



Illinois News and Information Ecosystems Report



A Pivot Fund landscape analysis of how Illinois residents find, trust, and use local news and information.

BY JEAN MARIE BROWN AND ERIC ORTIZ

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On the cover: Shakia Yancey, right, is the founder of Elevate the Family Entertainment and the Elevate TV Network in Rockford, Illinois. (ETF Entertainment LLC/ ElevateTV.Network)



Executive Summary

Illinois sharpened a core lesson from our Great Lakes research. Local news is not simply missing in many places. It is unevenly distributed, unevenly trusted, and unevenly reachable. Residents across the state described living with news deficits, not “news deserts.” These are gaps in timely, actionable, hyperlocal information that helps people navigate daily life.

The deficits are not abstract. People told us they are flooded with crime coverage and national politics while actively searching for:

- school board decisions
- local taxes and assessments
- planning and zoning updates
- street closures and disruptions
- public services and resource access

Residents are not waiting for news to arrive through traditional channels. They are assembling information from wherever it shows up fastest and feels most useful: Facebook pages, WhatsApp groups, Nextdoor, Patch, YouTube, neighborhood text chains, local officials’ posts, and community institutions like libraries and schools.

Illinois also reinforced a concept philanthropy often underestimates. **“Audience” is not one thing.** A newsroom can have an audience of funders or other journalists and still be largely disconnected from local residents. Its can also have a real audience of readers, listeners, or viewers without broad brand recognition, meaning residents may benefit from the information without realizing *who* produced it.

Chicago made this distinction unavoidable. **Block Club Chicago—one of the most highly cited newsrooms in our study—was still unfamiliar to some residents, even when the reporting itself appeared to be reaching people through social sharing and informal distribution.** In other words, **information can travel without brand awareness.** That doesn’t mean the reporting isn’t getting out. It means the pathway often detaches the outlet name from the information, making sustainability and accountability harder.

Funding reporting capacity matters. But impact depends on distribution, visibility, cultural competency, language access, and whether the information shows up in the places people already live.

At the other end of the spectrum, Illinois surfaced a stark example of a newsroom having an audience largely comprised of funders and journalists: **City Bureau**. Despite major field credibility—including a Pulitzer Prize—City Bureau rarely appeared in residents’ descriptions of where they get information, what they trust, or what they return to. This is not a critique of quality. It is a warning about assumptions. **Prestige and influence inside the civic media field do not automatically translate into resident awareness or daily utility.**

For funders, Illinois underscores a bottom-line reality:

Truth is not useful unless it is reachable.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tracie". The letter "T" is large and stylized, with a long vertical stroke that extends below the rest of the name.

Tracie Powell / CEO / The Pivot Fund

Introduction

From January 2024 through December 2025, researchers with The Pivot Fund examined the news ecosystems of several states lining the shores of Lake Michigan. We began this project hoping to identify emerging media entrepreneurs—especially those focusing on audiences historically overlooked by traditional media.

Our focus was on the people producing and consuming hyperlocal and, to some extent, local news and information. We gleaned insights from more than 4,600 people across four states—Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Illinois—through one-on-one interviews, listening sessions, and prescreenings of potential participants in listening sessions.

What we heard across the region was not a story of people living without information. It was something more precise: a story of constant effort—finding information, verifying it, and translating it into something usable for daily life.

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Key findings

The notion of “news deserts” is overstated. Yes, there are communities—large and small—that have limited to no traditional news outlets. But that doesn’t equate to being bereft of news and information. People in these communities have become adept at seeking out what they need and piecing together sources, ranging from a local resident who posts on social media to local governments and local officials.

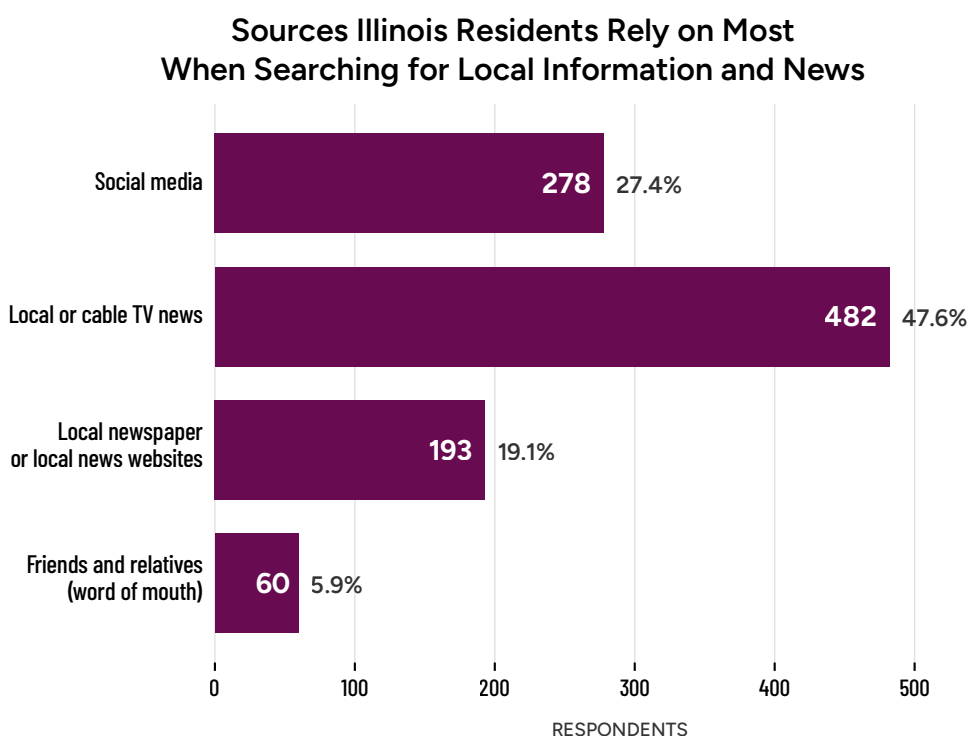
As noted in the Wisconsin report, these deficits are in key areas where information is lacking. They are distinct. The people we spoke with were awash in crime news and national politics, but they searched—often urgently—for information about school boards, local taxes and assessments, and planning and zoning decisions.

Audience is key: The focus of the industry—and, to a large extent, philanthropy—has centered on shoring up the journalism industry and, by extension, the livelihood of journalists. Both are necessary goals, but neither works without an audience. Endeavors have to be designed to meet people where they are, not assume that people will flock to outlets because of the journalists who staff them. Watchdog and investigative journalism are important, but the people we spoke to said they need information that helps them navigate real life.

Geography matters: People living in large population centers—Minneapolis/St. Paul, Detroit, and Chicago—have access to a range of information sources. This includes media entrepreneurs, traditional news sources, and people sharing information. Chicago is brimming with sites and sources. The Windy City's news ecosystem is fully fragmented, with sources ranging from traditional to digital providing news and information to a variety of audiences.

Q: "When searching for local information and news, which source do you rely on the most?"

1,013 Respondents



Accessing information is now a digital-first practice: Digital media has become the standard entry point for accessing news and information. From YouTube to Google and everything in between, people said they search digital platforms when they need information. Legacy outlets still have followings—people across Illinois cited WGN as a source. But no matter the generation, when we asked people where they got their news, social media was the answer.

Digital imbalance drives inequity: There's no denying that Chicago has a robust ecosystem. But it hasn't developed evenly. People living on the North Side spoke of access and coverage that isn't reflected on the city's West Side. The same is true for many suburbs. In many ways, income, geography, race, and ethnicity continue to influence how news and information are produced, distributed, and trusted.

Chicago stands out in our research because of its size and the sheer number of sources people turn to for news and information. Its ecosystem is mature—an early reflection of what media fragmentation looks like at scale. Information is tied to geography and neighborhoods, but also to communities and interests.

Income, geography, race, and ethnicity continue to influence how news and information are produced, distributed, and trusted.

There is also a disconnect with legacy media. Our conversations show that it is rooted in concerns about bias—particularly crime coverage in Black and Brown neighborhoods—and questions about cultural and geographic competency. It is also spurred by the need for information in real time, and as unfiltered as possible.

Respect in journalism circles doesn't mean an outlet is widely known to the public. Social media strategies are a must if outlets want to extend their reach. During a South Side listening session, participants did not name outlets such as South Side Weekly, Chicago Reader, Borderless Magazine, The TRiiBE, or Invisible Institute as trusted local news sources. Participants referred to stories that were published inside of these publications, but they didn't know their names. At the same time, one-on-one interviews with residents of nearby western suburbs of Chicago (Evergreen Park and Oak Lawn) brought instant name recognition for The TRiiBE and Block Club.

Block Club Chicago, recognized as [Best Daily News Site](#) in Editor & Publisher's [2025 EPPY Awards](#), has published more than 29,000 neighborhood stories since 2018 and grown into one of the city's most respected digital newsrooms. Many participants were aware of it, but it was new to others.

One West Side participant referenced it in passing: “For the tax and the property tax things like that, I mainly listen to Chicago Block, I can’t think of the name,” said Summer Gitty, 18, a student from North Austin who attends a Hispanic-Serving Institution.

Outside of Chicago and its adjacent suburban counties, people up- and down-state are also finding alternative coverage in unsuspecting outlets. The search for information can lead people outside of the groups they identify with.

Trang Nguyen, a 23-year-old Vietnamese American living in Champaign, said one of his favorite go-to outlets is [Chambanamoms.com](https://www.chambanamoms.com), a site that mainly serves new mothers to keep them connected to each other and the local community. Nguyen is not a woman or a mother, but he said it is one of the few outlets that tries to spotlight non-White people and events.

“I even saw an article on Chambanamoms about Diwali and Día de los Muertos, so I like how they try to be educational about cultural holidays, which I think is especially important when you have a diverse population,” he said.

Residents told us what they want:

- Newsrooms that serve as true community hubs.
- Balanced coverage that highlights culture, achievements, and solutions.
- Accessible, trustworthy information in multiple formats.
- Opportunities for people of all ages to engage, learn, and strengthen their communities through journalism.

They also told us what’s missing: visibility, connection, and intentional outreach.

For funders, this landscape presents a powerful and urgent opportunity. By investing in hyperlocal reporting, community-rooted outlets, media literacy programs, and partnerships with trusted neighborhood institutions, philanthropy can close critical gaps between local news and the underserved communities that need it most.



Block Club Chicago reporter Atavia Reed poses questions to Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson at Gary Comer Youth Center, 7230 S. South Chicago Ave., in Greater Grand Crossing on Aug. 13, 2025. (Photo by Colin Boyle for Block Club Chicago)

Investing has to be more than grants. These entrepreneurs and startups need wrap-around services—including business strategies that help them become financially stable and not dependent on philanthropy or the finances of the founder.

Residents told us what they want. They also told us what's missing: visibility, connection, and intentional outreach.

Their responses prompted us to recognize that while journalism and journalists remain focused on websites and traditional news outlets, people have moved en masse to social media channels that deliver news and information quickly. YouTube, Facebook, and other social media platforms have become incubators for media entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, people use Google as a reporting tool, regularly searching for news and information.

An overview and methodology

To understand Illinois, we designed this study around place—because information behaves differently depending on where people live, what institutions are present, and which networks they trust. We broke the state up geographically, taking into account the outsized presence of Chicago and its adjacent suburban counties, which function as Illinois' population and media anchor.

Chicago's demographic shifts shaped our approach. Growth in the city's Latino and Asian populations has helped offset declines in its Black population, reshaping neighborhood identities, civic engagement, and information consumption patterns—creating new opportunities and challenges for local media.

