began abandoning print newspapers for their smartphones a decade ago, viewers

stuck with television. It’s only now that evidence shows a large generational divide poses a significant threat to television news. Respondents may believe that since television seems to be doing well financially, then the entire news ecosystem is doing just fine.

VIEWS ON WHETHER
 THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD
 HELP LOCAL NEWS
 OUTLETS WITH TAX CREDITS



NOTE: Because of rounding and the omission of missing responses, responses for each question may not total to 100.

Consumer support for a government benefit

Recently, lawmakers in Illinois along with other states have proposed or enacted legislation designed to support the financially ailing local news ecosystem. An Illinois legislative proposal has called for several measures, including tax credits for local news employers designed to encourage the hiring and retention of qualified journalists.

Against that backdrop, the survey asked a broad question to gauge public interest in government incentives for news organizations. When asked if the government should provide tax credits to help local news outlets, 38% said yes and 25% said no, while 37% said “don’t know.”

Given the limited information widely known about such proposals, the number of positive responses seemed high — and potentially encouraging to news organizations that might be interested.

But who pays?

Half of those surveyed said no one should pay for local news. Tim Franklin, Medill Senior Associate Dean, Professor and John M. Mutz Chair in Local News, observed:

“The new and most solid pillar of local news is reader revenue, digital subscriptions or memberships. If half of people think that no one should have to pay for news, that shows the news business model has some headwinds.”

A clear disconnect

Seven in 10 people surveyed thought the local news industry was doing fine financially. It’s not. Tim Franklin:

“There’s a major disconnect between the public’s perception of the financial health of the news industry and the reality. There was almost a record year for layoffs in 2023 even among those organizations still in operation.”

THE MEDILL SURVEY:
HOW THE CHICAGO AREA
GETS ITS NEWS
MAY 2024



Local news attitudes and engagement

What we found

- A majority of Chicago-area residents trust local news media.
- Respondents prefer watching news to reading it.
- They are highly interested in “positive” stories and big stories of the day.
- They are confident reporters will cover significant local events.
- Just 15% of respondents have ever interacted with a reporter.
- More than half have left a comment on a local news website or social media page in the past year.
- Chicago-area residents are open to the idea of a meet-and-greet with journalists.

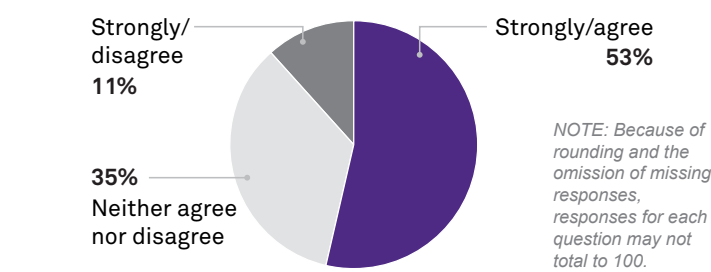
Chicago-area media overperform on trust

While trust in the news media nationally has been declining for decades, Chicago-area residents expressed a more positive opinion about local news organizations.

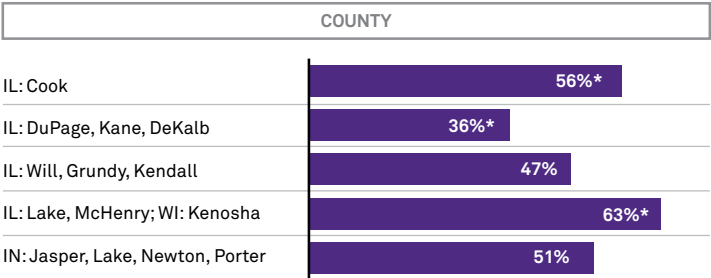
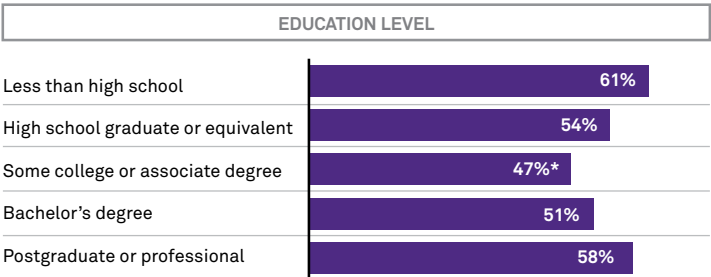
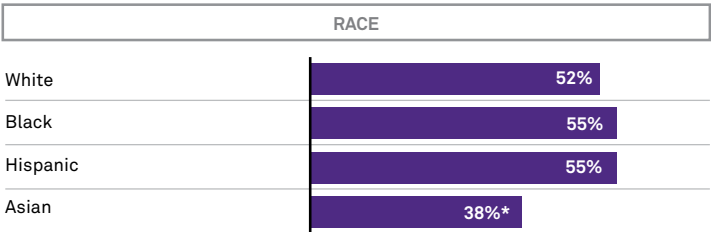
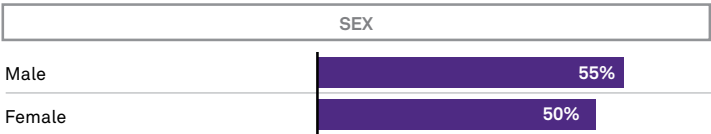
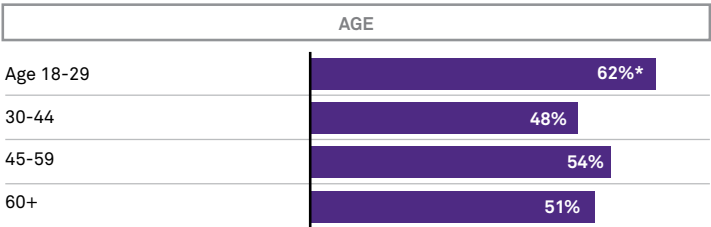
About half (53%) of people surveyed agree, or strongly agree, that news media can be trusted to get things right. Given the divisiveness of political discourse nationally, this result stands out. A 2021 [Knight Foundation survey](#) found that 44% of Americans trust local news organizations when it comes to reporting the news, while just 27% trust national news organizations.

Trust responses in the survey did include significant difference based on demographics. For example, there were geographic differences with residents of DuPage, Kane and DeKalb counties expressing a noticeably less positive attitude about the news media than those in Cook County, Lake (IL), Kenosha and McHenry counties. The survey did not examine why residents of certain areas held different opinions, but the higher populated areas, Cook and Lake (IL), have a stronger journalism ecosystem, which may relate to higher levels of trust.

AGREE OR DISAGREE: LOCAL MEDIA CAN BE TRUSTED TO GET THINGS RIGHT



Those answering “strongly agree” and “agree” in each demographic group



Note: * = Denotes a statistically significant difference between respondents who belong to the given group and those who do not, at least at the 0.05 level.

Less belief in holding officials accountable

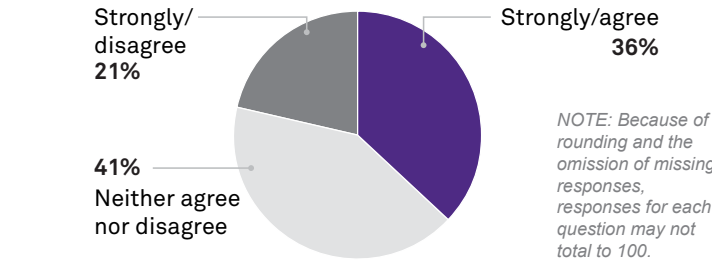
Respondents showed limited faith in local news organizations to play their watchdog role. Just over one-third (36%) of respondents said they agreed or strongly agreed the local news media hold public officials accountable. A larger portion (41%) said they neither agreed nor disagreed, while 21% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

These totals can be compared to the exact same question that was asked in 2023 among a national sample of adults. [The survey](#), commissioned by the Medill Local News Initiative, found a slightly lower percentage — only 30% — of the national respondents agreed that their local news media hold officials accountable.

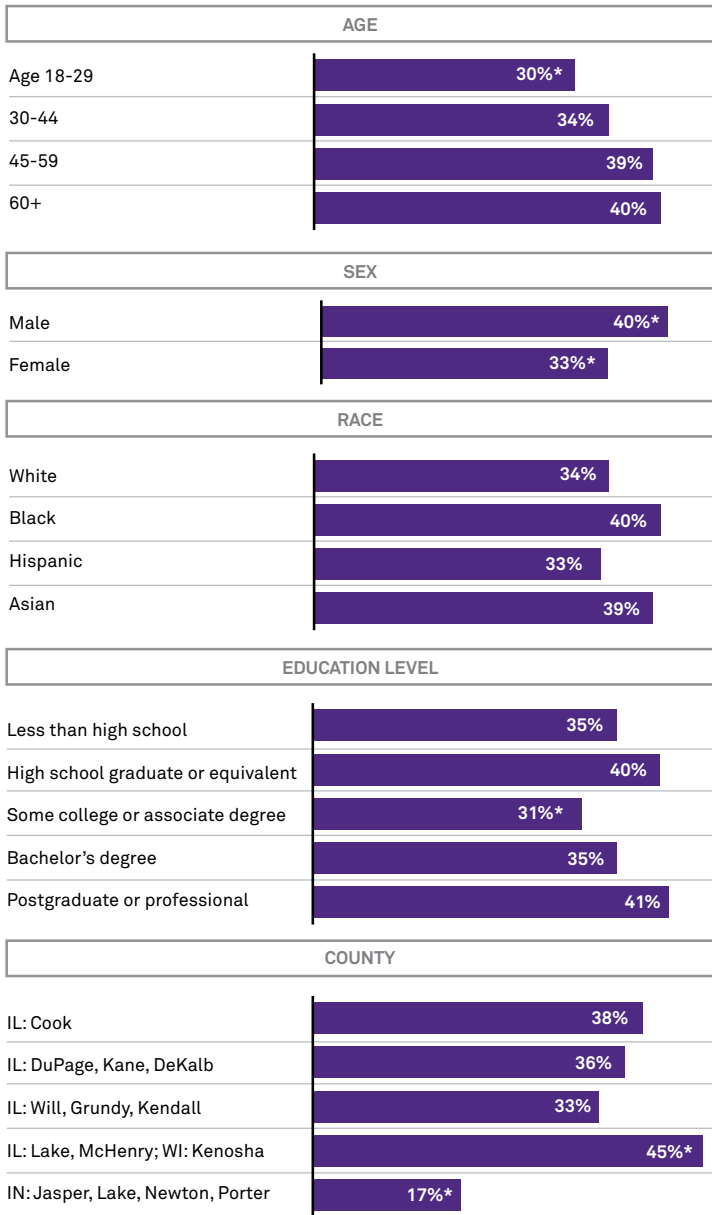
Locally, there were some geographic disparities. Notably, just 17% of residents of Jasper, Lake and Porter counties in Indiana agreed that reporters hold officials accountable, compared to 38% in Cook County.

There was also an age disparity: 30% of people 18-29 agreed that journalists are holding officials accountable, compared with about 40% for people 45-59 and 60+.