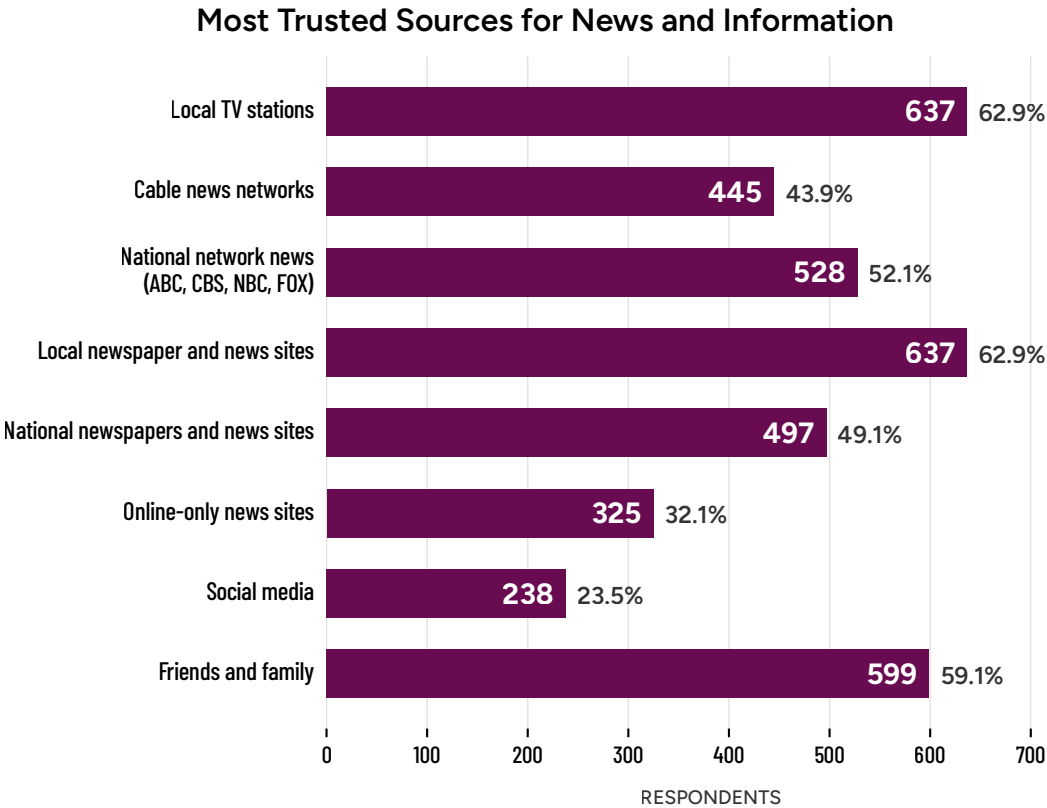


The Jesse White Tumblers, created in 1959 to provide a positive alternative for youth in Chicago, perform at a community event. (Photo by Ashantis Jones)

Illinois’ broader population trends provide critical context for what we heard. In 2025, Illinois’ population stands at approximately 12.7 million, according to the [latest U.S. Census estimates](#). After [nine consecutive years of decline](#), the state experienced modest gains in 2023 and 2024, adding just over 20,000 residents in 2023 and 67,899 residents in 2024 (0.53%). This growth was driven largely by a [surge in international migration](#) that helped offset losses across many communities.

Q: “How much do you trust each of the following sources for news and information?”

1,013 Respondents

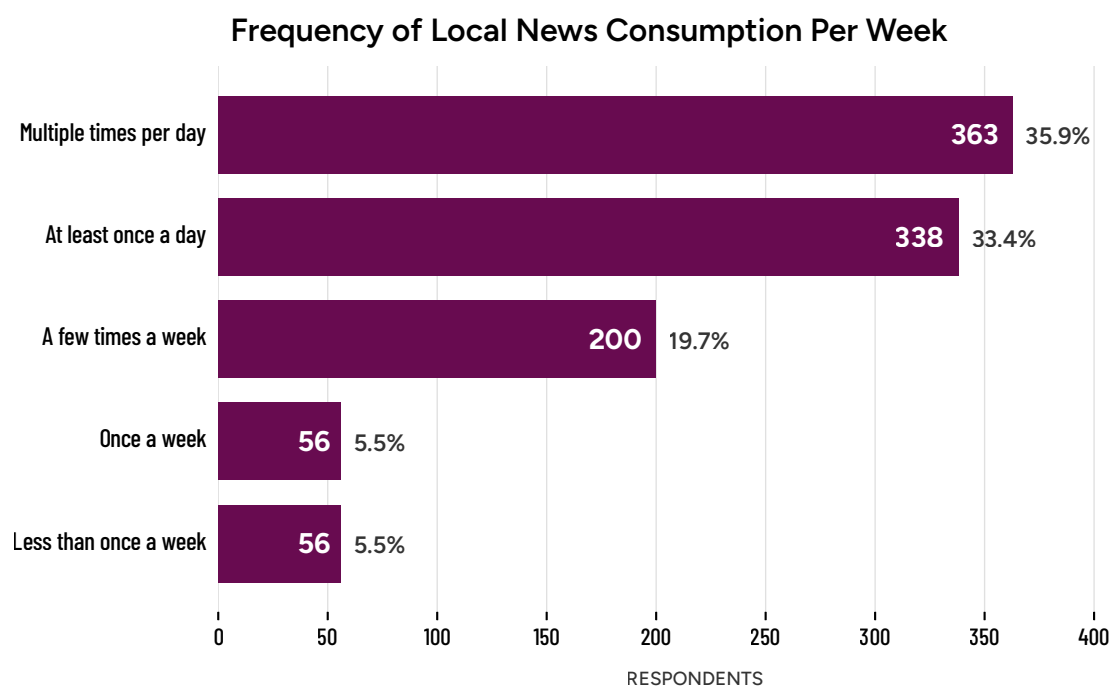


Even with those gains, population decline remains the dominant trend across much of the state. In 2024, **64 of Illinois’ 102 counties lost residents**, and **56,235 people moved out of the state**. Illinois continues to experience one of the [fastest rates of domestic outmigration](#) in the Midwest, driven by [concerns about taxes](#), cost of living, job opportunities, and housing affordability.

At the same time, the suburban counties that make up Chicagoland—**DuPage, Kane, Will, Lake, and McHenry**—have seen substantial growth and diversification. Immigrant, Latino, Asian, and mixed-race populations are driving much of the change. Many suburbs now require multilingual, community-specific news coverage that legacy metro outlets have historically overlooked.

Q: “How often do you consume local news in a week?”

1,013 Respondents



Geographic scope

Beyond Chicagoland, we examined three distinct regions:

- **Central Illinois** (42 of Illinois’ 102 counties), anchored by Springfield (population 113,000, according to the Census Bureau).
- **Southern Illinois** (a 17-county region including the Shawnee National Forest), long known as “Little Egypt,” and predominantly rural.
- **Northern Illinois**, stretching from the Mississippi River and Iowa to the Wisconsin border and the shores of Lake Michigan.

These geographies are not static. Between 2010 and 2020, **87 of Illinois' 102 counties experienced population declines**, driven by youth outmigration, aging residents, and economic shifts. Many rural counties remain majority White, but they are changing in targeted ways, with agricultural and manufacturing hubs seeing growth among immigrant workers, particularly in food processing and logistics. These shrinking geographies face some of the steepest challenges in sustaining local news.

Research approach

Because we were studying **how people navigate information**, we prioritized residents' routines and decision points—**where they go first, what they ignore, what they verify, and why**.

Our findings are based on qualitative and quantitative research, including **one-on-one interviews, listening sessions, focus groups, and participant screenings**. In total, we engaged **more than 1,200 people in Illinois**. Every conversation centered on a guiding question:

How do you get local news and information—and what sources do you trust?

We also conducted a three-state survey of 2,800 people: 1,000 each in Michigan and Illinois and 800 in Wisconsin. This survey was sampled to follow the demographic percentages for each state and complements our qualitative findings by quantifying patterns we heard repeatedly across interviews and listening sessions.

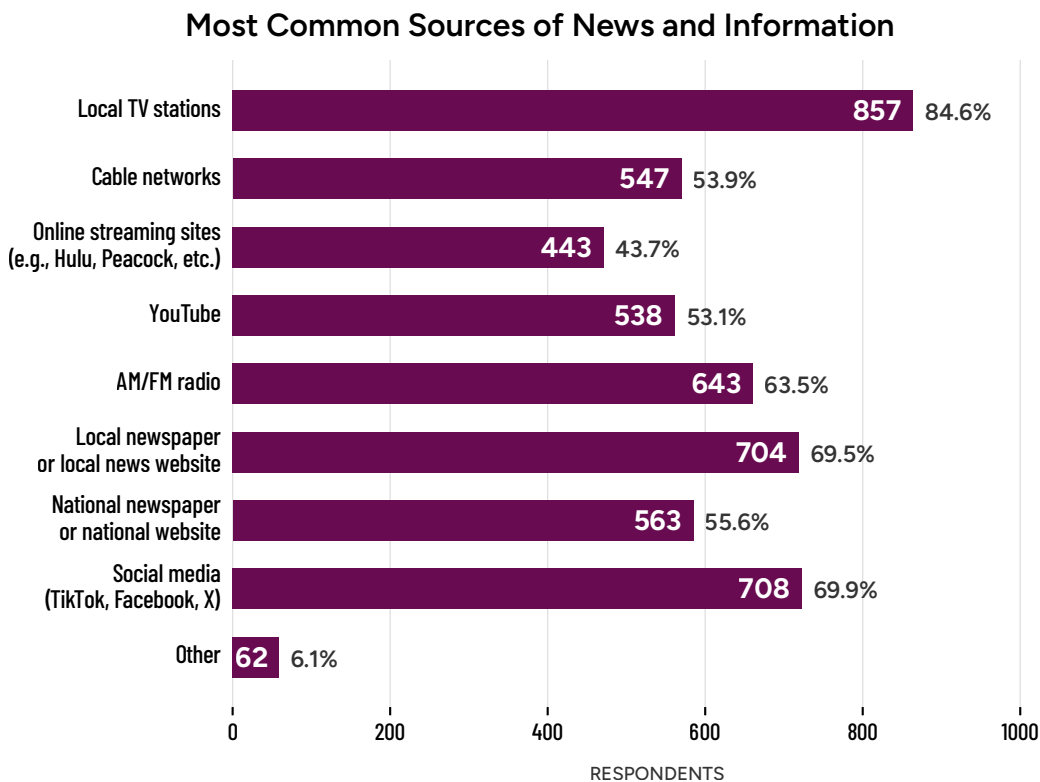


Rise Community Market in Cairo, Illinois, closed in January 2026 after opening in June 2023. The co-op was Cairo's only local grocery store but was unable to sustain operations because of financial challenges. (Photo provided by Urban Voices)

Because we were studying how people navigate information, we prioritized residents' routines and decision points—where they go first, what they ignore, what they verify, and why.

Q: “Within the past seven days, which of the following have been your most common sources of information?”

1,013 Responses



As part of our analysis, residents of Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan were surveyed about their news consumption habits. Researchers with SAGO market research surveyed 2,800 people: 1,000 each in Illinois and Michigan, 800 in Wisconsin. Researchers contacted participants between Oct. 27 and Nov. 15, 2025. The results underscored Pivot’s long-held position that efforts to repair and bolster journalism have to be centered around the audience.

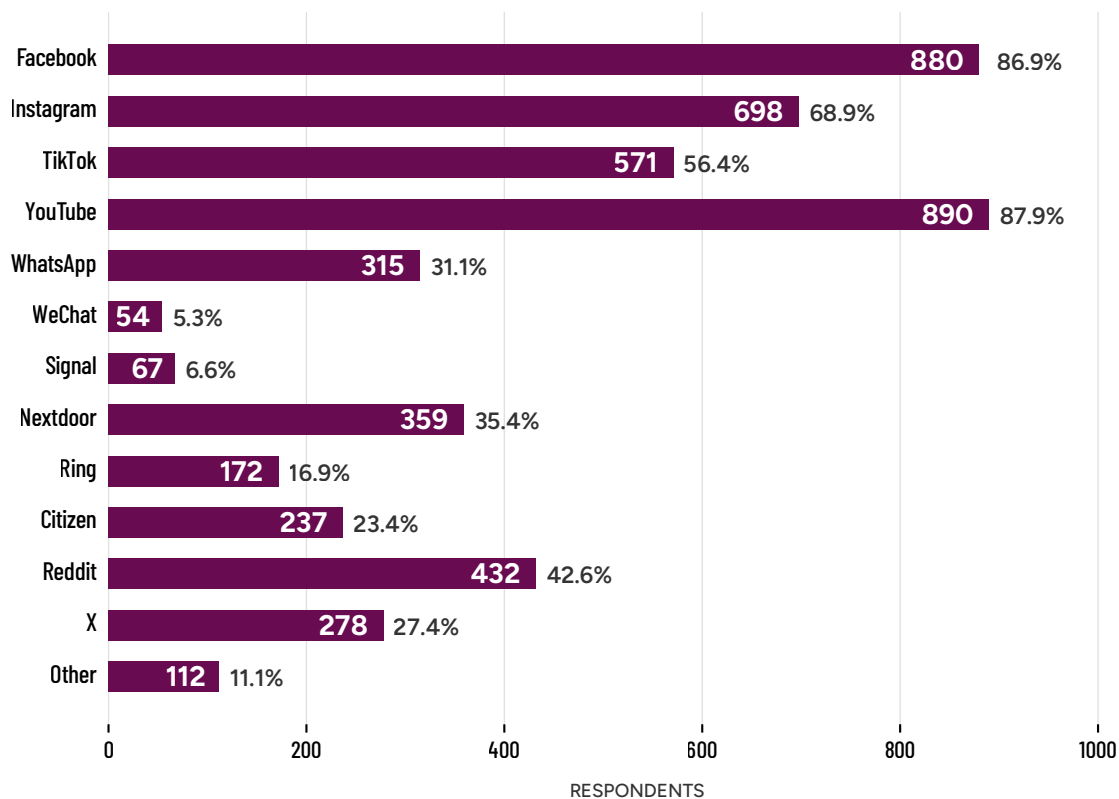
The survey results provide a glimpse at an audience that considers itself fairly well-versed when it comes to news. It would seem that access and convenience drive their news choices.

People still rely on local newspapers or local news websites, but they also turn to YouTube and Facebook for news and information.

Q: “In the past seven days, which social media or messaging platform have you used for local news and information?”

1,013 Responses

Most-Used Social Media and Messaging Platforms for Local News and Information



Region-by-Region Findings: How Illinois Residents Actually Navigate Information

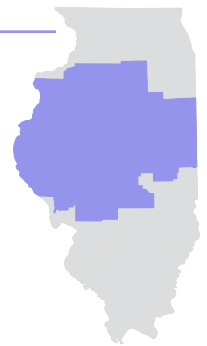
These sections are the heart of our Illinois research. Rather than evaluating the state through the lens of newsroom capacity alone, we centered the people living inside these ecosystems—the residents who wake up each day needing information that is timely, usable, and trustworthy. Across regions, we asked the same core questions: **Where do you go first? What do you trust? What do you ignore? What do you verify—and why?** What emerged was not a simple story of “who has news and who doesn’t,” but a more precise picture of **how information actually moves**: through platforms, community hubs, personal networks, and the uneven geography of visibility.

Central Illinois

About 15% of Illinois residents—roughly 1.9 million people—live in Central Illinois, a region that spans 42 of the state’s 102 counties. Springfield, the state capital, is the largest city there, with a population of about 113,000. Other major cities include Peoria (110,000), Decatur (69,000), Champaign (92,000), Urbana (40,000), Bloomington (79,000), Normal (53,000), and Quincy (39,000).

The median household income for the region is \$80,306, just under the national median of \$84,000, according to the Census.

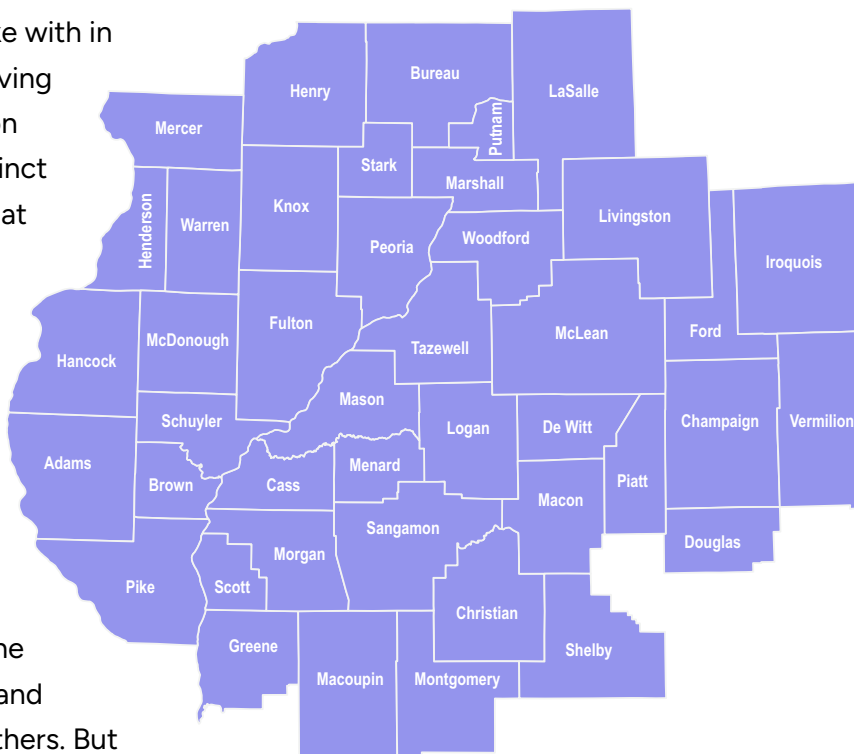
Central Illinois is often described as a place without a single media center. No one city, no one outlet, no one newsroom sets the agenda across the region. That absence is real. But what residents described to us was not an absence of information. It was something more precise: a constant effort to find information, to verify it, and to translate it into something usable for daily life.



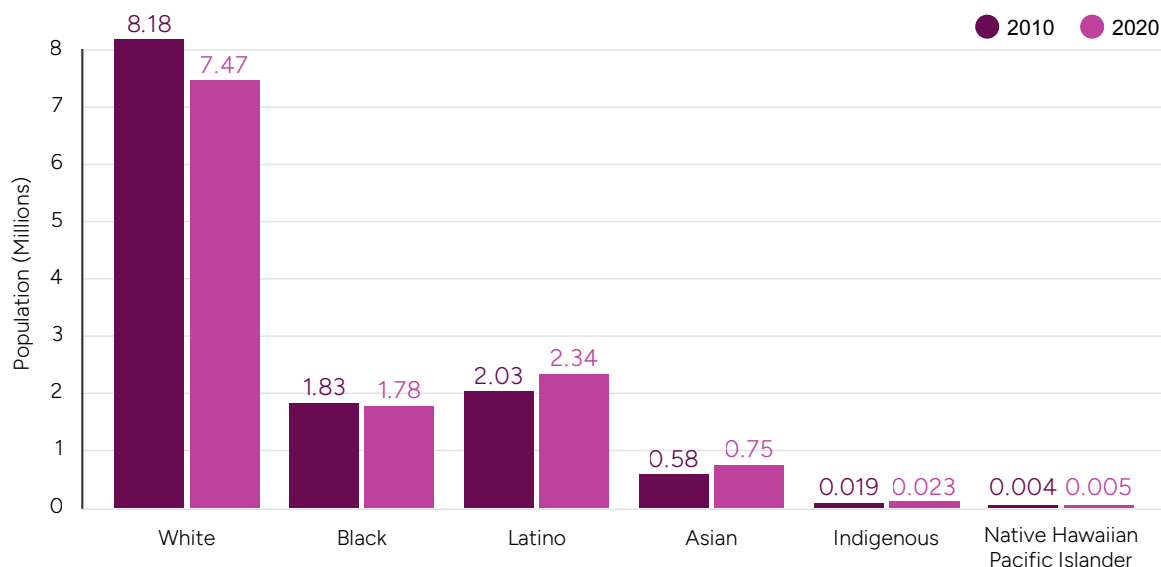
Not 'news deserts,' but deficits you can feel

The people we interviewed and spoke with in listening sessions did not describe living in “news deserts,” as if no information existed. Instead, they described distinct information deficits—not only in what is covered, but in how quickly it reaches them, how evenly it travels, and how relevant it feels once it arrives.

Many residents said their local newspapers remain generally reputable—The News-Gazette (Champaign-Urbana), Herald & Review (Decatur), The Pantagraph (Bloomington-Normal), and Illinois Times (Springfield), among others. But just as often, they described local Facebook groups, subreddits, or TikTok aggregators as more useful in filling hyperlocal needs, especially when information must travel fast.



Illinois Population Distribution: 2010 vs. 2020



U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 and 2020 Decennial Census

The ecosystem is shaped by overlapping forces: corporate ownership, the immediacy of social media, and the blur between journalism, “influencer” and “citizen” reporting. Skepticism toward outside ownership was especially pronounced in rural areas and communities outside major population centers—a theme that also surfaced in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota.

“With the local newspaper being part of a conglomerate, not even being published here in Bloomington anymore, local news from the local newspaper doesn’t really exist either,” said Michael Jensen, 51, of Bloomington.

Jensen was referring to The Pantagraph, which covers Bloomington, Normal, and McLean County and is owned by Davenport, Iowa-based Lee Enterprises. That skepticism wasn’t only about who owns the paper. It was also about what ownership signals: where decision-making sits, what coverage priorities rise, and whether “local” still feels local.

Central Illinois papers are owned by Lee Enterprises, Gannett, Community Media Group, and Paxton Media Group. In Southern Illinois, Paxton’s 2023 purchase of the Carbondale-based Southern Illinoisan—followed by layoffs—helped [fuel state legislation](#) requiring communities be given 90-day notice prior to the sale of local papers to outside ownership in case a local bid can be mounted. No notice was given, however, when [Paxton bought eight papers](#) in fall 2025. The state’s attorney general took no action, in part because the law lacked an enforcement arm.

Social media isn’t supplemental—it’s infrastructure

Across Central Illinois, social media platforms and channels have become deeply embedded in people’s daily routines for news and information, especially when the need is hyperlocal.

The Facebook page [217 Problems](#), named for a local area code, came up repeatedly. With more than 185,000 followers, it is not simply a digital hangout. It functions as a primary information node.