AGREE OR DISAGREE: LOCAL NEWS MEDIA HOLD PUBLIC OFFICIALS ACCOUNTABLE



Those answering “strongly agree” and “agree” in each demographic group

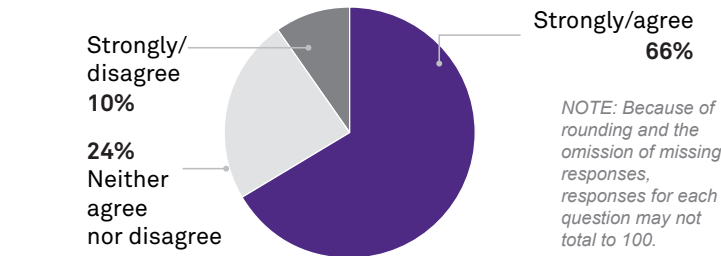


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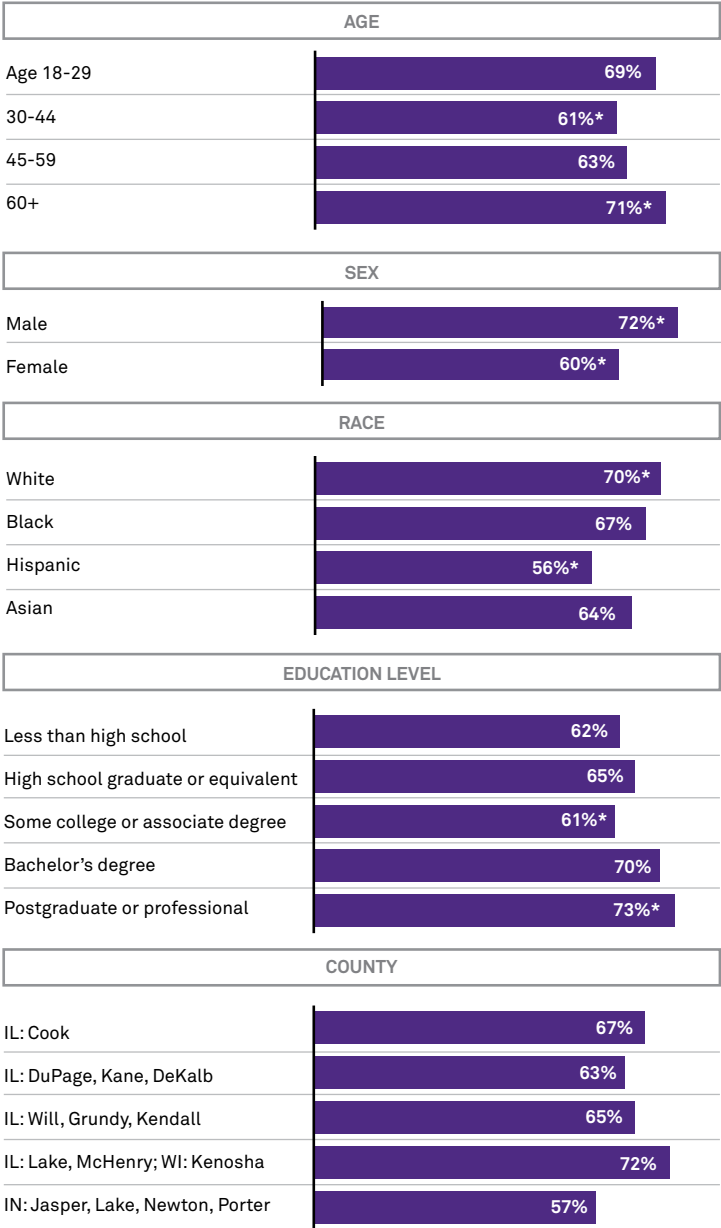
Confidence in coverage of important stories

Two-thirds (66%) of respondents either agree or strongly agree that they can depend on local news to cover significant stories that happen in their community. Among different demographic groups, Hispanics were slightly less confident (56%) in the news media's abilities. Overall females were less confident (60%) than males (72%).

AGREE OR DISAGREE: LOCAL NEWS OUTLETS COVER SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN THE COMMUNITY



Those answering “strongly agree” and “agree” in each demographic group

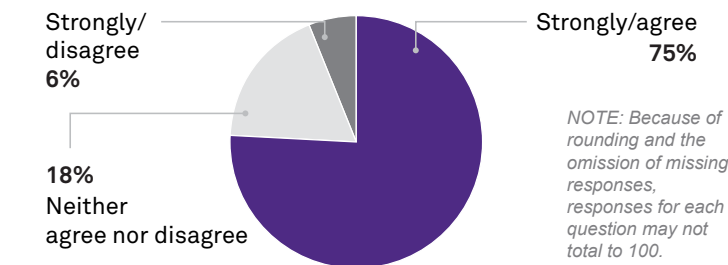


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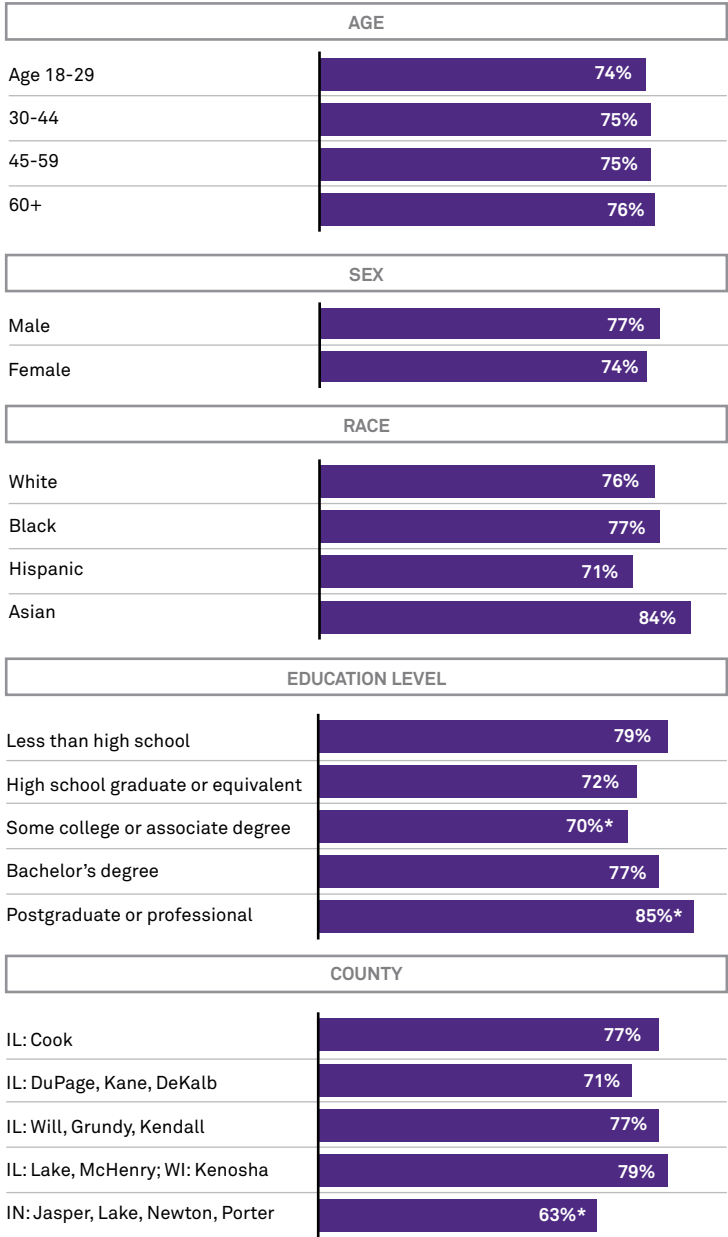
Majorities see news coverage relevant to their lives

Three-quarters (75%) of respondents agree or strongly agree that they have access to news relevant to their lives. Residents of Northwest Indiana (Jasper, Lake, Newton and Porter counties) were less satisfied (63%). Again, this likely reflects the fact that Chicago-based media pay less attention to outlying areas, as well as fewer local news outlets.

AGREE OR DISAGREE: I HAVE ACCESS TO NEWS THAT IS RELEVANT TO MY LIFE



Those answering “strongly agree” and “agree” in each demographic group

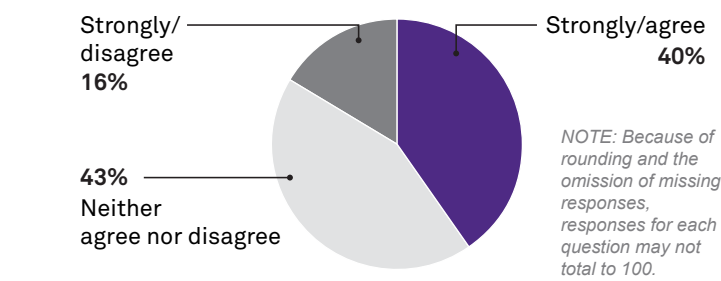


Note: * = denotes a statistically significant difference between respondents who belong to the given group and those who do not, at least at the 0.05 level.

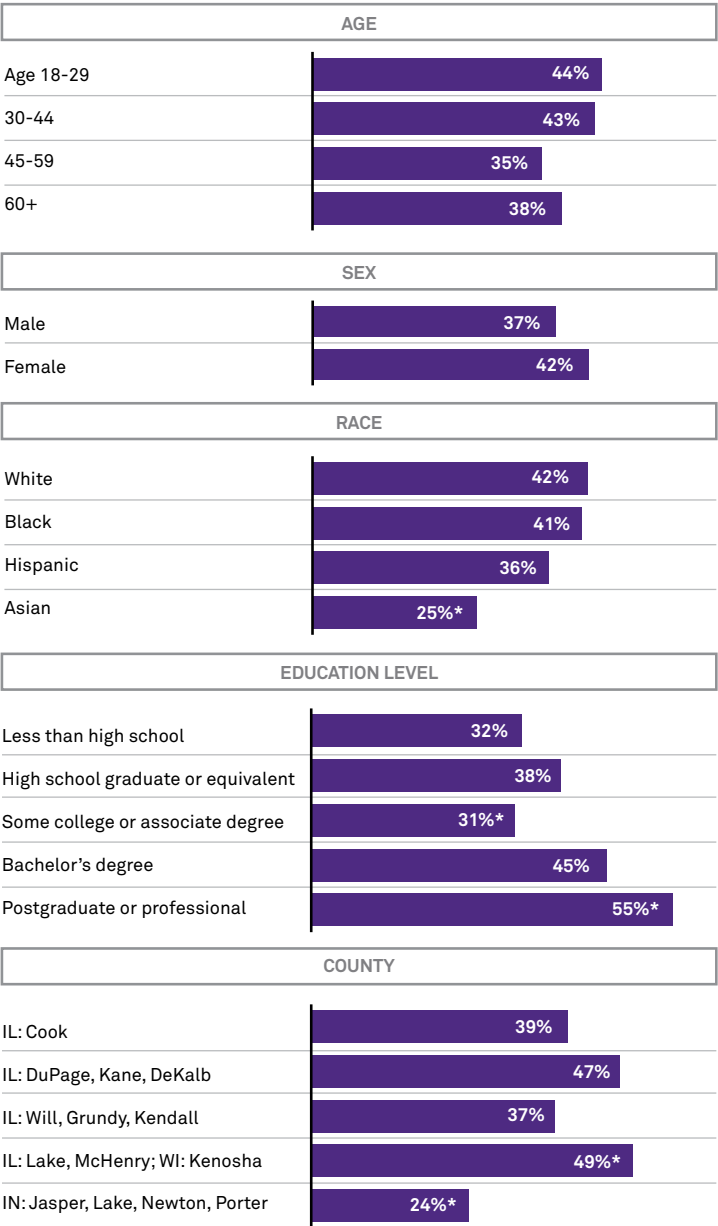
Do respondents see themselves in coverage? It's split.

Only four in 10 people surveyed said they agree or strongly agree that they see their identities in news media stories. Slightly more (43%) neither agreed nor disagreed with that statement. The biggest divergences came from residents in Northwest Indiana (only 24% saw themselves in coverage) and among people with some college education (31%). A quarter (25%) of Asian respondents said they saw themselves in coverage, less than white, Black or Hispanic people.

AGREE OR DISAGREE: MY IDENTITIES ARE REPRESENTED IN THE LOCAL NEWS I CONSUME



Those answering “strongly agree” and “agree” in each demographic group



Note: * = Denotes a statistically significant difference between respondents who belong to the given group and those who do not, at least at the 0.05 level.

HOW RESPONDENTS PREFER
TO CONSUME LOCAL NEWS

Habits

Consumers would rather watch than read

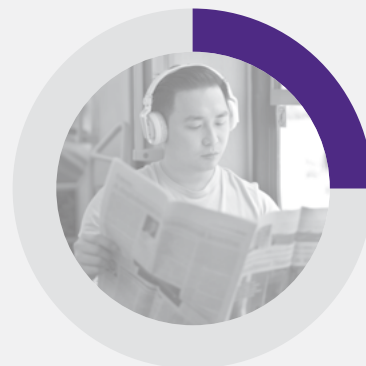
Given television news' long-standing preeminence, it is perhaps unsurprising that respondents said they prefer watching local news to reading it. The difference is clear but not overwhelming: 44% of respondents said they prefer to watch local news, compared with 25% who prefer to read, 20% who said they have no preference, and 10% who prefer to listen.

This question didn't distinguish among media sources, so those who prefer watching news could be referring to television screens or digital video.

I prefer to watch
local news
44%



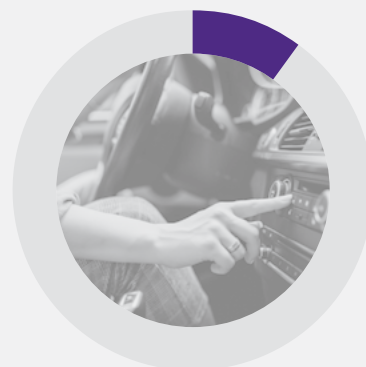
I prefer to read
local news
25%



I don't have a
clear preference
20%



I prefer to listen to
local news
10%



NOTE: Because of rounding and the omission of missing responses, responses for each question may not total to 100.