“I look at it every day, sometimes multiple times a day just to see what’s going on,” said Josette Marie Slaughter, 55, a grant writer in the attorney general’s office. “People post there quite often, daily on a range of subjects that’s going on. It could be anything from a crash to a murder to maybe sometimes politics. So that’s why it’s like the go-to for a lot of people. Because if you

Across Central Illinois, social media platforms and channels have become deeply embedded in people’s daily routines for news and information.

want to kind of know what's happening, 217 is kind of a way of looking at it and getting that information."

Cameron Karchor, a tax specialist with the Department of Revenue in Springfield, described the page's evolution:

"It was created to sort of be like, 'Oh, we all can relate to, you know, these problems, these funny things that have been happening.' But now it's also a source of news for the area too."

Jordan McCorkle, 20, a student advisor who identifies as White and Native American and lives in Bloomington, said he doesn't watch news outlets, but he follows [WMBD News](#) on Facebook (137,000 followers), along with the page [25News Week](#) (205,000 followers). Still, he regularly gets information from relatives and friends.

The scale matters here. Even in communities that still have traditional outlets, the reach and frequency of social pages can surpass them—and those pages travel through networks that feel more immediate and personal.

Jeremy Harrington, 20, of Bloomington, said he watches Chicago-based WGN and ABC7. But when it comes to trusted information, he still relies most on relationships.

"For trusted information ... I really rely on what my grandma tells me," he said.

Even in communities that still have traditional outlets, the reach and frequency of social pages can surpass them.

Across the Great Lakes states, residents described how social media has diminished the traditional gatekeeping role of newspapers and broadcast stations. Even those who hesitate to call Facebook pages "journalism" often rely on them anyway—because they are fast, familiar, and already embedded in daily life.

In addition to Facebook, residents described using internet searches, subreddits, Instagram, government agency websites, and local officials' social media pages to gather information. Social platforms often become the first stop when people move to a new area.

Rayburn Johnson, 37, a team member at the Rivian auto plant, didn't grow up in Bloomington. He said Facebook is his go-to when he needs information.

"You just type in Bloomington events, Bloomington news, and usually a lot of things, a lot of pages pop up," he said.

Speed wins, even when people know it's imperfect

Across the region, residents repeatedly told us that speed is often the reason social platforms win. Nearly everyone described turning to Facebook, X, or Reddit before official news outlets when it comes to accidents, closures, or major disruptive events.

"If something is happening on the road, like a major road block ... the news channels are supposed to update us on that, especially online or digital, but most times it takes longer than expected," said Aria Robert, 25, a Black resident of Bloomington. "Sometimes it takes hours for WGLT [Bloomington-Normal's public media outlet] to post or update."

Residents also described citizen-led reporting as more authentic, because it feels closer to lived experience.

"What I like about [NowDecatur](#) and the Facebook pages is that they're quick—people post things as they're happening," said Sam Gabriel, a Black photographer in Decatur. "You get that real 'word on the street' feel. It's local folks sharing what they see, not just reporters."

'We are often talked about and not talked to.'

As we spoke with residents who identify as Black and Brown, it became clear that they were searching for more than information. They were also searching for recognition, dignity, and context, many felt local coverage did not provide it.

Central Illinois' population is majority White (just over 58%). African Americans make up 13.9%; Asian residents 5.8%; Hispanic or Latino residents 18.2%; and those identifying as two or more races 3.2%, according to the Census.

Pauline John, a 26-year-old African American kitchen assistant in Springfield, described what many others echoed: that Black and Brown neighborhoods appear in the news most often through a narrow frame.

"When it comes to a robbery or shooting, you will definitely see something about it come up on the major TV channels," John said. "But you never see a report about a Black woman opening a business, or something promoting the community."

These interviews occurred during fall 2025, when raids and arrests by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents were taking place. Residents said much of the coverage lens overrepresented Latino communities, leaving little balancing coverage of daily life, civic concerns, or achievement.

“They don’t tend to focus on various demographic groups, like Latinos, unless there is a specific problem or concern related to the Latino community,” said Rita Black, a 63-year-old Latina urban planner from Urbana.

Residents described how this kind of imbalance shapes public perception and can create dangerous associations between race, place, and criminality while erasing the nuances and complexities of people’s lives.

“We are often talked about, and not talked to,” John said.

Multiple residents emphasized that while crime reporting may be factually accurate, it often lacks the deeper context that explains why disparities exist and how communities are shaped by history, policy, and economic change.

“When you talk about race, and where people live in town, it’s impossible to understand [our issues] without knowing the history,” said Nashla Vega, 32, dean of students at a high school in Champaign.

Vega, a Champaign native, described seeing demographic shifts tied to inflation and ICE-related fears. This kind of context, she believes, is missing when reporting stays trapped in isolated incidents rather than telling the full civic story.

Residents consistently told us that authenticity begins with proximity: who tells the story, where they live, and whether they show up beyond moments of crisis.

“I’d like to see more reporters who actually live in the community and understand our day-to-day struggles,” Gabriel said.

“I’d like to see them cover local Black-owned businesses, community programs, successful stories—not just negative stuff. And they should show up to events in our neighborhoods, listen to our perspectives, and build trust with us over time. That’s how you represent people properly.”

People want journalism, but they don’t trust the pipeline

Several residents told us they understand they can pitch stories to local newspapers. But many question whether those stories would be developed or prioritized.



“We are often talked about, and not talked to.”

*Pauline John, age 26
Black kitchen assistant
from Springfield*

"I think I would have to pass a lot of stages and red tape before it might get done," Aria Robert said about the likelihood an established outlet would pick up a pitched story. "It's a probability ... I think it's like a 30% probability of them picking it up."

Robert said he wants more profiles of successful young Black entrepreneurs and more uplifting stories of "staying afloat" during difficult economic times—stories that reflect what it takes to live here, not only what goes wrong.

Joe Hood, a 34-year-old filmmaker in Champaign, said he prefers citizen journalism for a related reason: It can feel more human and authentic.

"Local media could better engage younger audiences by adopting more man-on-the-street and reaction-style reporting," Hood suggested. "The era of the celebrity anchor behind a desk is fading. Live, dynamic field segments could create new local personalities who have the potential to go viral, much like YouTubers and streamers do."

For some residents, community information doesn't come from "media" at all. Gabriella Desmond, a Black resident of Springfield, said she's not a frequent churchgoer, but she's found that church bulletin boards often share community engagement events she doesn't hear about elsewhere. She also described church gatherings as spaces where people exchange information in ways that feel more engaging than reading a story online.

Tony Smith, a Black resident of Bloomington-Normal, framed the emotional gap many residents described between reporting and lived reality.

"The news reflects not just what happens to us but what is felt by us," he said.

Many respondents in Central—and in Southern—Illinois reported that they listen to news on the radio. Given the distance between any given point in some areas, it makes sense that radio comes more into play in more rural areas. Residents often pointed to their local NPR affiliate as a trusted news source.

Central Illinois residents made clear that the challenge is not whether local information exists. It's whether it reaches them quickly enough, reflects them accurately enough, and connects to their daily decision-making with enough dignity and clarity to be useful.



"The news reflects not just what happens to us but what is felt by us."

*Tony Smith
Black resident of
Bloomington-Normal*

Central Illinois revealed what happens when information exists but doesn't reliably reach people in the form they need. In Southern Illinois, residents described a similar reality—but with even sharper consequences tied to rurality, shrinking institutions, and the growing role of social media as the “default infrastructure” for everything from breaking weather to basic survival resources.

Southern Illinois

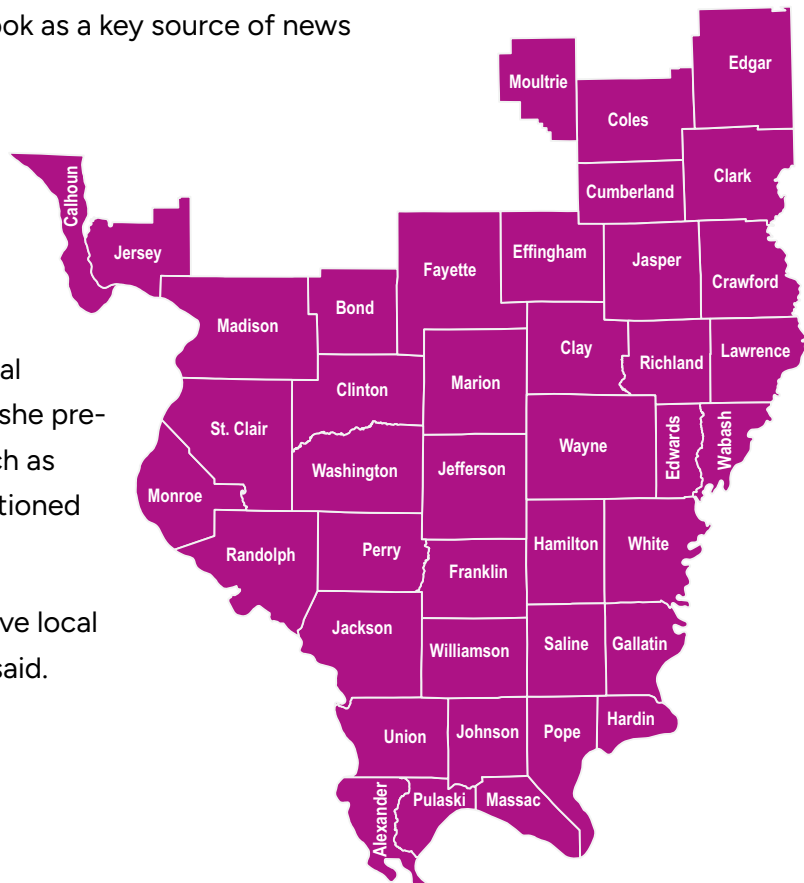
About 10% of Illinois residents—roughly 1.2 million people—live in the 17-county region that makes up Southern Illinois. Predominantly rural and long known as “Little Egypt,” the region includes the Shawnee National Forest.

The Carbondale/Marion area, home to Southern Illinois University, has a population of about 123,000. Metro East, bordering St. Louis, has roughly 700,000 residents. Belleville is the largest city, with about 41,700 people.

Much like Central Illinois, Southern Illinois residents have made Facebook and other platforms part of the daily news routine. Several people cited television stations, but nearly everyone also named Facebook as a key source of news and information.

Adam Benns, a 53-year-old White registered nurse from Carbondale, mentioned the [Southern Illinoisan](#) and [Carbondale Connected](#), a public Facebook group with 27,000 followers. Janet Flesch, a 50-year-old White special education administrator in Marion, said she prefers “quick and easy” media sources such as short snippets of local TV and also mentioned [Swinford Media](#).

“They cover local areas, and they also have local newspapers in Marion and Herrin,” she said.



Swinford Media: A case study in reach

Swinford Media Group owns The Marion Star, The Herrin Independent, and The Carterville Courier. Residents described these publications as locally embedded and highly visible, not only through print distribution but through their digital presence.

These newspapers do not have websites but are active on social media and have a strong digital presence. Using Facebook pages as the digital home for [The Marion Star](#) (18K followers), [The Herrin Independent](#) (4.9K followers), and [The Carterville Courier](#) (1.4K followers), they have popular live streams of local events, including high school sports, veterans ceremonies, graduations, awards events, even funerals, all supported by underwriting sponsors.

WFCN News is also part of Swinford, and they post news on [YouTube](#) (1.53K subscribers) and [Instagram](#) (388 followers). [Aaron Price](#), a young local reporter, started WFCN News in 2017, and they [merged with the Swinford Media Group](#) in June 2023 to [provide more news coverage](#) in Southern Illinois.