RESPONDENTS' INTEREST IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF LOCAL NEWS STORIES

Habits

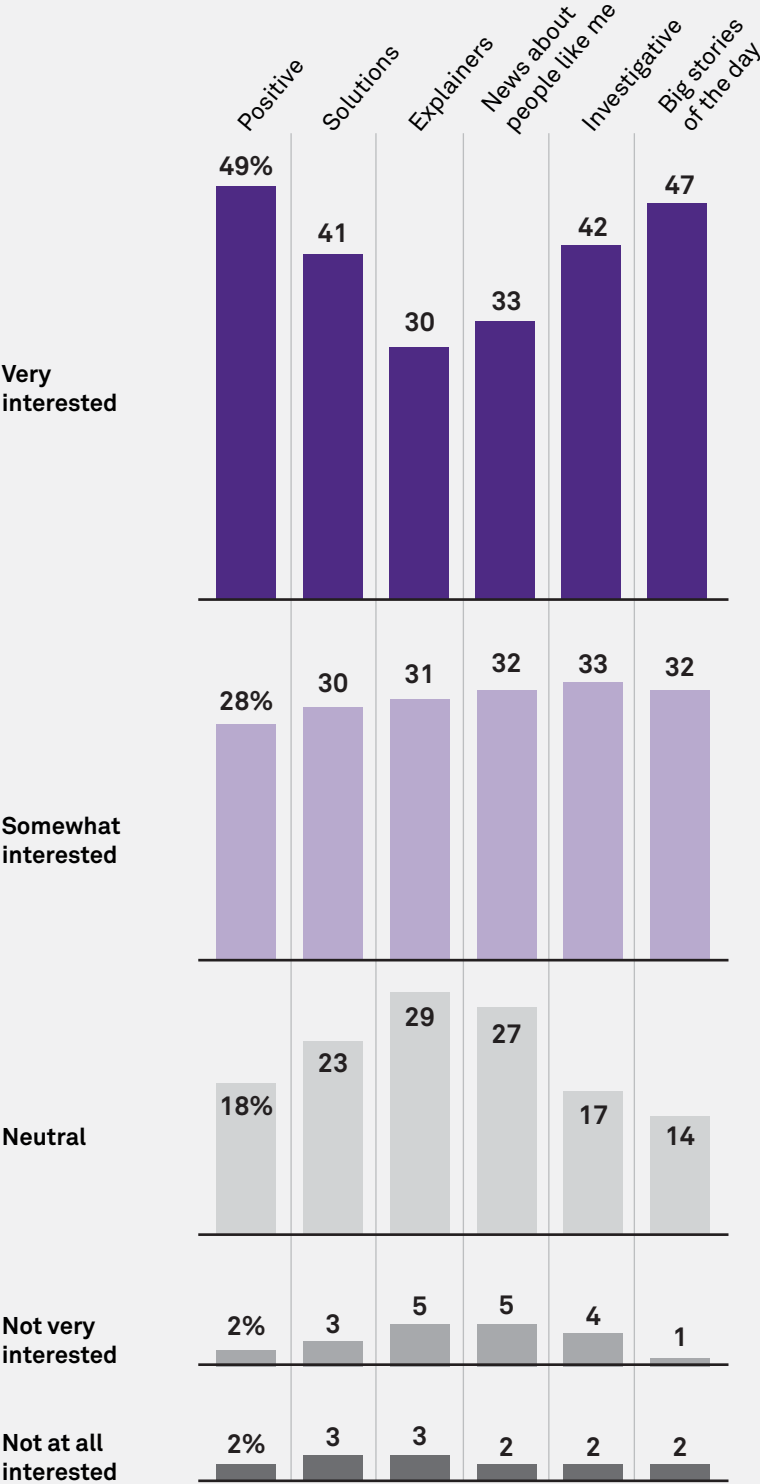
Audiences have wide interests

Respondents said they were very interested in a variety of types of news, including positive news stories (49%), big stories of the day (47%), investigative journalism (42%) and stories focused on solutions (41%).

Positive doesn't mean frivolous

The finding that 49% of respondents are “very interested” in positive news coverage prompted this observation by Medill Professor Stephanie Edgerly, Associate Dean of Research:

“The interest in positive news mimics many national and international trends. But I would caution news organizations against seeing this as audiences wanting more entertaining or amusing stories. A move in that direction will likely garner negative responses from the public. Instead, the challenge is to reimagine how to tell important local stories, and to repackaging news experiences, in ways that do not leave audiences thinking everything is doom and gloom.”



NOTE: Because of rounding and the omission of missing responses, responses for each question may not total to 100.



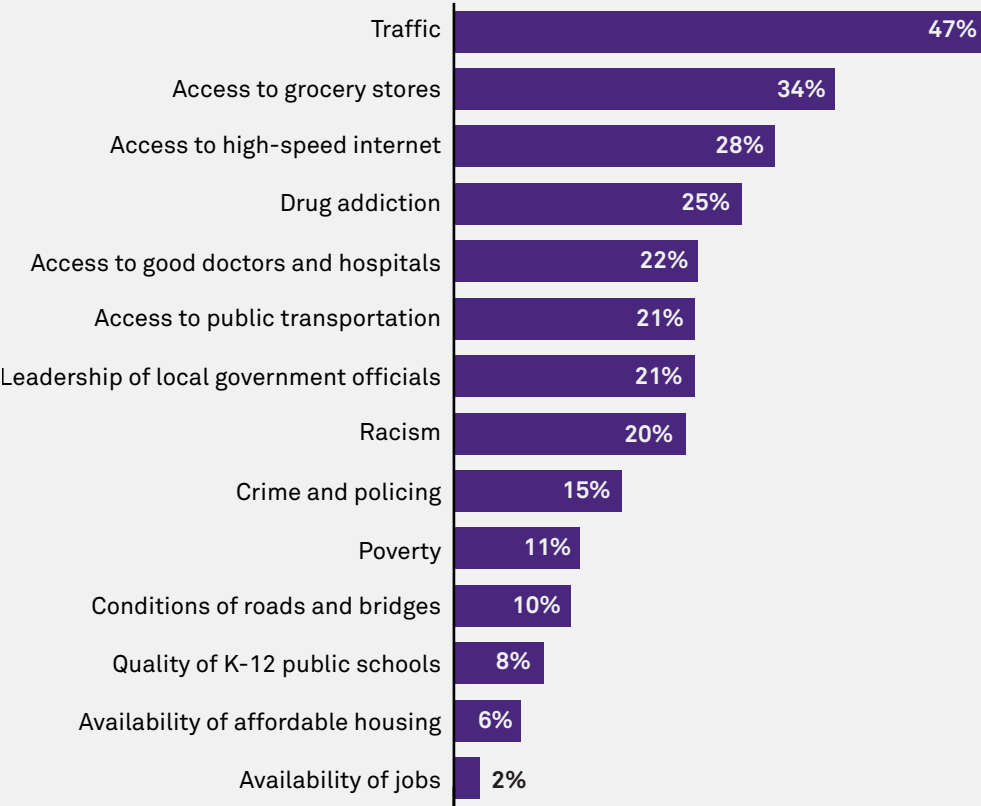
Habits

Traffic ranks as top community issue

When asked to identify up to three of the most important issues in their community, respondents selected topics that relate to daily life: traffic (47%), access to grocery stores (34%) and access to high-speed internet (28%).

The totals were lower for significant social issues, many of which are staples of local news coverage: racism (20%), crime and policing (15%), and poverty (11%). These answers may suggest that news executives and editors should rethink some coverage decisions, including the daily focus on crime stories.

ISSUES RESPONDENTS FIND MOST IMPORTANT IN THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITY



NOTE: Respondents could choose up to three issues.



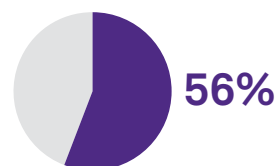
A potential outreach opportunity with news consumers

A majority of the public encounters local news every day, yet this study found that most people have never met a local journalist. Several questions explored the relationship between news media and consumers, and offered possible opportunities for news leaders and journalists to make connections with more members of the public.

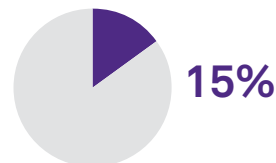
The survey found that just 15% of Chicago-area residents have ever interacted with a local journalist, but more than half (56%) said they have left a comment on a local news website or social media page in the past year. Older consumers were more than twice as likely to do so as younger people: 73% of people 60+ left a comment, vs. 32% of people 18-29.

RESPONDENTS WHO HAVE TAKEN JOURNALISM-RELATED ACTIONS

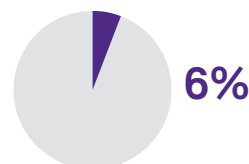
Left a comment on a local news website or social media page in the past year



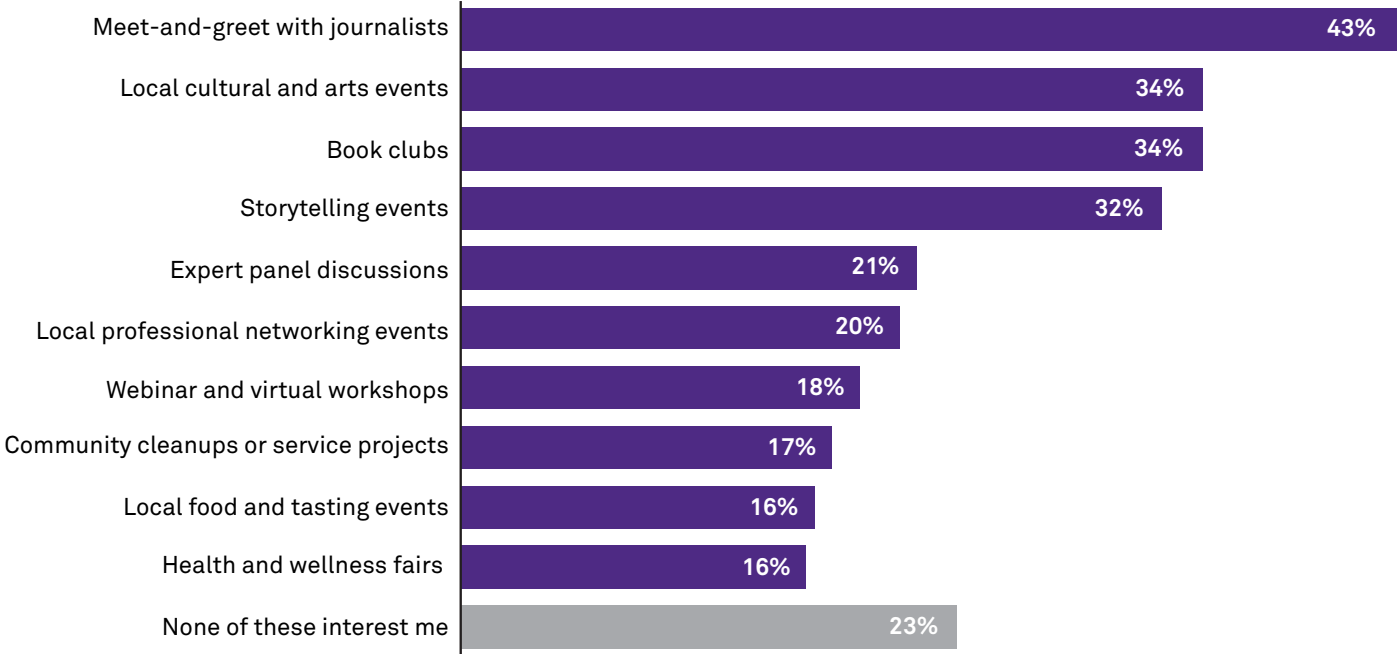
Spoken with or been interviewed by a local journalist



Written to a local news editor or called in to a radio station in the past year



WHAT LOCAL NEWS ACTIVITIES WOULD RESPONDENTS BE MOST INTERESTED IN



NOTE: Percentages indicate a “yes” response; multiple responses permitted.

When the survey asked news consumers about their interest in events hosted by local news organizations, respondents had an opportunity to choose from among 11 activities, ranging from a meet-and-greet with local reporters to webinars and food tastings. Respondents could choose all activities that interested them.

The largest number of people (43%) said they would be interested in the meet-and-greet. This could be an opportunity for reporters and editors to discuss their work, build trust with the public and explain why the work of journalists matters. About one-third of respondents said they would be interested in local cultural and arts events (34%), book clubs (34%) and storytelling events (32%).

Meeting face-to-face

Respondents expressed interest in meeting journalists in a range of different types of activities. Tim Franklin, Medill Senior Associate Dean, Professor and John M. Mutz Chair in Local News, said:

“There’s a powerful message for news organizations in these poll findings. And that is: Many people are open to interacting with journalists. At a time when trust in the news media is near a low ebb, I think this personal touch could go a long way in building credibility and exploding caricatures about journalists.”

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News media literacy

What we found

- People generally have a weak understanding of how the news media operates.
- Many respondents didn't recognize the difference between a newsroom and a search engine.
- People with higher education levels were more likely to answer media literacy questions correctly.



A gap in understanding how news is produced

To explore public awareness of how members of the news media do their jobs, the survey included four media literacy questions, selected from a [larger battery of questions](#) commonly used by researchers to measure news media literacy. These questions were general in nature, not specifically about local news.

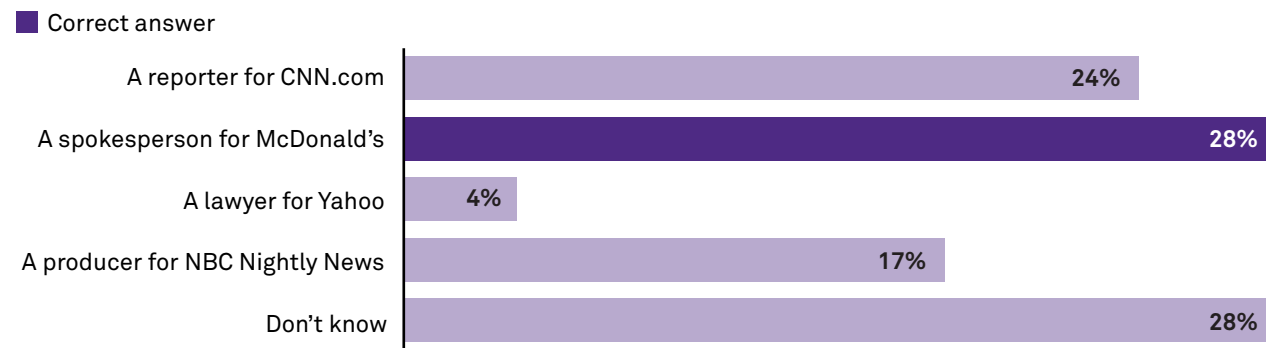
Just one-third of respondents got at least three questions right. Respondents did better on questions about more traditional types of news-related knowledge, while struggling with those about digital platforms. A large portion of respondents (44%) answered at least three questions incorrectly.

An unlevel news environment

The lack of media literacy fuels social inequality. Yu Xu, a Medill Assistant Professor of Integrated Marketing Communications, said:

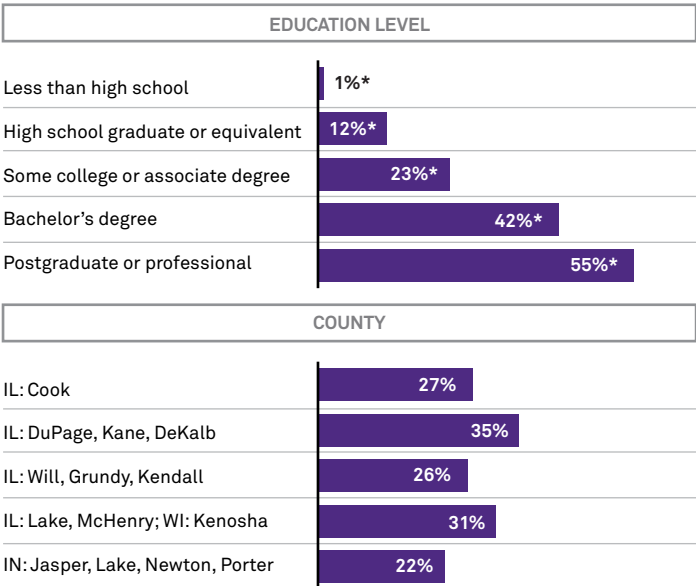
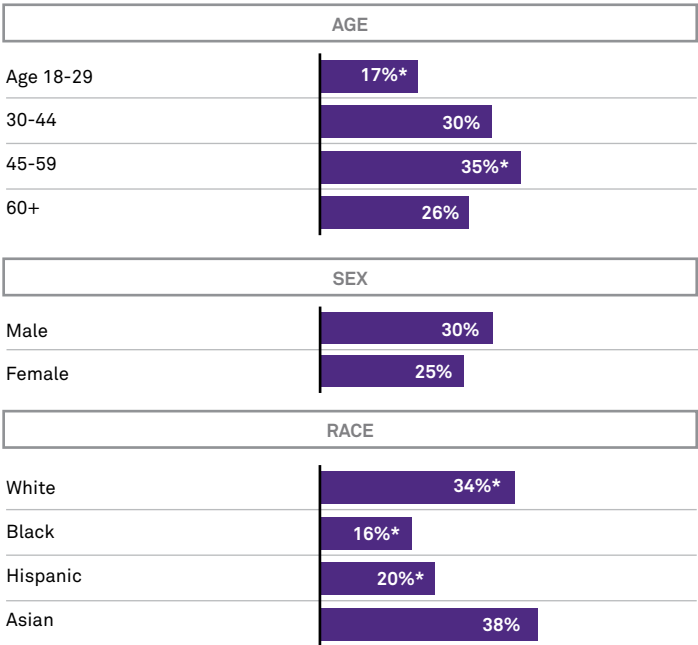
“News organizations are part of a complex information ecosystem where media content is created and disseminated by diverse stakeholders with overlapping or conflicting interests. The positive association between education levels and media literacy suggests the presence of social inequality among the media audience. Consequently, disadvantaged audience groups are likely to receive fewer information and resource benefits from media consumption due to lower levels of media literacy.”

Writing a press release is typically the job of ...



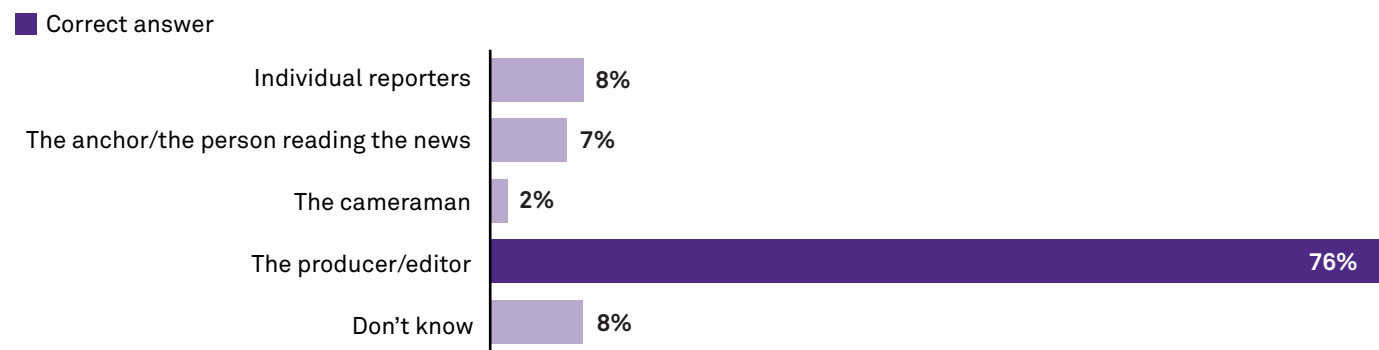
The first question asked who writes a press release. The correct answer was a spokesperson, and just 28% answered correctly. People with post-graduate degrees were far more likely (55%) to provide the right answer. People ages 45-59 were twice as likely to answer correctly as those 18-29.

Percentage answering correctly in each demographic group



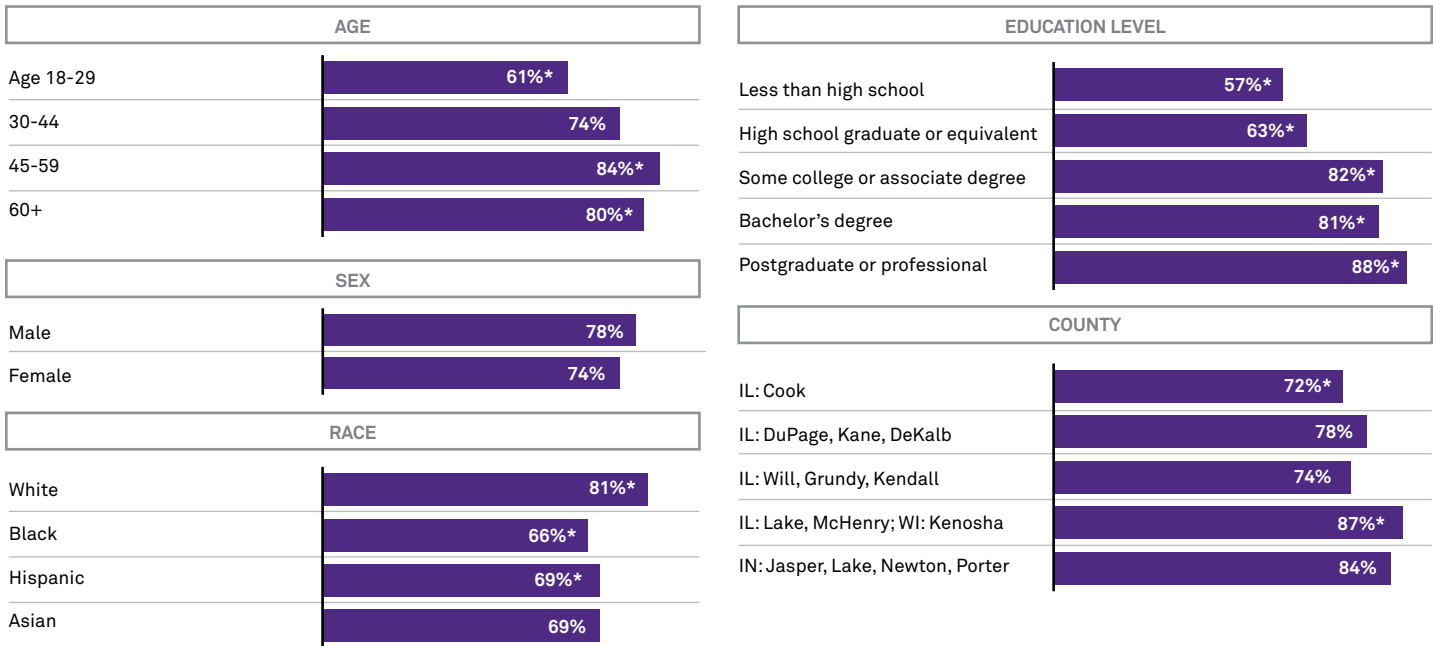
Note: * = Denotes a statistically significant difference between respondents who belong to the given group and those who do not, at least at the 0.05 level.

Who has the most influence on what gets aired on the local news?



The second question asked who most influences what gets aired on local TV news. The correct response was the producer/editor. Most respondents (76%) answered this one correctly, though just 61% of younger people and only 57% with less than a high school degree.

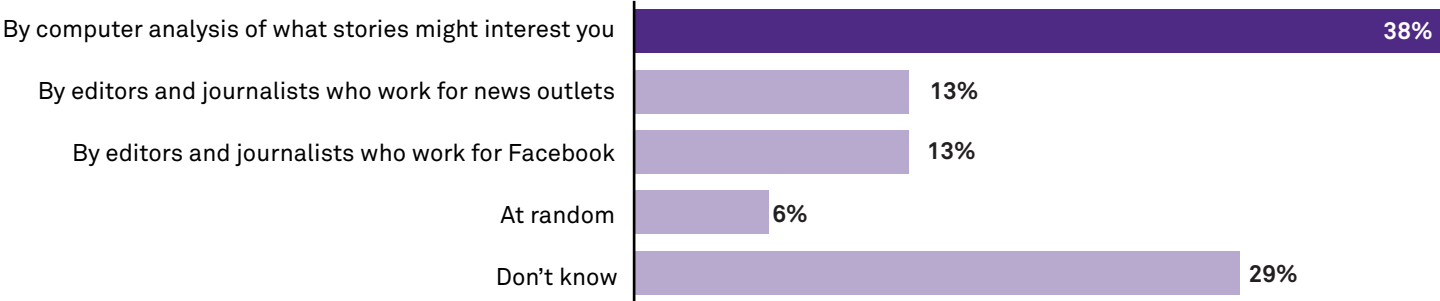
Percentage answering correctly in each demographic group



Note: * = Denotes a statistically significant difference between respondents who belong to the given group and those who do not, at least at the 0.05 level.