“WFCN Swinford. I do feel like they are reliable,” said Katy King, a 35-year-old White woman in Mt. Vernon who works as a merchandiser with Pepsi MidAmerica. “But I do feel like they’re a bit biased politically in some of the things that they post.”

King tied her community’s reliance on social media to the decline of traditional outlets.

“We just kind of had to rely on social media for the most part,” she said, referencing the loss of the daily Mt. Vernon Register-News.

Bridging ‘old’ media and the social-first future

At the center of Swinford’s digital evolution is Aaron Price, a 21-year-old journalist whose path into the newsroom began not with formal training, but with experimentation.



Swinford Media Group spotlights Southern Illinois changemakers like Emma Bartlett, 10, of Marion, a contestant in the 2026 Bob Ross “America’s Most Artistic Kid” contest and guest on the “Squared Up” podcast. (Photo provided by Swinford Media Group)

"I had absolutely no idea what I was doing," Price said of launching WFCN News at age 14. "I just randomly created a Facebook page, unbeknownst to me anything about the future."

That experiment became infrastructure. By 2021, his independently built platform had grown to tens of thousands of followers, large enough that Swinford Media acquired it and brought it into its ecosystem.

"They were interested in basically taking that under their wing and buying that from me," he said. "That was fully theirs in early 2022."

Today, Price operates across both sides of the newsroom, writing for Swinford's weekly papers while leading its real-time digital coverage across Southern Illinois.

His rise coincided with a collapse in local news capacity.

"Southern Illinois became a news desert at the same time I was growing," he said, pointing to layoffs at a regional TV station during COVID. "Timing is the main thing that helped me."

What followed was acceleration. A weekly broadcast became daily. A teenager became a frontline reporter.

"So, me, with little to no experience, is thrown into this daily news broadcast," he said.

Price's reporting, rooted in proximity and urgency, exemplifies the blend of real-time digital coverage with traditional newsroom practices.

"I also work as an emergency video photographer for a couple local fire departments," he said. "So anytime there's a fire, tornado, wreck, anything like that, I'm usually on scene. I always have a scanner going or I'm notified through an app."

"That's what I love doing the most—emergency-related photography and videography. I get a bit of a thrill being in the action, similar to what a first responder might describe."



Aaron Price, 21, is a seasoned community reporter in Southern Illinois. (Photo provided by Swinford Media Group)

That presence has become a trust mechanism. “If something happens in Southern Illinois, I try to have it up quickly. That consistency builds trust.”

His role illustrates a broader shift. In Southern Illinois, the future of local news is neither old nor new. It’s both.

Price sits at that intersection, pairing the reach and speed of a social-first platform with the structure of print newspapers, moving seamlessly between real-time reporting and traditional coverage.

This hybrid approach shapes how residents access critical information and experience daily life.

Regina Clancy, a 44-year-old Asian woman in Johnston who works as a store assistant at Walmart, also emphasized social media’s role during breaking news.

“Last year, whenever there was a tornado, automatically you would go online, on TV, just because you want to know right away what’s happening,” she said. “But what I’ve noticed is some of the stuff on social media, Facebook, is so much more on point and more real time than what I can see or find in the news.”

When Dwight, a 48-year-old Black retired teacher from East St. Louis, talked about struggling with rising electric bills, another participant suggested a Facebook page that might have information on where to get help. Even practical survival needs, residents suggested, increasingly travel through informal digital networks.

These networks now power the hybrid model Price embodies with Swinford Media Group. Their work reflects both the urgency and uncertainty of modern local journalism.

“The biggest challenge is that everything is a question mark right now—from how we put out content to press freedom,” Price said.

Social media has become both infrastructure and battleground. “We’re trying to get more traffic to Instagram and younger audiences ... figuring out what people watch is a constant balance,” Price explained



“But what I’ve noticed is some of the stuff on social media ... is so much more on point and more real time than what I can see or find in the news.”

*Regina Clancy, age 44
Asian store assistant in Johnston*

At the same time, misinformation is rising. “We’re in an information crisis. People don’t know what to believe, he added. “AI makes that harder.”

Still, his core belief remains grounded in the fundamentals of local reporting. “It’s important to have local independent journalism because national outlets don’t know our towns, our people,” he said. “To be a good journalist, you have to go where the news is happening and talk to people. Trust is the biggest thing.”

In a region navigating news scarcity and digital transformation, Price’s partnership with Swinford Media offers a glimpse of what the future of local news can look like. The hybrid, community-rooted model is built by those willing to show up early, often, and without a roadmap.

The hybrid, community-rooted model is built by those willing to show up early, often, and without a roadmap.

The rise of community-powered newsrooms

Alongside hybrid outlets like Swinford, a second layer of the ecosystem has emerged: community-powered, self-reporting platforms operating outside traditional editorial structures.

Nathan Colombo, a 36-year-old lifelong Carbondale resident, describes [WTF? Carbondale](#) as a form of “self-reporting” that has become a central node in the local information ecosystem. The public Facebook page has 51K members and serves as a “digital town square where you have the opportunity to complete the conversation.”

Launched in 2015, Colombo took over the page in 2016 and grew the platform into a widely used community forum. Its reach expanded in 2020, when a Facebook group launched at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic turned it into a real-time hub for local information.

“I usually hear all of the interesting news ... what’s going on in the town, through a Facebook page called WTF? Carbondale,” Regina Clancy said. “People are very active there. If anything pops up, anything significant, they just share the link, and then they get this discussion going. That usually piques my interest. And then I Google it and get on the news about it.”

“Everybody is their own reporter.”

*Nathan Colobombo, age 36
Carbondale resident who runs WTF?
Carbondale Facebook page*

Colombo sees the platform as a bridge between community-generated information and traditional journalism.

“Everybody is their own reporter,” he said, describing a system where residents share information as it unfolds, content that can then be “positioned ... in the hands of legitimate news organizations” for verification and broader distribution.

In a fragmented ecosystem, WTF? Carbondale functions as both signal and filter, surfacing stories that might otherwise go unseen while creating a form of distributed accountability.

‘I am the news’

East St. Louis, about 100 miles northwest of Carbondale, faces similar challenges, with few local information resources for its roughly 18,000 residents. Once home to more than 82,000 people in 1950, the city today is predominantly Black (approximately 93% of the population) and contends with significant economic challenges, including a poverty rate over 30%.

“East St. Louis doesn’t really have news,” said Scenario Spearman, the 54-year-old founder of 89 Block News Inc., an independent media platform that focuses on East St. Louis and surrounding communities. “I am the news.”

Spearman launched 89 Block News in 2019 after losing his son to violence 17 years ago and noticing a persistent gap in local coverage.

“I never got any justice. ... So, I thought about something I could do,” Spearman said. “I ran across a few other independent journalists on social media and thought maybe I need to do something similar. I’m from East St. Louis, and nobody was doing it there.”

Operating primarily through Facebook, Spearman reports from the scene of shootings, emergencies, and other breaking events, often livestreaming in real time to his roughly 150,000 followers across three pages. He has built 89 Block News into one of the region’s most visible independent platforms, providing coverage and accountability where traditional outlets are absent.



“A lot of information comes from the people in the community. It’s reliable and unedited. It’s real-time live streaming.”

*Scenario Spearman, age 54
East St. Louis resident and
founder of 89 Block News Inc.*

"A lot of followers message me and let me know what's going on, on their streets," he said. "East St. Louis has about 40,000 people, but with 150,000 followers, somebody is always on every street. They call me, message me, and I go find out what happened."

The community appreciate that Spearman's work, which focuses on the 89 blocks of East St. Louis, prioritizes speed, access, and authenticity over traditional editorial processes.

"He seems to be live a lot," said Sarah Grady, a 53-year-old Korean American retired nurse from Belleville. "And he's very fast in getting to the scene. And it's factual because he's live."

Spearman embraces a model rooted in community input. "A lot of information comes from the people in the community. It's reliable and unedited. It's real-time live streaming."

While some question his legitimacy—"just a person with a phone," as he described—he leans into authenticity.

"A lot of people say I'm not professional, but I'm not trying to be," Spearman said. "I'm from the hood. I'm going to keep it real."

Spearman's work highlights a core tension in the ecosystem: the tradeoff between grass-roots and professionals, and the growing demand for both.

Championing the voiceless and the powerless

For Sarah Boyles, journalism is not neutral. It is mission-driven and unapologetically advocacy-focused.

A freelance journalist based in Salem, Illinois, a former sundown town in Marion County that is 70 miles east of East St. Louis, Boyles has made a name for herself as a tireless advocate for victims.

"I definitely am a victim advocate first and foremost," she said. "My platform specializes in victims telling their stories that corporate media will not pick up."



Scenario Spearman, left, founder of 89 Block News Inc., with a member of the 618 Stop the Violence movement. (Photo provided by Scenario Spearman)

Her Facebook-based platform, Sarah Boyles Freelance Journalist, has 152K followers and often generates millions of views per story, turning overlooked stories into viral sensations.

"Facebook's different to work for," explained Boyles, who is 46 and used to work in corporate media. "You can have 135,000 followers but get millions of views."

Even when mainstream outlets take her stories without permission, she sees the upside: "It helps my page grow because people look up the original writer. I usually have more details. ... When they take it, honestly, I have a pretty good attitude about it, because I only write about victims and if they're extending the voice to the ears that need to hear it, that's great."

Her reporting centers on victims, accountability, and stories traditional outlets overlook.

Community members describe Boyles as someone who pushes local leaders for answers and shines a light on the powerless.

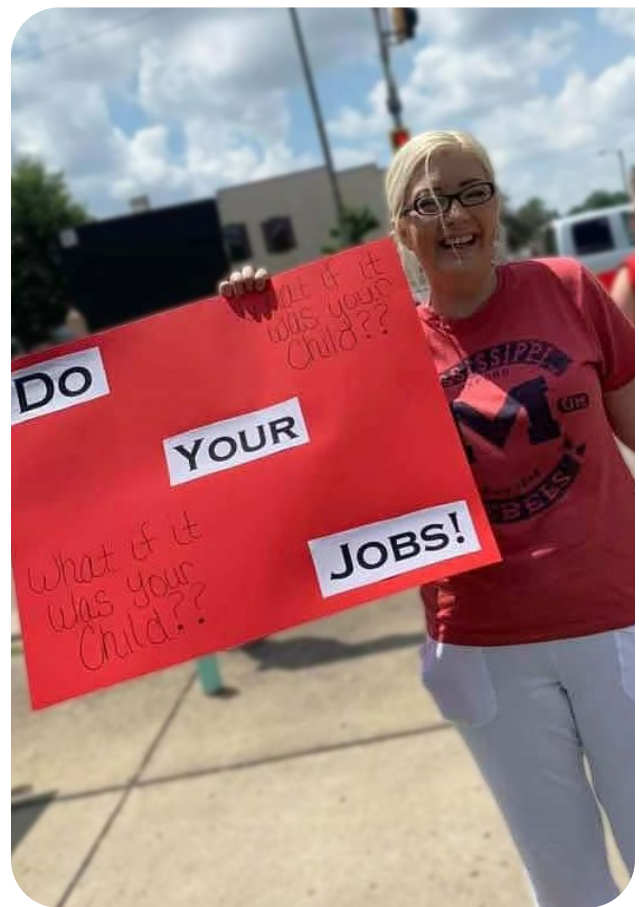
"I would say Sarah Boyles does more work on that type of issue than anybody else does," said Katy King from Mt. Vernon.