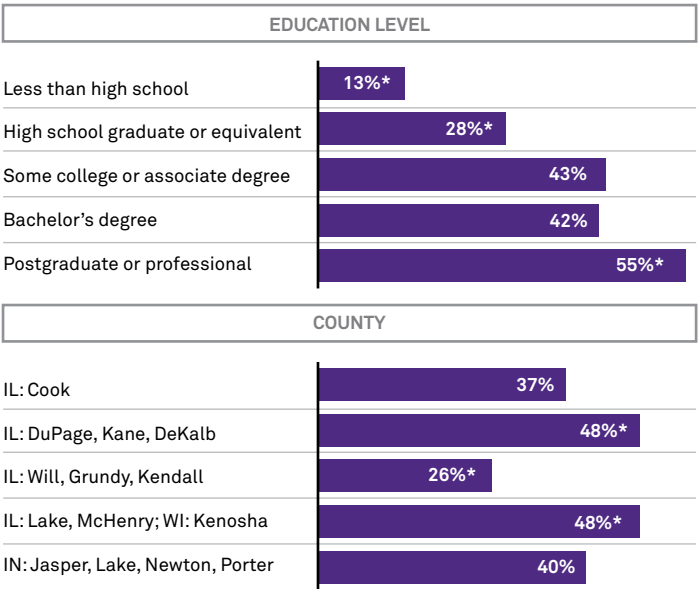
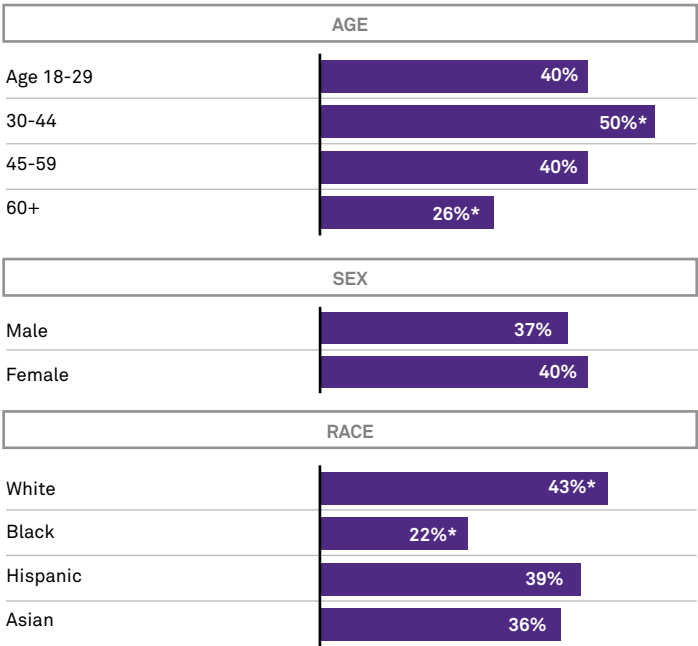
How are most of the individual decisions made about what news stories to show people on Facebook?

Correct answer



The third question asked how Facebook makes decisions about what news stories to show people. A little over one-third (38%) knew the right answer: the algorithm.

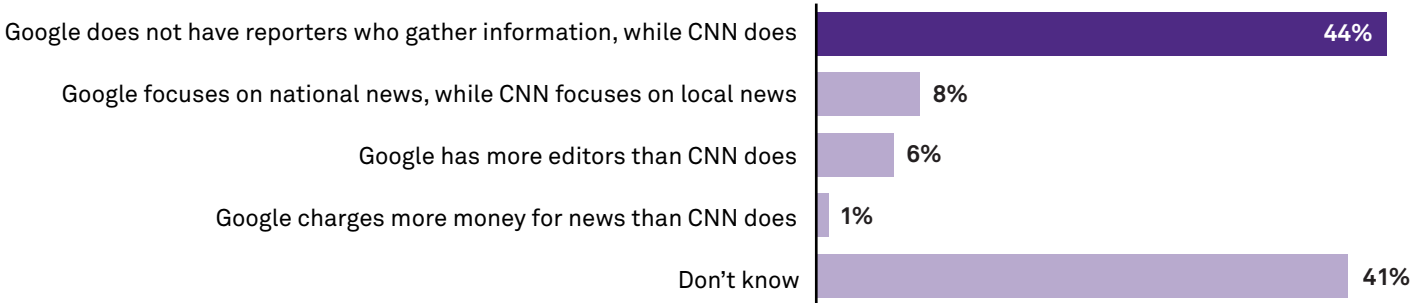
Percentage answering correctly in each demographic group



Note: * = Denotes a statistically significant difference between respondents who belong to the given group and those who do not, at least at the 0.05 level.

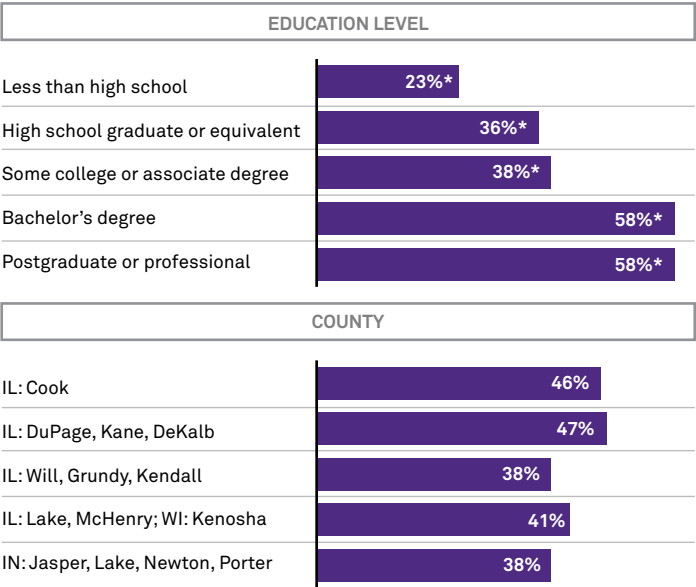
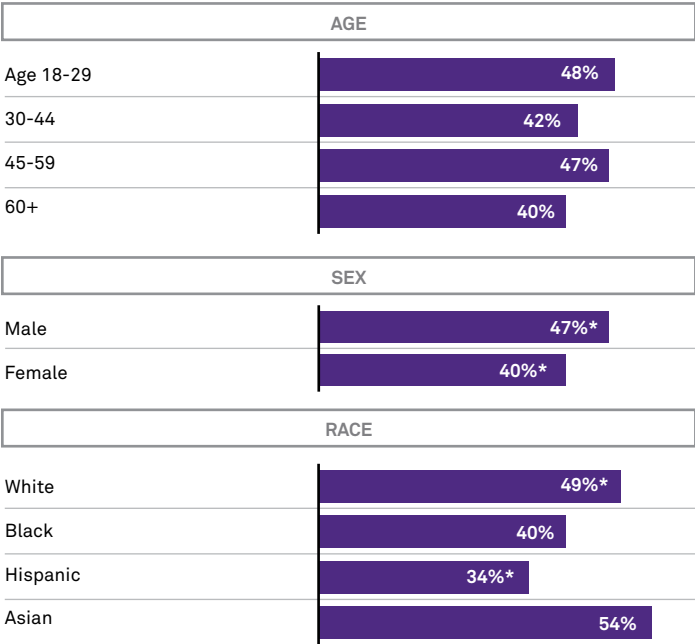
When it comes to reporting the news, the main difference between a website like Google News and a website like CNN is ...

Correct answer



The fourth question asked people to identify the main difference between Google News and CNN. The correct answer: CNN has a reporting staff, while Google News aggregates stories from other sources. Almost half (44%) got it right, but given the prevalence of search engines as a news consumption tool, many people may be confused about the fundamental structure of digital news sources.

Percentage answering correctly by group



Note: * = Denotes a statistically significant difference between respondents who belong to the given group and those who do not, at least at the 0.05 level.



The public might benefit from more detailed explanations of how journalists do their work

In total, 32% gave at least three correct answers, while 44% got just one or zero questions right. The results reveal that the public has a limited understanding overall of the inner workings of journalism, especially in the digital media environment.

While the significance of answers to just four questions shouldn't be overstated, the responses show that the public might benefit from more detailed explanations of how journalists do their work across platforms, how the business of journalism functions and why stories and headlines reach consumers the way they do.

Greater understanding of the news media could build trust and appreciation of the work of journalists, which could directly and indirectly help the industry achieve an important goal during a time of change: a more engaged audience.

**THE MEDILL SURVEY:
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Conclusion



Selling the public on the future of journalism

This report, a survey of local news consumption habits based on a survey of about 1,000 Chicago-area residents, highlights a dramatic difference in perspectives between industry professionals and their target audience.

News industry professionals and supporters recognize the business is in financial crisis, beset by layoffs and newspaper closings while it struggles to find a sustainable revenue model in the digital age. *Yet the public believes the business of local journalism is doing just fine.*

News organizations are hopeful that audiences over time will pay for digital content. *But half of respondents to this survey said no one should pay for local news.*

Journalists believe that by holding the powerful to account they play a pivotal role in a healthy democracy. *But the public is more motivated by news and information that connects to their lives.*

This study was written for news industry and civic leaders, entrepreneurs, philanthropists, academics, editors, reporters, and engaged members of the public — all those with an interest in reshaping news organizations into sustainable, vigorous enterprises amid

tectonic shifts in the way information is consumed.

One of the biggest challenges is one of the most direct: Persuading audiences to pay for the news they receive. With advertising drying up as a revenue source, subscriptions and memberships, along with donations, are required to fund newsgathering. *But this study found that just 19% of Chicago-area residents pay or donate money for access to local journalism (only 9% pay for both local and national news).*

The gulf in attitudes between insiders and audience reveals that, despite the industry's many talents at communicating, news professionals have done a poor job of explaining the economic impact of the digital revolution. The old days of print newspapers making most of their money from ad revenue are over. Younger people are much less interested in TV news than older consumers, so another big change looms there. Meanwhile, digital newsrooms are still trying to find their footing.



Delivering a stronger message

The survey results aren't all negative. About half of Chicago-area residents said they consume local news at least once a day. The same number also said they had left a comment on a local news website or social page in the past year, which confirms a solid level of engagement.

True, large portions of the public have a limited understanding of the inner workings of journalism, especially in a complex digital media environment (see the section of this report on news media literacy). However, respondents seem open to learning more. Only 15% of the public has had contact with a journalist, but 43% were interested in the idea of a meet-and-greet with reporters. Additionally, 38% support giving government tax credits to help local news outlets, even though little is widely known about this legislative proposal.

The big change underway is the manner in which

news is delivered. The report confirms that the smartphone is now the device of choice for consuming local news, supplanting TV news as well as newspapers. The question for the industry is how it will cope with this change. This study strongly suggests that as news organizations shift resources and content to the web, they cannot take their audiences for granted.

Most people do not wake up every morning recognizing the value of the news and information they consume. There is no guarantee they will pay, given the plethora of free content via websites and social media.

For all stakeholders with an interest in a free and vigorous press, including philanthropists, entrepreneurs, community and government leaders, there are roles to play in elevating local news in this moment when it is under siege.

Most of all, it will be up to the news industry to deliver not just the news but also convincing arguments for why the public should support the great work done every day by journalists in this country.

THE MEDILL SURVEY:
HOW THE CHICAGO AREA
GETS ITS NEWS
MAY 2024



News in Chicago: A brief history

How Chicago has made journalism history — and isn't done yet

By Mark Jacob

Chicago has always been a great news town.

Its innovative journalism brought us the first live radio broadcast of a trial in U.S. history.

It brought us the first televised presidential debate.

It brought us a newspaper's clarion call for Black Americans to migrate north from the Jim Crow South.

It helped put Abraham Lincoln in the White House and helped push Richard Nixon out of it.

Chicago journalism is still making a difference today, despite financial pressure that has left it leaner than in its heyday.

The disruption caused by the internet and the takeover of long-standing news organizations by nontraditional owners has transformed Chicago journalism. A hedge fund now owns the Chicago Tribune, which shed 82% of its newsroom staff from 2006 to 2022. The Chicago Defender, once a hugely influential newspaper for Black Americans, is holding on as an online-only product. Television stations have generally avoided the financial distress of the city's print products, but TV and radio news operations have been downsized as well.

Many news outlets doing the best are nonprofit, as Chicago's strong foundation community comes to the rescue. This has opened up new areas of innovation that have generated some optimism in Chicago despite the brutal job cuts at legacy outlets. Public radio station WBEZ's parent company acquired the Chicago Sun-Times to rescue the endangered newspaper and broaden the radio station's audience. It is too soon to judge the results a success, but this novel approach is being closely watched nationally.

The disruptions in journalism extend far beyond the border of Chicago. According to data from the [State of Local News 2023](#) report by the Medill Local News Initiative at Northwestern University, the greater



A street seller with copies of the Chicago Defender in 1942. (Photo by Jack Delano via Library of Congress)

Chicago area has lost 45% of its news outlets since 2005. There are 14 Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin counties in the Chicago Metropolitan Statistical Area, and nine of them have lost half of their news outlets or more in less than two decades. All of those counties are outlying: DuPage, McHenry, Will, Grundy, DeKalb and Kane in Illinois; Lake and Newton in Indiana; and Kenosha in Wisconsin.

Given those market forces, today's Chicago-area news outlets will be hard-pressed to live up to their past influence on our democracy and our culture. But they're taking on the challenge.

Newspapers

The cow hoax, the Colonel and the Mirage

“A newspaper is the lowest thing there is,” declared Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley, who was often a target of newspaper criticism. Yet the city’s papers have been enormously influential, whether Daley liked it or not.

Chicago’s first paper, [the Chicago Weekly Democrat](#), was founded in 1833, when Chicago’s population was just 350.

The Democrat closed just before the Civil War, but a newspaper that began in 1847 is still alive. That’s the Chicago Tribune, which once billed itself as “The World’s Greatest Newspaper.” The editor who established the Tribune’s reputation was Joseph Medill, an abolitionist who was such a political player that he changed the course of the 1860 Republican National Convention in Chicago by persuading Ohio’s delegates to vote for Abraham Lincoln. For the past century, Northwestern University’s journalism school has carried Medill’s name.

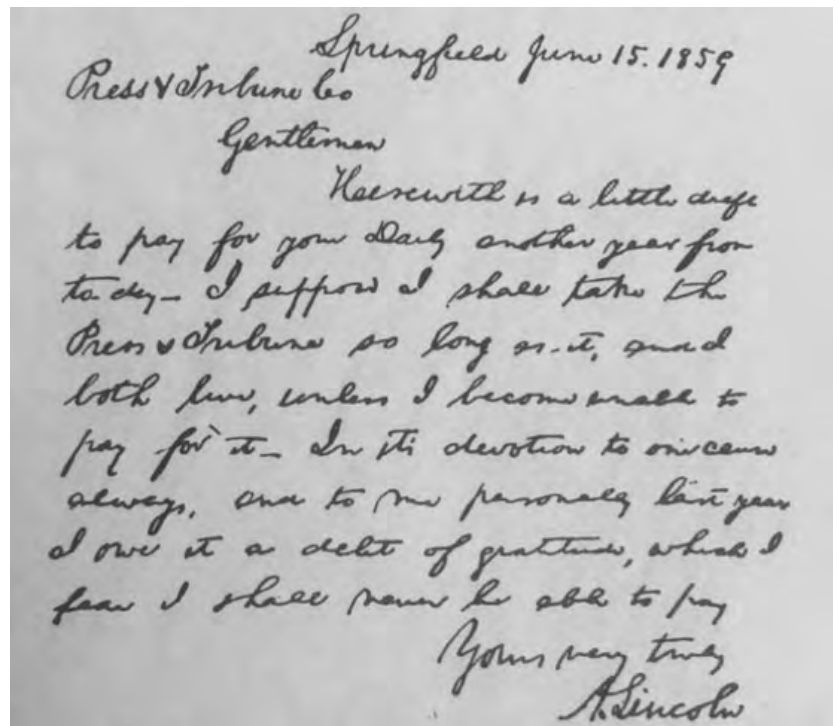
The Chicago area’s oldest surviving newspaper is not in Chicago: It’s the [Joliet Herald-News](#), which began in 1839 as the Juliet Courier in Will County, Illinois. Another early paper in an outlying Illinois area was the Aurora Beacon, which debuted in 1846 and is still operating.

Newspapering got an early start just across the Wisconsin border when [C.L. Sholes founded the Southport Telegraph](#) in 1840. (Southport was an early name for Kenosha.) Sholes had a more prominent claim to fame: He was an early developer of the typewriter and [devised the QWERTY keyboard](#). A newspaper founded half a century later, the [Kenosha News](#), now serves the area.

The most defining event in Chicago history, the Great Fire of 1871, inspired both boosterism and mischief among journalists. A reporter for the Chicago Republican, Michael Ahern, made up a story that a cow had started the blaze by kicking over a lantern. Blame fell on the cow’s owner, Catherine O’Leary, and a myth was born. Reflecting the political influence of newspaper editors, the Tribune’s



The Great Fire of 1871 was a defining event for Chicago. A reporter for the Chicago Republican is responsible for the myth of a cow causing the blaze. (Library of Congress image)



Abraham Lincoln, future president of the United States, resubscribes to the Chicago Tribune in 1859.

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The 1919 Chicago race riot. (Photo by Jun Fujita)

Medill was elected mayor under the Fireproof Party ticket and served two years.

Four years after the fire came a worthy challenger to the Tribune: the [Chicago Daily News](#). In the late 1880s, the Daily News dropped the price of its morning edition to a penny and achieved a circulation of 200,000, tops in Chicago and one of the largest in the world. The Daily News held the city's circulation lead until 1918, when it was overtaken by the Tribune. Among the Daily News' writers: Carl Sandburg, whose [poem "Chicago"](#) established the city's reputation as "Hog Butcher for the World, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat ... City of the Big Shoulders."

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, newspaper competition was fierce and standards were loose. The Chicago Examiner hyped a bogus story that social do-gooder Jane Addams was hiding a "devil child" with cloven hooves and a tail at her Hull House settlement house. A Chicago Times story about the hanging of criminals carried the headline "Jerked to Jesus," which reportedly earned the headline writer a raise. When fire broke out at the Iroquois Theater, killing 602 people in 1903, [Walter Howey of the City Press Association](#) hurried to the scene, paid a bookie \$20 for exclusive use of a phone, then hired a youngster to buy a box of straight pins and stick one in the wire of every public phone in the area, making them unusable by rival reporters.

Howey was the model for the unscrupulous editor in the 1928 play "The Front Page," written by former Chicago newspapermen Ben Hecht and



Crusading journalist Ida B. Wells. (Photo by Sallie E. Garrity)

Charles MacArthur. The comedy, which spawned several movie versions, was over the top, but maybe not too far over. Hecht, for example, got his start at the [Chicago Journal](#) as a "picture chaser" whose job was (in the words of his biographer) "to beg, borrow, or most often steal photos of recently murdered, raped, divorced, or otherwise newsworthy people." Another Chicago newspaperman-turned-playwright was [Ring Lardner](#), a sportswriter for the Chicago Inter Ocean and the Tribune who became known for capturing low-

brow language with authenticity.

By 1900, Chicago had nearly a dozen general-circulation newspapers, with more foreign-language and religious publications. Papers began to embrace news photography despite the cumbersome process, which included glass plates and flash powder. A standout photographer was [Japanese-born immigrant Jun Fujita](#), who worked for the Chicago Post and the Daily News and captured striking images of the Eastland ship disaster and 1919 race riot.

Media mogul William Randolph Hearst entered the Chicago market in 1900. His first product in the city was the Chicago American. Then he moved on to the Chicago Examiner, then a merged Herald-American, then a return to the name Chicago American. In 1956, the paper was sold to the Tribune, which tweaked its name to Chicago's American and finally turned it into the tabloid Chicago Today, which died in 1974.

Among the reporters at the Herald-American was

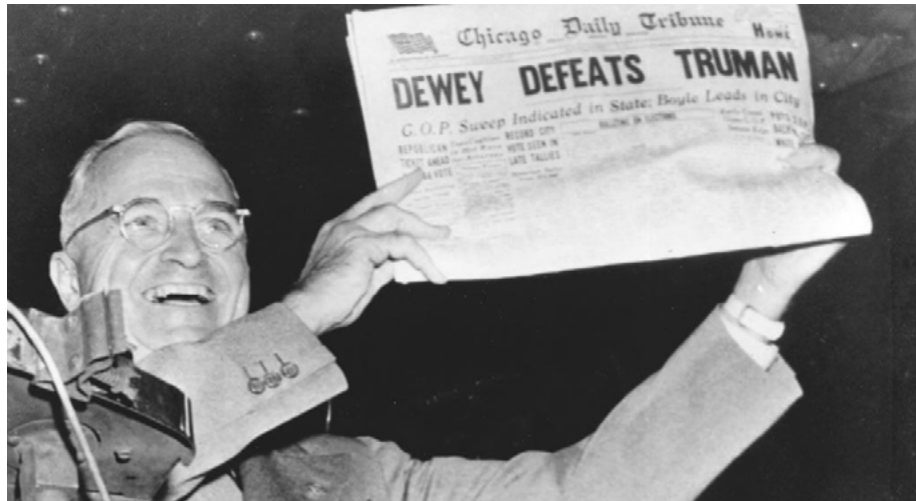
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Wendell Smith, a Black sportswriter who was Jackie Robinson's traveling companion when Robinson crossed the major leagues' color line in 1947. Smith was a pioneer in white-owned media in Chicago, but [Black newspapers had already established a rich history](#). The city's first Black-owned paper, the *Conservator*, was founded in 1878 by lawyer Ferdinand Barnett and later was led by Barnett's wife, [Ida B. Wells](#), whose ferocious crusade against racial injustice set the standard for Chicago journalists, of all races. The leading Black newspaper was the *Defender*, founded in 1905 by lawyer Robert S. Abbott. While the *Tribune* was telling Black Southerners they were unwelcome (a 1917 editorial was headlined "Black Man, Stay South"), the *Defender* sent the opposite signal, publicizing lynchings in the South and job opportunities in Chicago.

In their heyday, Chicago newspapers weren't just delivering the news. They were social service agencies and organizers of civic events. The *Daily News* operated a Fresh Air Sanatorium that provided health care and meals to children. The *Tribune* ran a Public Service Office that gave tax advice and helped military veterans apply for benefits. *Tribune* sports editor [Arch Ward created baseball's All-Star Game](#) and co-founded the Golden Gloves boxing competition. Chicago's official flag was designed by *Tribune* writer Wallace Rice. The *Defender* organized the [Bud Billiken Parade](#), a South Side summer tradition that has been going strong for nearly a century.

In 1890, *Daily News* publisher Victor Lawson persuaded his competitors to cooperate in forming the City Press Association, which covered routine news and trained reporters. [Renamed the City News Bureau](#) in 1910, it was a cradle for creatives, with such alumni as columnist Mike Royko, pop-art sculptor Claes Oldenburg and novelist Kurt Vonnegut Jr. [Melvyn Douglas was fired](#) by the City News Bureau for falling asleep during a big story, so he went into acting and went on to win two Academy Awards. A famous admonition to reporters — ["If your mother says she loves you, check it out"](#) — originated at the City News Bureau, which shut down in 1999.

The *Tribune* became a national and even international force. During the Spanish-American War, [a Tribune editor telephoned the White House](#) and woke up President William McKinley to inform him of the U.S. fleet's victory in Manila Bay. The *Tribune's* influence kept growing in the first half of the 20th century under the direction of Robert McCormick, who was known as "The Colonel" because of his World War I service. The Colonel was presumptuous enough to try to streamline American English with "modern" spellings, such as altho, cantaloup,



cigaret, crum, definitely, fantom, hocky, iland, jaz, leather, rehearse and trafic.

a

The *Tribune* even rewrote the Constitution, sort of. The paper's reporters caught a Chicago crook named William "The Blond Boss" Lorimer bribing his way into a U.S. Senate seat in 1909, when state legislatures selected senators. That scandal was one impetus for passage of the 17th Amendment, which provides for direct election of senators by the voters.

By 1940, the *Tribune's* daily circulation was over 1 million, but all was not smooth sailing. During World War II, the *Tribune* revealed that one reason the U.S. military won the Battle of Midway was its knowledge of the Japanese fleet's plans. That infuriated the White House, which figured the Japanese would realize their naval code had been cracked. A federal grand jury considered charges over the *Tribune* story, but nothing came of it. The *Tribune* is also known for the most famous error in U.S. newspaper history: the ["Dewey Defeats Truman" headline](#) in 1948. The *Tribune* wanted to start its presses early because its printers were on strike, so it went out on a limb. The winner, Democratic President Harry Truman, was delighted to stick it to the pro-Republican *Tribune* by posing with the erroneous front page.

The paper that has most directly competed with the *Tribune* in recent decades is the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The original *Chicago Times* merged with the *Chicago Herald* in 1895, and the resulting *Times-Herald* dropped "Times" from its name six years later to become the short-lived *Record-Herald*. But a more enduring version of the *Times* appeared in 1929, taking over operations from the just-shuttered *Journal*. A *Times* investigation inspired the 1948 film ["Call Northside 777,"](#) in which James Stewart

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played a reporter whose work freed a wrongfully imprisoned man. The “Sun” part of the Sun-Times was created by department store heir Marshall Field III, who founded the Chicago Sun in 1941 to counter the Tribune’s isolationism. But just a few days later, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, and the Tribune was no longer isolationist. The Sun found its place anyway, and it merged with the Times in 1948.

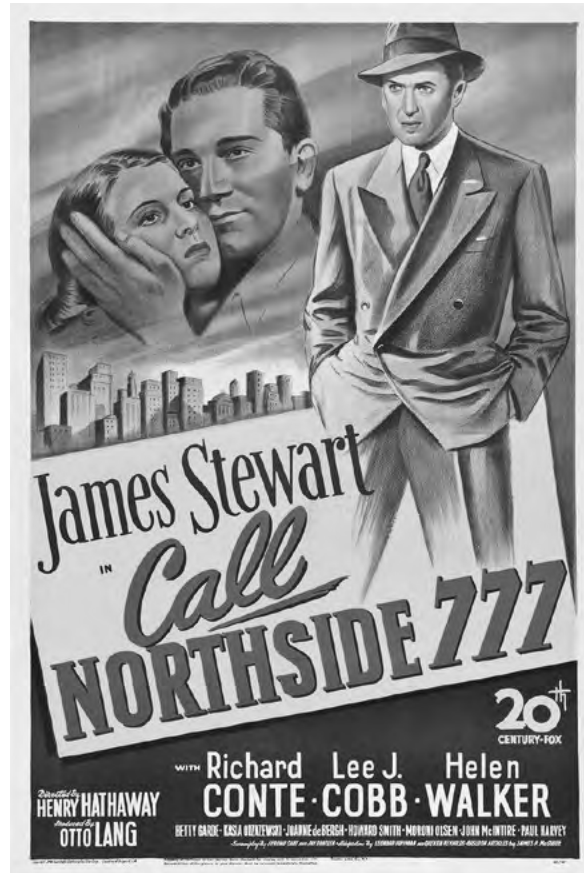
The Tribune of the mid-20th century was innovative in some ways but culturally backward in others. McCormick jumped on the new media of radio and television, and he was an early promoter of fax communications. But the paper was hostile to the civil rights movement and embarrassed itself with its coverage of the police killings of Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. The Tribune swallowed the state’s attorney’s lie that the incident was a raid that had turned into a gunfight when the Panthers resisted. The Tribune ran photos that supposedly showed bullet holes from the Panthers’ gunshots, but the Sun-Times revealed that the “bullet holes” were actually nail heads. There was no gun battle. It was a police assassination.