Boyles doesn't just report the news. She fights for it.

"I totally do everything for the victims. That's why I began this," said Boyles, who became a paid freelancer in 2019. "I really do care about people getting justice."

But that work carries risk. From gender bias in courtrooms to threats and retaliation from officials, the stakes are high.

"Journalism is a man's world. It. ... They kind of look at women like they're gossiping," Boyles said. "As a female journalist, they just kind of look at us like we might be spreading a rumor. Even though there's all the proof in front of them."



Sarah Boyles, an independent journalist based out of Salem, Illinois, holds a sign at a rally outside the Marion County Courthouse. (Photo by Ricky Lindsey)

Boyles remains committed, and her ambition is clear: “I’d love to get to a million followers so I could help everybody in the world. ... and employ two other reporters to help me.”

In every story, Boyles blends courage, tenacity, and compassion. “Once you get to that position, you can use that power,” she said. “It takes a lot, and it can be hard sometimes. You can feel very defeated with the death threats you get.”

Even in the face of challenges, Boyles keeps amplifying voices the world might otherwise never hear. She represents a growing wave of independent journalists whose credibility comes not from institutions, but through advocacy, persistence, and direct community trust.

Local connection matters

Kevin Boucher, a longtime broadcaster, represents another layer of the ecosystem: slower, reflective storytelling rooted in community connection.

“I focus on what interests me—mostly nature and the outdoors,” Boucher. “But I also want to highlight people in the community doing interesting things. It’s about telling stories that might otherwise go unnoticed.”

The 64-year-old Murphysboro resident brings more than four decades of experience in radio and local media, with roots in journalism dating back to 1980. A graduate of Southern Illinois University’s radio and television program, Boucher built a long career in regional broadcasting before retiring from WSIU Public Broadcasting and transitioning into independent, community-focused media work.

Today, his work is shared primarily on Facebook, with occasional segments on public radio. Rather than chasing breaking news, he values stories that encourage reflection, positivity, and appreciation of everyday life.

“I avoid controversy and keep things respectful,” Boucher said. “I want my page to focus on good things in the world. ... It’s about keeping a connection with the community.”



Kevin Boucher, an independent journalist, captures the sounds of nature. (Photo provided by Kevin Boucher)

Sustaining community voice against the odds

Lloyd Williams operates Urban Voices as a one-person newsroom, publishing a monthly print paper while building a digital platform to serve Black communities in Southern Illinois and Southeast Missouri.

"I do have people that send me content and contribute to the paper, but as far as staff, it's just me," said Williams, who is in his mid-70s and launched the publication in 2022 after retiring as a neurosurgical technician.

"I had a paper before I retired. I had one called the Crossroads, and it served Southeast Missouri, 11 counties in the Bootheel."

After leaving the area, Williams returned and heard a common refrain: "People who were familiar with the Crossroads ... kept asking, 'Where's the newspaper? We missed it.'"

"They kept telling me how much they appreciated it and the information it contained. ... So I decided to start it up again. This time, I got inquiries from the Southern Illinois area. And I decided to include the Southern Illinois area within the service region."

Williams now works with residents in Cairo and Carbondale to expand coverage, grounding the publication in representation and civic empowerment.

"It gives people information from a different perspective," he said. "I try to give information people can use to make wise decisions—information they normally won't see in local media. I want to reflect the communities I serve, their interests, and their concerns."

For Williams, the mission is simple and enduring.

"We're here ... trying to give you information you can use. Others have spoken for us. Now we speak for ourselves."



Lloyd Williams, the founder of Urban Voices, is working with residents in Cairo and Carbondale to expand coverage. (Photo provided by Lloyd Williams)

Student journalism as infrastructure

At Southern Illinois University, student journalists are filling regional gaps once covered by professional newsrooms.

“It’s completely student-run, operated, produced,” said Lylee Gibbs, a 21-year-old senior editor and former editor-in-chief of The Daily Egyptian.

Gibbs has been part of the student-run newsroom since she was a first-year student in 2022, helping lead its evolution from a campus publication into a broader regional news source that serves both the university and the wider Southern Illinois community.

The newsroom holds itself to professional standards. “We’re doing the same kind of process ... covering all of our bases,” Gibbs explained, emphasizing that the work is complete to professional outlets.

Trust comes not just from consistent reporting, but from transparency. “We’re students, we’re learning, we’re going to make mistakes—we’re owning up to them,” Gibbs said, highlighting a newsroom culture that prioritizes accountability.

“When a newspaper ... is like, ‘yeah, we made this mistake ... here is what’s correct,’ that makes them more trustworthy.”

Within the regional media ecosystem, The Daily Egyptian plays a critical role in filling coverage gaps, particularly through in-depth and enterprise reporting that extends beyond campus.

“We’re definitely adding stories that may not be in an average newspaper,” Gibbs said, pointing to coverage in underreported areas like Alexander County.

Founded in 1888, The Daily Egyptian brings more than a century of tradition to its evolving role in a changing media landscape. Looking ahead, Gibbs is optimistic the publication’s trajectory will remain “long and prosperous” as future student journalists build on its momentum.

As Gibbs explained, the mission is “to produce accurate, timely, and important news for Southern Illinois readers,” reflecting a shift toward deeper, more community-centered reporting in a region with limited local news coverage.

In this ecosystem, student journalism is not just training. It’s infrastructure: a pipeline where education, workforce development, and local journalism converge.

A generational divide—and an endless river of information

One-on-one interviews reinforced what surfaced in the listening session: Southern Illinois is not a news desert. Information moves constantly—through social media, community networks, and word of mouth—but it arrives unevenly, mistrusted, or lost entirely.

For some residents, the problem isn't access. It's saturation.

Jaleel Denton, a longtime Carbondale resident, described a relationship to news shaped by fatigue.

"I don't really watch the news. ... I'm kind of disheartened by the whole political thing," said Denton, a 55-year-old DJ and construction worker.

His consumption is mostly passive, driven by scrolling and incidental exposure.

"If there's things of interest, I land on it," he said.

Verification happens individually. "If I see something crazy ... I'll just Google it," he said.

His experience reflects a broader shift. Audiences are no longer consistently engaged. They are intermittently activated.

Generation is a dividing line. Social media use is nearly universal, but platform choice shifts by age.

"Facebook is the first thing I go to," said Deangelo Handley, 22, a Black Chicago native and Carbondale resident. "It is where everything is trending."

Handley cross-checks stories when they seem important. He didn't describe living without news but rather navigating a constant stream of it—observing how information overload reshapes engagement. Students, he added, aren't uninterested. They are simply overwhelmed.

Audiences are no longer consistently engaged. They are intermittently activated.

Saho Araki, 19, who came from Tokyo to study at SIU Carbondale, said her news consumption is almost entirely digital, arriving sporadically and often through peers.

"I get my news mostly from my phone," she said. "Social media is like the only way."

She said she doesn't believe most posts, but she also doesn't know where else to go. When something happens on campus, she does not hear it from a newsroom or administrator. She hears it through relationships.

"If something happens, my friends tell me," she said.

Makenzie Ford, 19, a Black student who grew up in Chicago, described a different baseline.

"TikTok can be so fabricated," she said, adding that her mother always told her never to trust what you see until you see it for yourself.

Residents across ages also described the stories that never appear—the issues that remain unreported, the community concerns that stay invisible. Deficits aren't only about speed. They are about absence and omission.

Gabriel Dickerson, 23, a multiracial self-employed resident of Cairo, said he consumes news across platforms, including newspapers, social media, phone updates, and television. He also relies on a mentor who tracks city council updates.

"I think if you want to know something, you are going to do the work to find out what is going on," he said. "Everybody, um, not everybody, but a majority of people nowadays, they do not really care to know about things like that anymore."

Maxbiya English, 38, a member of the Nakota Tribe, described the deeper challenge. Many stories are underreported or stripped of lived context.

"Some stories are just underreported, or they do not capture the real experiences of the community," she said. "You can see a post, but you do not always understand the impact."

Trust lives in lived experience

In Southern Illinois, local hubs often function as informal civic information systems. In Carbondale, Rahim's Beauty Supply operates not only as a business but as a local place of conversation and verification.



"Some stories are just underreported, or they do not capture the real experiences of the community. You can see a post, but you do not always understand the impact."

*Maxbiya English, age 38
Member of the Nakota Tribe*

"I still watch Fox because I do not want to be one-sided," said owner Abdul Rahim Khalil, 78.

But he does not trust any outlet completely. His credibility standard is grounded in life experience.

"My credibility check comes from my own personal experience," he said. "My frame of reference. My life struggles."

SIU Professor Najjar Abdul-Musawwir, 67, described a deeper cynicism—not only about mistakes, but about agenda.

"There is no trust there," he said. "Everybody is always protecting an agenda."

He said he often finds international news less distorted and more practical.

"International news gives a perspective that sounds realistic and practical," he said. But he added: "You better depend on your own intellect."

Residents did not just describe a lack of information. They described a lack of accessible, usable information.

"Regional news is not accessible for me because I do not have cable," said Ameriah Lockett, a musical theater major.

Graduate student Nathaniel Mensah described what a bridge might look like.

"If there was a YouTube page that talks more about local information here, that would be awesome," he said.

Across interviews, the pattern is consistent. People want relevance, clarity, and accessibility. They want reporting that meets them where they are while retaining journalism's ethics and accountability. And they want systems that can translate "truth" into something reachable.

Information is not powerful unless it is accessible. Truth is not useful unless it is reachable.

A fully decentralized news ecosystem

Southern Illinois is not lacking information. Residents are navigating an emerging news ecosystem—one reassembled by a mix of legacy operators, independent journalists, students, and community members filling gaps as they appear.

People want relevance, clarity, and accessibility. They want reporting that meets them where they are while retaining journalism's ethics and accountability.

In place of a single dominant newsroom, residents rely on a layered system of Facebook pages, independent reporters, print holdovers, student outlets, and community-driven information networks. Each operates at different speeds, with varying levels of trust and accountability.

The ecosystem in Southern Illinois reveals a critical shift in local news.

Information is no longer centralized. It is distributed across people, platforms, and networks.

Trust no longer resides in institutions alone. It is relational, earned in real time through personal experience and community validation.

And journalism is no longer just a profession. It is an activity practiced by students, independent creators, and everyday residents alike.

The result is that access, relevance, and credibility are shaped by connection—not traditional newsroom authority.

Southern Illinois underscored how urgently residents want information that feels human, direct, and reachable—and how much trust now lives outside institutions.

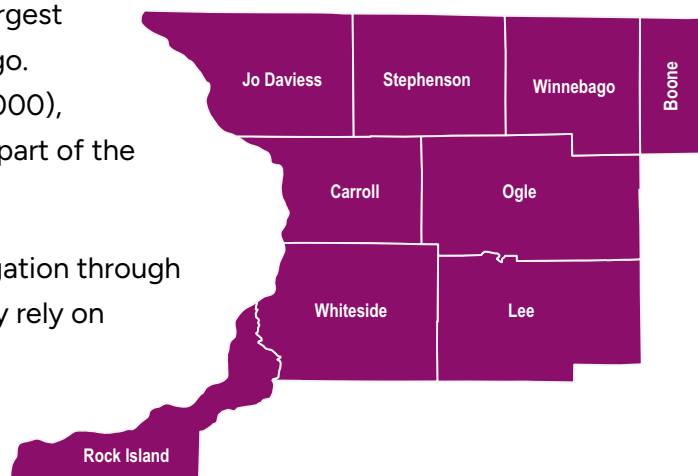
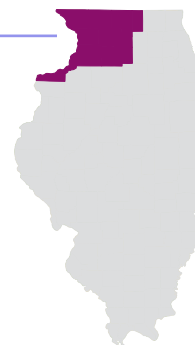
Northern Illinois

In Northern Illinois, that same reality shows up through a different mechanism: the “patchwork” ecosystem, where people rely on relationships, local anchors, and community entrepreneurs to fill coverage gaps that media density alone cannot solve.

This area is harder to define than other regions, in part because it borders the sprawling Chicagoland area. It also shares boundaries with Iowa and the Mississippi River to the west, Wisconsin to the north, and Lake Michigan to the east.

Rockford (population: 148,000) is the region’s largest city and the state’s largest city outside of Chicago. In the western corner of Illinois, Rock Island (37,000), Moline (43,000), and East Moline (21,000) form part of the Quad Cities region.

Northern Illinois residents described active navigation through an incomplete local ecosystem. In Rockford, they rely on



social media, broadcast news, and personal relationships to stay informed and fill gaps when coverage fails.

Raven Rogers, 24, a Black assistant basketball coach and casino employee in Rockford suburb Loves Park, said she checks Rockford Scanner on X primarily when she hears sirens nearby.

"I get on Twitter and I just look at the Rockford Scanner. I usually only look at it when I hear, like, sirens outside," she said.

She also watches ABC affiliate WIFR in the morning and checks Fox 39 for lifestyle and business updates. Rogers keeps an eye on Chicago news to stay connected to family and events, balancing hyperlocal updates with regional context.

She supplements digital news with personal networks, including her boss.

"My boss is from there, so he is my news outlet," she said. "He tells me."

Even with these sources, Rogers described serious gaps in local coverage, particularly around violence.

"The gang violence actually [should be in the news] ... the area where they claim it's so unsafe? I don't hear that a lot of the stuff is happening until I go look for it," she said, describing incidents that surfaced only after she searched for them herself.

James Yancey, 26, an employee at the Black Chamber of Commerce of Rockford, stays informed by attending city hall meetings so he can help local businesses understand taxes, opportunities, and civic improvements.

He said TV news feels biased and political, print less biased but slow, and he described the rise of a local Black media entrepreneur, [Shakia Yancey](#) (no relation), as a growing force.

Shakia Yancey: An investable local model

Shakia Yancey founded [ETF Entertainment](#) (Elevate The Family) and launched [Elevate TV](#), a



Shakia Yancey, left, the founder of ETF Entertainment LLC. (ETF Entertainment LLC ElevateTV.Network)

streaming network anchored in community, culture, and solutions. She produces a podcast, a community resource magazine, and a broader ecosystem of local storytelling not built through traditional journalism pipelines.

“We do entertainment, we talk business, we talk about things going on in the community,” Yancey said. “For instance, somebody might be going through different changes with the school system or justice system. We interview them and get their story out there, and we connect them with the right people.”

Yancey described her independence as central.

“I stream it directly on my own platform,” she said. “There’s no benefit in [streaming elsewhere]. Everything I do is independent.”

Her model is not simply media. It is community infrastructure: a studio, events, programming, and a culturally fluent approach to information as connection.

“I’m built up and in the streets with it,” she said. “People are going to go where they can relate to more.”

Sycamore: The library as civic infrastructure

In Sycamore, a town of about 18,000 in DeKalb County, 40 miles south of Rockford, residents described a different kind of ecosystem. Television news is largely absent, so the library, school newsletters, community organizations, and moderated community social pages function as the primary information system.

“I haven’t watched a live local newscast in 20 years,” said Cryssida Green, a 49-year-old public school librarian in Sycamore.

“The libraries are a free resource,” said Green, who is a Black woman. “For small towns ... they typically offer story time, a mom’s meeting place for mommy groups, a ton of resources free and otherwise.”

Quad Cities: Information exists, but access and equity don’t

The Quad Cities demonstrate how density does not guarantee civic usefulness. Multiple TV stations and daily newspapers exist, but community

In the absence of community-centered local journalism and actionable coverage of civic processes, information flows through relationships.

members described persistent deficits in timely, actionable information, especially around governance and economic realities.

“Just current events, letting the public know and be informed about certain things that affect the community,” said Nishia Bragg, 52, a Black restaurant owner in East Moline. “Helping people, just informing people more about the things that they’re struggling with every day. ... They could do better.”

In the absence of community-centered local journalism and actionable coverage of civic processes, information flows through relationships. Bragg relies on social media, networking, and word of mouth with community members to stay informed about local happenings.

Bragg highlighted community initiatives that support minority-owned businesses in the Quad Cities, including the Quad Cities Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Mercado on Fifth, the Black Business Expo, and the Quad Cities African American Resource Directory.

“The Quad Cities African American Resource Directory is geared toward businesses that are really underserved,” Bragg explained. “They have a whole booklet, a community website, and they post a lot on Facebook to make people aware of all the stuff we offer.”

These efforts provide visibility and resources for underserved businesses across sectors, from restaurants and jewelry stores to flower shops, and contribute to the region’s cultural and economic vitality.

“There’s a lot of Black businesses,” Bragg added. “We bring a lot of the entertainment for things to do around here.”

Much of this activity is connected to community anchors such as the Martin Luther King Center in Rock Island, which hosts events and programming on both the Illinois and Iowa sides of the Quad Cities, and Third Missionary Baptist Church at the Lincoln Center in Davenport, Iowa, just two miles across the state border.

Even with these grassroots efforts, Bragg acknowledged that significant gaps remain in local media coverage.



“Without smaller outlets pulling together and keeping people informed, a lot of the bigger companies don’t highlight that.”

*Nishia Bragg, age 52
Black restaurant
owner in East Moline*

“Without smaller outlets pulling together and keeping people informed, a lot of the bigger companies don’t highlight that,” Bragg said. “And that’s not just for the African American. That’s for any minority groups, Hispanic ones as well.”

Bragg’s experience highlights how limitations in the local media ecosystem intersect with broader economic pressures. Like many small business owners, Bragg relies almost entirely on free social media platforms to promote her restaurant and communicate with customers. Paid advertising, sponsored content, and “pay-to-play” visibility models are out of reach.

“You don’t have thousands of dollars to put into all these different people who contact you saying they’ll help grow your business,” said Bragg, who opened her family-run restaurant, Bragg BBQ, with her husband in April 2024 after operating as a food truck for a few years. “When you’re starting out, it’s just not feasible.”

As a result, business owners, local leaders, and nonprofit organizers have become the de facto news system in the Quad Cities.

Bragg stays informed through Facebook and Instagram by following East Moline Main Street and Lonnie Westerfield.

“He is a big staple in the community on the Iowa side and the Illinois side,” Bragg said of Westerfield. “He does a lot of things with children. He has a longstanding, prominent business [Celebrity Beauty Supply in Davenport], so I follow him a lot for a lot of informational stuff. He makes a lot of the meetings and things like that.”

Bragg also gets information from Linda Barnes, a Third Ward Alderperson in Rock Island, and her work with the Martin Luther King Center, as well as Argrow’s House, a nonprofit in Davenport that provides free services for survivors of domestic violence and abuse.

The Quad Cities is a region where people regularly live, work, and organize across the Iowa-Illinois border, relying on trusted individuals active in local events, civic engagement, and social support initiatives. These informal networks are trusted because they are present, accountable, and rooted in the community.

“It’s just networking, connecting with people that are on the ground doing things and trying to make a difference,” Bragg said. “So that’s why I follow social media, and I get informed like that a lot.”

At the same time, Bragg expressed deep skepticism toward paywalls and pay-to-play media models. She described local business promotions and awards that require payment to participate, noting that these systems privilege access over accuracy or community value.

“It doesn’t necessarily mean you’re the best,” Bragg said. “It just means you paid into it. It’s access. It’s a way to manipulate figures.”

Her perspective highlights a core tension in the local media ecosystem. Journalism needs revenue, but communities need access. When monetization strategies undermine access, people disengage from traditional outlets and seek information elsewhere.

Bragg believes news and information should be free and accessible to everyone. Without trusted, open-access journalism, she said, word of mouth and personal relationships remain the most effective ways for small businesses to thrive and for local information to circulate and strengthen communities.

Bragg’s experience reflects a broader pattern across the Quad Cities. Latino communities are also underrepresented and underserved by local media and face similar barriers to access, visibility, and trustworthy information.

A local media ecosystem that does not speak the community’s language cannot truly serve it. Language accessibility cannot be an add-on. It must be the starting point. The Quad Cities do not lack information. They lack systems that ensure information is equitable, multilingual, usable, and connected to the realities of Black, Latino, and immigrant communities.

Journalism needs revenue, but communities need access. When monetization strategies undermine access, people disengage from traditional outlets and seek information elsewhere.

Trust already exists in people, relationships, radio, and grassroots networks. The key is to strengthen and resource these channels with language-accessible infrastructure, civic and economic reporting, multilingual community hubs, and cultural messengers.

Northern Illinois highlighted two truths at once. Relationships have become a core verification system, and community-rooted entrepreneurs can become credible civic anchors.

In Chicago, those same dynamics are amplified at scale—where abundance can still produce disconnection, and where the stakes of misinformation, fear, and fragmented trust are even higher.

Chicago

Chicago dominates Illinois unlike any of the other major cities we reviewed for our Midwest study. With 2.7 million residents in Chicago—about 20% of the state’s population—the city’s footprint outpaces entire regions of Southern, Central, and Northern Illinois combined. When the collar counties are factored in, its presence grows exponentially.



Chicago is made up of neighborhoods, enclaves, ethnicities, and geographic sides. And the information ecosystem reflects that.

ICE as a turning point

The Pivot Fund’s research coincided with a volatile period for the city and the region.

As our work was underway, the federal government dispatched U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to Chicago, staging raids across schools, places of worship, retail corridors, downtown attractions, and other public sites. In one national headline incident, a Black Hawk helicopter was deployed to detain individuals—including small children—in the predominantly Black South Shore community during early morning hours.



This climate shaped people’s willingness to gather, to be seen, and to share personal details. Some nonprofit organizations and residents hesitated to provide information or attend in-person interviews, citing fear of law enforcement and potential consequences.

Conversations about ICE dominated multiple listening sessions and one-on-one interviews, particularly in Little Village (La Villita), a majority Latino community. During an in-person session conducted in Spanish with an interpreter, nearly a dozen attendees gathered at Paleteria el Sabor de Mexico, a popular local ice cream shop, and described friends, loved ones, and acquaintances being “disappeared.”

In response, residents relied heavily on social media (especially WhatsApp and Facebook), as well as text chains and word-of-mouth to track enforcement activity in real time. They often turned to these networks before traditional news sources, underscoring how mainstream media failed to provide timely or relevant information.

“People don’t even know that help exists,” said Ana, 38, a small business owner, pointing to gaps in awareness of critical resources and local developments.

Others expressed disappointment that media coverage felt delayed, limited, or overly cautious during a moment of urgent need.

“The news was late,” said Carla, 27-year-old college student from Brighton Park, about local news coverage on emergencies, immigration raids, and public health developments that often occurred after events had already impacted the community.

Participants consistently emphasized that language and cultural competency shape trust, acknowledging that Spanish-language reporting increased both comprehension and confidence.