As the Watergate scandal unfolded in 1974, Richard Nixon’s crimes became too much even for the staunchly Republican Tribune. The newspaper’s call for the president to resign or be impeached was considered a major erosion of his support that hastened his decision to resign.

In 1978, the Sun-Times came up with one of the most audacious newsgathering projects ever when an investigative team went undercover and [set up a bar called the Mirage](#). The Sun-Times wanted to see if city officials would shake them down for bribes. Indeed they did. That same year, the Daily News closed, a victim of decreasing demand for afternoon newspapers. Daily News columnist Mike Royko moved to the Sun-Times, which was owned by the same company, Field Enterprises. Six years later, Field sold the Sun-Times to sensationalist Australian-born publisher Rupert Murdoch, and Royko moved again, this time to the Tribune. “No self-respecting fish would want to be wrapped in Murdoch’s publications,” Royko said.

Murdoch owned the Sun-Times for only two years. By 1994, the paper was controlled by Canadian-born publisher Conrad Black, who would later serve three years in prison for business fraud and obstruction of justice (and be pardoned by President Donald Trump in 2019).

The Sun-Times and Tribune both burnished their national profiles in this era because of a television show hosted by their film critics, the Sun-Times’

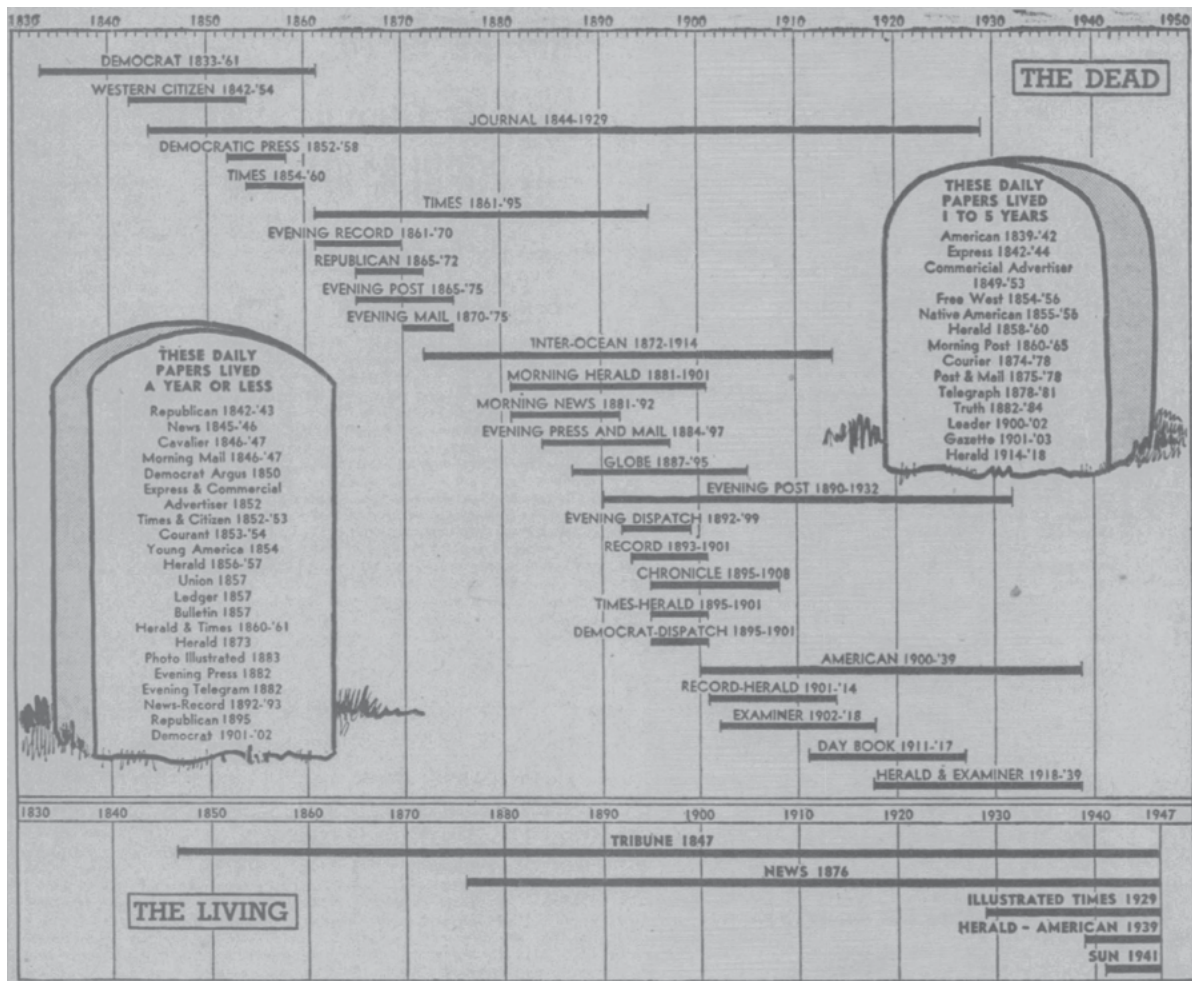


This 1948 James Stewart film was inspired by a Chicago Times investigation.

Roger Ebert and the Tribune’s Gene Siskel. Tribune Co. had an entertainment boom of another type when it bought the Chicago Cubs in 1981 and used its TV station WGN to promote the ballclub. But the entertainment coverage of the Sun-Times and Tribune failed to quench the public’s appetite, and that created an opening for the [Chicago Reader, a free alt-weekly](#) founded in 1971 that was a cash cow for decades. The Reader wasn’t just an entertainment paper; it published John Conroy’s stories exposing torture by Chicago police officers. Other small Chicago publications that made their mark in that era were the [Windy City Times](#), serving an LGBTQ audience, and [La Raza](#), which began in 1970 and continues to be the top Spanish-language publication in the city.

The past quarter-century has been an ugly mess for Chicago’s legacy newspapers. The Tribune took steps to respond to the challenge of the internet, acquiring about 10% of America Online in the 1990s. But there were missteps. In 2000, Tribune Co. acquired the Times Mirror news chain, including the Los Angeles Times and the Baltimore Sun. The timing was terrible, with more consumers getting free news over the internet and ad revenue — especially classifieds — migrating to the web as well. In 2007, real estate mogul Sam Zell acquired

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This timeline from the Chicago Tribune in 1947 shows which Chicago newspapers were still alive and which died.

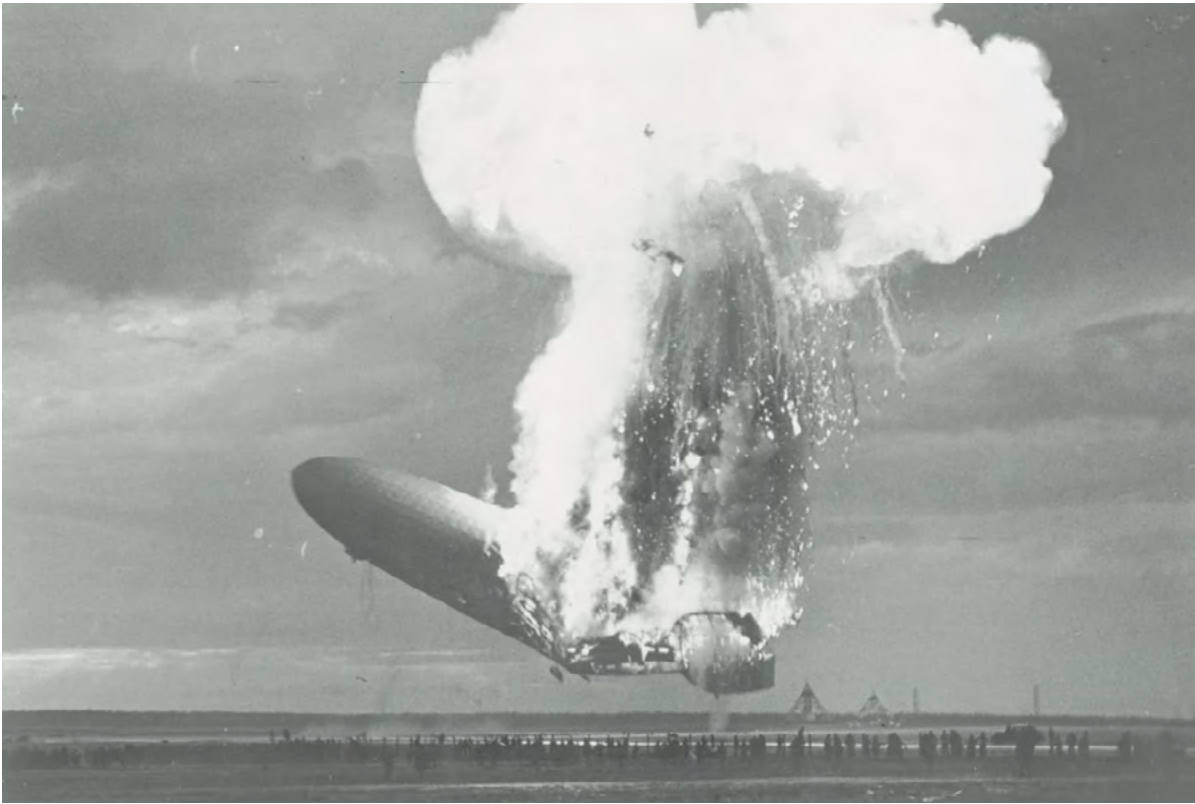
Tribune Co. in a leveraged buyout. Less than a year later, the company filed for bankruptcy protection. The Tribune became [enmeshed in a scandal](#) in 2012 when it was revealed that a vendor called Journatic had supplied hyperlocal news stories written from the Philippines with fake Anglo-sounding bylines. The company sold the Cubs, emerged from bankruptcy in 2012, and in 2013 split into two companies: Tribune Media and Tribune Publishing.

In 2009, the Sun-Times' owner filed for Chapter 11 protection. That meant both of Chicago's top legacy newspapers were in bankruptcy at the same time. It's been a constant struggle since then for both news organizations, which have undergone multiple ownership changes. The Tribune is now owned by [Alden Global Capital, a hedge fund](#) known for slashing staff at its news outlets. Meanwhile, the Sun-Times, whose demise had been predicted for decades, got new life in 2021 when it was acquired by WBEZ's parent, Chicago Public Media.

The turmoil for Chicago newspapers in the past quarter century did not prevent them from making a huge impact. The Tribune has won nine Pulitzers

in that time and has been a finalist more than 20 other times for work on topics ranging from the death penalty to unfair tax bills. The Sun-Times has served the public with many projects, including a Pulitzer-winning deep dive on gun violence and an investigation into the city's corrupt Hired Truck Program.

Strong "newspapering" still happens in Chicago, though it often doesn't happen on paper. Digital outlets such as ProPublica, the Better Government Association (BGA), Injustice Watch, the TRIIBE and Block Club Chicago are making names for themselves. An encouraging trend is news outlets pooling resources. The Tribune and BGA shared a Pulitzer in 2022 for a joint investigation into failures in [safety code enforcement](#) that led to fire deaths. And in 2024, Chicago's City Bureau and the Invisible Institute shared a Pulitzer for their joint investigation of [missing person cases involving Black women and girls](#). It was a sign of the growing impact of nonprofit startups. The Invisible Institute won a second Pulitzer for a podcast about a [1997 hate crime](#).



WLS radio broadcaster Herb Morrison dramatically described the Hindenburg disaster in 1937. (Library of Congress image)

Radio

The ether, the Cool Gent and, oh, the humanity

In the early days of commercial radio, the science of beaming audio into people's homes was a mystery to many in the public and the media. Some thought radio signals traveled through an invisible ether, and in 1930 the [Tribune expressed wonder](#) that "no matter how many millions tune in there always seems to be sufficient energy in the ether for all."

Whether journalists understood the science, they certainly saw the opportunity. The Tribune owned WGN, for "World's Greatest Newspaper." Sears Roebuck & Co. sponsored WLS — "World's Largest Store." Chicago once had a station called WJBT — "Where Jesus Blesses Thousands." The Daily News asked U.S. Commerce Secretary (and later president) Herbert Hoover to choose the call letters for its radio station. He picked WMAQ —



WMAQ station manager Judith Waller was called the "First Lady of Radio."

"We Must Ask Questions." WMAQ benefited from the [strong leadership of Judith Waller](#), who was known as the "First Lady of Radio" after putting Chicago Cubs games on the air and setting up educational shows with the University of Chicago, the American Medical Association and other groups.

At first, news broadcasts often consisted of simple readings of newspaper stories. But ambitions soon grew. In 1925, WGN became the first U.S. station to broadcast live from a criminal court when it [covered the Scopes Monkey Trial](#), in which a Tennessee teacher was prosecuted for teaching evolution. Perhaps the ultimate example of eyewitness reporting came when Herb Morrison of WLS went to New Jersey to cover the arrival of the

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[dirigible Hindenburg in 1937](#). As the airship went up in flames, the Chicago radio reporter exclaimed: “Oh, the humanity!”

That same year came another milestone. The start of Chicago’s school year was delayed three weeks because of the spread of polio, so the district instituted an [early version of remote learning](#) over half a dozen radio stations. The experiment was so successful that the district kept doing lessons on radio and in 1943 created [WBEZ as its own station](#) to broadcast them.

Traffic reporting became a valued function of radio news. WGN began putting police officer Leonard Baldy in a helicopter in 1958. Baldy died two years later when his copter crashed on the West Side. Officer Irv Hayden took over the job and did more than just report on traffic. If he spotted a major problem, he would tell the pilot to land so he could get out and direct traffic. Hayden died in 1971, when his helicopter crashed in west suburban Bellwood.

The art of the interview became a signature of Chicago radio. [Studs Terkel hosted an interview show on WFMT](#) for more than 40 years. Mike Wallace of “60 Minutes” television fame earned his stripes with an [interview program for Chicago’s WMAQ](#).

One of the nation’s most popular radio news hosts, Paul Harvey, was based in Chicago. After joining Chicago’s WENR, an ABC affiliate, he began hosting a national ABC radio program called “Paul Harvey News and Comment” and later added a second one, “The Rest of the Story.” After Harvey’s death, it was revealed that he [submitted radio scripts to his friend](#), J. Edgar Hoover, then director of the FBI, for approval. Another seminal figure of American conservatism came from radio in Kenosha, Wis. Paul Weyrich worked at WAXO and WLIP before [co-founding the Heritage Foundation](#) and being credited with coining the term “moral majority.”

Black radio has been vibrant in Chicago. Jack L. Cooper, who started at WSBC in the late 1920s, has been described as the nation’s “first African-American disc jockey with a commercially sustained radio show.” Cooper offered an on-air missing person’s service so people could reconnect with family and friends. Another major figure in Chicago’s Black radio was Herb “The Cool Gent” Kent, who worked at a number of stations, including WVON.

In 1964, Chicago radio station [WNUS became an all-news station](#), the first such station in the country. Bernard Shaw, later an anchor at CNN, got his



journalism start at WNUS. But the station discontinued the format after four years and went back to music, eventually becoming today’s WGCI. A few days after the rioting that followed the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, WBBM went all-news, and it became dominant in the city’s radio news scene. Its first news director was John Callaway, who later founded the “Chicago Tonight” news affairs show on public television station WTTW. The all-news format was so popular — for a while — that [WMAQ adopted it in 1988](#), going head-to-head against WBBM. But WMAQ disappeared in 2000 when its owner gave its frequency to WSCR sports talk radio.

WBBM still delivers 24-hour news, but like a lot of radio journalism in Chicago, its resources and reach have slipped. Many people get their traffic reports from apps these days. Still, radio remains a key part of Chicago’s journalism ecosystem, owing largely to WBEZ, home for such widely honored journalism as [“This American Life.”](#)

Studs Terkel, shown above in 1970, hosted an interview show on WFMT for more than 40 years. (Photo by Kathleen Ballard, Los Angeles Times)



The first televised presidential debate, in 1960 between Richard Nixon, left, and John F. Kennedy, right, was broadcast from WBBM's studios on the Near North Side. (Library of Congress images)

Television

Angry clouds, happy talk and a presidential debate

“TELEVISION! It’s here! Telephone and telegraph wires, and even the free air, are transformed in giant telescopes through which might be viewed the actions of persons hundreds, yea thousands, of miles away. [Another modern miracle is wrought.](#)”

Chicago’s WCFL Radio Magazine made that declaration in 1928, when television was “here” in a technological sense — but not in a commercial way. The first commercial TV station in Chicago was WBKB, the forerunner for today’s WBBM-Channel 2. Its first programming came in 1941, when there were only 50 to 100 television receivers in the city.

Sports was a higher priority than news. In the late 1940s, Cubs owner P.K. Wrigley gave WBKB a two-year contract to televise the games for free. But it wasn’t exclusive. The new Tribune-owned WGN-Channel 9 also broadcast the Cubs, and it aired White Sox games as well.

The city’s TV stations produced national entertainment shows such as “Kukla, Fran and Ollie” and “Garroway at Large” that were distinctive in their spontaneity and were categorized as “the [Chica-](#)

[go School of Television.](#)” School was soon out of session, however, as national TV shows left Chicago for the coasts. But one of the medium’s landmark moments occurred in Chicago in 1960, when, as the Tribune put it, “a Chicago television studio briefly became a hectic center of American politics.” [The first televised presidential debate](#) brought John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon to WBBM’s studios at 630 N. McClurg Court.

Television’s potential to inform people was embraced by a nonprofit group that [started WTTW-Channel 11](#) in 1955. The next year, WTTW launched “TV College,” the nation’s first program in which students earned college credit from “tele-courses.” As immigration from Mexico and other Hispanic countries grew in the 1970s, ’80s and ’90s, Spanish-speaking news became increasingly vital. In Chicago, that market is served by [Univision’s WGBO](#) and [Telemundo’s WSNS](#).

Considering how much news coverage defines the images of Chicago’s local stations today, it is remarkable what a low priority it was in the early days. It was the 1960s before WGN became the

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first Chicago TV station to [expand its nightly newscast](#) to a half-hour.

But since that time, the personalities on Chicago newscasts have been among the city's biggest celebrities — people like Fahey Flynn, Carol Marin, Walter Jacobson, Lester Holt, and Bill Kurtis.

The style of local TV news has long been subject to debate, with critics complaining about vacuous news shows that they label “happy talk.” That term has been attributed to Morry Roth, a Chicago-based correspondent for *Variety* who was supposedly referring to WLS. One example of a backlash came in 1997 when Marin and Ron Magers [quit as anchors at WMAQ](#) after trash TV host Jerry Springer was given a commentary slot on their Channel 5 news.

Over the decades, Chicago TV has produced many hard-news highlights. After Mayor Harold Washington's death in 1987, local TV coverage of the city's shock and the maneuvers over his successor was spectacularly strong journalism. The immediacy of local TV news was also evident when Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich was arrested in 2008 for trying to sell the U.S. Senate seat vacated when Barack Obama was elected president. WFLD won a Peabody Award in 2010 for coverage of the [beating death of South Side student Derrion Albert](#), a case that drew attention from the Obama White House. In 2020, WBBM won a Peabody for its reporting on [Chicago police raiding the homes of innocent people](#).

Recent decades have been a growth period for local TV news if measured by the number of hours devoted to it every week. But with streaming and startups, the market is fracturing. Even so, the public remains hungry for reliable information delivered in real time. When there's major news — especially a weather event — one of their first impulses is to turn on the TV.

Mark Jacob is a former metro editor at the Chicago Tribune and a former Sunday editor at the Chicago Sun-Times. He was the website editor for Northwestern University's Medill Local News Initiative from 2018-2022.



WLS-TV anchor Fahey Flynn, center, like many local newscasters, became a Chicago celebrity. Other 1972 Eyewitness News team members: back, from left: anchor John Drury, and anchor Joel Daly; front, from left: weatherman John Coleman, Flynn and sportscaster Bill Frink. (WLS image)



Before becoming the anchor for NBC Nightly News, Lester Holt spent 14 years in Chicago as a reporter and anchor for WBBM. (NBC Image)

THE MEDILL SURVEY:
HOW THE CHICAGO AREA
GETS ITS NEWS
MAY 2024



Methodology



How the survey was conducted

This study was designed by researchers at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications to understand how local news is consumed in the greater Chicago area. The project was supported by a grant from the MacArthur Foundation and conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago, an independent social research organization.

For the purpose of this study, the greater Chicago area was defined by the 14 counties comprising the Chicago Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). This includes nine counties in the state of Illinois, four counties in northwest Indiana and one county in southeast Wisconsin. The outlying areas are within about 70 miles of the Chicago city border.

The survey of 1,004 Chicagoland residents took place from Jan. 16 to Feb. 2, 2024 (See table on the next page). The sample of adults age 18+ who live in the Chicago MSA was selected from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak® Panel (n = 633) and from Dynata's non-probability panel (n = 371). Respondents who confirmed that they reside in the Chicago MSA were allowed to participate. The questionnaire was self-administered online and available in English and Spanish, depending on respondent preference. The median time to complete it was 14 minutes.

The probability sample was selected from the AmeriSpeak Panel, NORC's probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. During the initial recruitment phase of the panel, randomly selected U.S. households were sampled with a known, nonzero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame and then contacted by U.S. mail, email, telephone and field interviewers (face to face). The AmeriSpeak

Panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97 percent of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with only P.O. box addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File and some newly constructed dwellings.

For the probability sample, all AmeriSpeak panelists who reside in the Chicago MSA were invited to take the survey. If a panel household had more than one active adult panel member, only one adult panel member was selected at random.

For the non-probability sample, NORC defined quota buckets for demographic strata to reflect known population distributions for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education and regions of Chicago MSA. NORC worked with Dynata to slowly release the sample over the field period to adequately fill each.

The final sample of 1,004 Chicagoland residents does not include cases that were removed due to quality-control checks. NORC removed 28 cases from the final sample for speeding (i.e., those who completed the survey in less than one-third of the median duration), high refusal rates (i.e., those who skipped or refused more than 50% of the eligible questions) or straight-liners (i.e., those who

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straight-lined all of the grid questions they were shown). Additionally, two attention-check questions were asked of Dynata respondents in their battery of demographic questions. Any Dynata respondent who failed either attention check was not allowed to participate in the survey.

The final sample was weighted to the Chicagoland population. NORC developed the weights through three stages. First, probability and nonprobability sample weights were developed separately. This included the use of several nested benchmarks for age, gender, race/ethnicity and education from the 2022 one-year American Community Survey. Second, small area estimation was leveraged to model core response variables and generate raking benchmarks. Finally, the two samples were combined through TrueNorth calibration to create the final weights. These final two stages make up NORC’s TrueNorth® Calibration.

NORC provided additional weights to balance demographic distributions within the Chicago MSA by the following county groupings:

- 1. Cook, IL
- 2. DuPage, Grundy, McHenry and Will, IL
- 3. DeKalb, Kane, Kendall and Lake, IL; Jasper, Lake, Newton, Porter, IN; Kenosha, WI.

All analyses in this report were performed using the Chicago MSA weighting.

The overall margin of error for the combined weighted sample is +/- 4.66 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, including the design effect. Estimates based on subgroups have larger margins of error. It is important to note that sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error in a survey. Other sources, such as question wording and reporting inaccuracy, may contribute additional error.

Values are weighted percentages. Categories may not total to 100% due to rounding and respondents who indicated they did not know the answer or refused to answer a question.

White, Black and Asian adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic; Hispanic adults are of any race. “Other” includes those who selected “other” for race/ethnicity (1.4%) and those who selected multiple races, non-Hispanic (3%).

SURVEY SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

Demographics	Chicago MSA sample (%)
Age	
18-29	18.5
30-44	27.5
45-59	24.5
60+	29.5
Gender	
Male	49.3
Female	50.7
Race / Ethnicity	
White	53.3
Black	15.2
Hispanic	21
Asian-Pacific Islander	6.1
Other	4.4
Education	
Less than high school	9.1
High school graduate or equivalent	24.5
Some college or associate degree	26.8
Bachelor’s degree	24.4
Postgraduate or professional	15.1
Income	
Less than \$30,000	21.2
\$30,000 to under \$60,000	25.6
\$60,000 to under \$100,000	21.5
\$100,000 or more	31.7
County groups	
Cook	54.6
Will, Grundy, Kendall	11.3
DuPage, Kane, DeKalb	11.1
IL: Lake, McHenry; WI: Kenosha	11.5
IN: Jasper, Lake, Newton, Porter	9.2

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