Latino community members participated in a listening session at Paletería el Sabor de México in Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood on Oct. 14, 2025, to discuss local news access, trust, and information needs. (Photo by Eric Ortiz)

“If it’s in Spanish, I understand it better, and I know it’s for me,” said José, 33, a mechanic from Pilsen, a neighborhood on the Lower West Side of Chicago that has long been a hub of Mexican and Latino culture.

At the same time, many community members expressed reluctance to speak with journalists at all. “People are afraid,” José noted. “They don’t want to be identified.”

In this environment, misinformation spread quickly, often outpacing verified reporting.

"I always have to check it myself because people just share anything," explained Carla.

Fear-based reporting from some local media undermined community trust. Participants described coverage of arrests or deportations as sensationalized, causing distress within families.

Fear-based reporting from some local media undermined community trust.

"They make it sound worse than it is, and it scares people," said Elena, 42, a mother and housekeeper.

Trust, participants said, depends not just on accuracy, but on approach. They indicated that culturally aware reporting fosters trust and engagement and said tone, empathy, and cultural sensitivity are essential components of credibility.

"The way they tell it matters," Miguel, 23, a construction worker, observed. "Respectful news makes me pay attention."

Several described negative experiences with journalists, including feeling coached or misrepresented. Some said they heard journalists tell people, "Don't worry, I'll tell you what to say," when an interviewee was approached and didn't know how to respond to the topic of the interview.

This fostered skepticism with participants who said they believe journalists frame stories from their own point of view, rather than the communities they cover.

"The news should say things as they are," said Miguel.

Others emphasized the importance of follow-up and sustained engagement.

"It's important that they come back and see what happened," Ana said.

Participants expressed a clear vision for what effective journalism should provide: actionable information, cultural understanding, and a focus on resilience.

"Tell us what we can do, not just what's wrong," José said.

Despite the fear and uncertainty, community members emphasized strength and solidarity. "*Somos una comunidad fuerte*," one participant said, reinforcing the importance of sharing their perspectives in local media.

For many, the role of journalism is not only to document harm, but to reflect that strength and provide the guidance to navigate moments of crisis and strengthen communities.

Abundance without coherence

Compared to the rest of Illinois, Chicago has lots of media sources. Cook County alone has 139 outlets, according to Medill's 2025 State of Local News report, though estimates suggest more.

Residents did not describe Chicago as a place with too little news. They described it as a place with too much of everything, and no clear map.

"I can find local news," said Amaya, 23, a Black toxicologist from the South Side. "I would say some of my sources are mainly TikTok ... Facebook. ... You go to different events that can lead you to different sources and, you know, get connected with different people."

Shanice Johnson, who lives in the West Loop, said her default is "always social media, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Google especially."

Residents described using Google and tools like Perplexity AI to cross-check information. Nextdoor, scanners, and "no-face" accounts pulling scanner data were referenced repeatedly—even as people acknowledged the risk of misinformation and manipulation.

How residents navigate the ecosystem

South Side: Show us the relevance

Chicago's South Side has long been home to many of the city's Black communities. To better understand how residents view and access news, we held a listening session with nine young Black women, ages 18–30, at the Girls Like Me Project headquarters in Washington Park.

Participants said they largely avoid traditional news, describing it as negative, stressful, and disconnected from their lives. Instead, they rely on social media, algorithms, and peer networks to stay informed, while questioning how stories are framed and whose perspectives are represented.

"News is depressing ... it just adds onto what I've already got going on," said Emani Henderson, 22.

Participants called for more representative, engaging, and culturally relevant journalism that reflects the full reality of their communities. They also emphasized that news must

entertain as well as inform, with one participant urging reporters to “get hype” and “come to spaces we don’t see them in,” rather than relying on traditional delivery styles.



Young Black women at the Girls Like Me Project headquarters in the Washington Park neighborhood of Chicago for a community listening session on July 31, 2025. (Photo by Ismael Perez)

North Side: Choice, convenience, and control

North Side residents navigate a wide mix of traditional and digital sources, with YouTube emerging as a central platform for accessing and customizing news. Participants value convenience, on-demand access, and the ability to seek out specific information when they need it.

“You can’t really sit there and watch the entire news,” said Jennifer, 48, a project manager working in government. “So, what’s nice with YouTube, I can just search for what I’m looking for.”

This approach reflects a preference for efficiency, control, and multiple perspectives, while also reinforcing fragmented consumption patterns.

West Side: Time for some actionable information

West Side residents described a fragmented information environment where traditional news often fails to meet daily, hyperlocal needs. Many rely on social media, apps, and word-of-mouth to track real-time information—from safety concerns to services and street-level disruptions.

“I’m really looking for what’s going on in my neighborhood. ... What do I need to know when I walk out of my door?” said Danielle Williams, 48, a resident of West Town.

Participants cited gaps in coverage of basic needs like street closures, sanitation, safety, and local opportunities, alongside frustration with persistent negative narratives. For many, “local” means actionable, block-level information that helps them navigate daily life—not broad, citywide coverage.

The demand for ‘unfiltered’

Multiple residents were skeptical of official reporting, not only because of accuracy concerns, but because they believe traditional journalism is shaped by framing, incentives, and delay.

“The news tells a lot of lies and they want to cause fear. It’s better to see a live video than TV,” said Olga Piña, who attended the Little Village listening session.

During a virtual conversation with West Side and West Suburban residents, Summer Gitty, 18, argued that local coverage choices often track clicks, not usefulness:

“News channels are a business and do whatever to get news even if that means to promote negativity. That’s what draws people. A story that someone rescued five cats is not as appealing as one about someone who killed five cats. It’s about whatever draws views. It’s not about the perception of cities.”

Multiple residents were skeptical of official reporting, not only because of accuracy concerns, but because they believe traditional journalism is shaped by framing, incentives, and delay.

Hyperlocal isn’t a niche—it’s the whole point

Residents emphasized that Chicago must be covered neighborhood by neighborhood and different areas have different definitions of “what matters.”

West Loop residents emphasized taxes, schools, and corruption. Pilsen and Little Village residents emphasized real-time information, particularly regarding ICE activity.

[Block Club Chicago](#) surfaced frequently as an outlet many felt was getting it right.

“Block Club covers stories from all over Chicago, not limited to the North Side, and covers marginalized communities,” said Emily Diaz, 26, from Jefferson Park.

Fayethe Vongsouvanh, a Chicago resident in her 30s, described why it matters:

“Block Club Chicago helps me keep up with stories affecting my local neighborhood. It’s very local and firsthand reporting.”

But even in Chicago, where media density is high, participants described an audience/awareness gap. Respected outlets can be essential to civic life, yet remain unfamiliar, especially when people encounter the work through social distribution rather than brand identity.

Andrea Melendez, 24, a business owner from Pilsen, said she had never heard of Block Club Chicago until they interviewed her about her grand opening announcement.

“It was nice,” she said. “It was nice to be able to be recognized for my work and to be able to tell our story to the world.”

Her husband, Alfredo Flores, 24, said he hadn’t heard of Block Club Chicago either—until that moment.

Legacy outlets need to update the feed

Even longtime, trusted Chicago outlets face challenges reaching audiences today.

Rather than engaging with historically Black-owned outlets like [The Chicago Defender](#) and [WVON](#) (1690 AM) or the Latino-led [La Raza](#), interviewees and listening session participants more often cited alternative sources with strong social media presences.

“I don’t see the Defender on my thread,” said Ernest Crim III, a 37-year-old educational consultant and online influencer who lives in Joliet after being a lifelong Chicagoan from the West Pullman neighborhood. “I think I follow them, but it’s like these other legacy papers. With The Joliet Herald, they haven’t caught up with how to get news out there today.”



Block Club Chicago reporter Rachel Hinton speaks with James, an unhoused person, as he sits on a couch under River East as the annual Point-in-Time (PIT) count was conducted to assess the city’s unhoused population in Chicago on Jan. 22, 2026. (Photo by Colin Boyle for Block Club Chicago)

Residents increasingly are turning to social media and alternative voices for timely, community-focused news.

“There’s a guy I follow online, Aaron Parnas—he’s cool, but I go to him for the news and cross-reference it,” added Crim. “There’s another guy: Kevin (@hereswhykevin) on Instagram, and he’s a Black Latino guy who covers a lot of breaking news. They’ve adapted to how we get news. The Defender should partner with some content creators, if that’s in the budget, to keep us up to date.”

Proactive strategies to compete

With news consumption largely guided by algorithms, local outlets must get creative. Across interviews, community members shared that local news outlets lose visibility when they aren’t as active as influencers on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, where audiences are already consuming and sharing information.

DeAnna McCleary-Sherman, a 47-year-old nonprofit executive and the co-founder/executive director of [True Star Media](#), sees the challenge firsthand from her work teaching youth media production.

Independent and hyperlocal outlets often need targeted support to amplify their reach and connect with audiences.

“They have great stories and great information, but it’s like they don’t have the staff ... and I’m guessing all this based on my own experience with True Star,” she said, noting the hurdles for independent outlets. “I hired a podcast growth strategist, and he was teaching us what we needed to do—how to clip content, set up keywords, tag it. It’s a real science. I don’t want to say they could do their content better because when I deliberately go there, I’m impressed by the journalism.”

In Chicago’s abundant media environment, independent and hyperlocal outlets often need targeted support to amplify their reach and connect with audiences.

A civic product that reaches people

[Injustice Watch](#), a Chicago-based investigative newsroom, has achieved remarkable success and high public awareness through a single, highly organized civic product: the Judicial Election Guide, launched with the simple, action-oriented campaign, #checkyourjudges.

The organization identified a critical gap in local coverage. “It’s the biggest part of your ballot, yet for so long, this was something that was ignored by media and continues to be ignored in other states,” noted director of operations Amanda Miley. “I think it’s a travesty.”

Judicial elections determine some of the most consequential decisions in people’s lives—from divorce cases to prison sentencing—but voters are often left to choose unfamiliar names.

Injustice Watch filled this void with a deep-dive, nonpartisan research product. They tackle a significant challenge—Cook County courts are exempt from FOIA requests, making data collection “a significant amount of work.”

The guide is explicitly not an advocacy tool.

“We’re not making recommendations for judges at all ...,” said Miley. “The act of checking your judges is participating in civic engagement.”

The approach works. The guide reached 10,000 people online in 2016, and today, it reaches hundreds of thousands online, with 100,000–150,000 print copies distributed per election.

Injustice Watch’s success is a direct result of a calculated community-focused strategy that prioritizes public service and accessibility over brand self-promotion:

- Prioritizing product over brand: The organization deliberately focuses on the value of the information. Their focus on a physical product and a service ensures their work is valued, which in turn organically expands their name.
- Community-driven distribution: They meet the public where they are, far outside of political and journalistic hubs. Distribution is a “core responsibility” and a team-wide effort, with print copies specifically addressing an “accessibility piece” for older adults and other communities who prefer a tangible product. They actively seek recommendations for drop-off points, which include:
 - Chicago Public Libraries, laundromats, and food pantries.
 - Senior centers and public housing.
 - Over 150 community organizations and partners, like the Harvey World Herald. This grassroots network allows them to reach all 77 Chicago community areas and half of the Cook County suburbs, even the hardest-to-reach South-land communities.
- Converting users to readers: The guide is positioned as a powerful entry point to their broader investigative work. By initially engaging people with the massive,

life-altering impact of judges—the power to decide if you “lose your home or get to stay in your home”—they convert a one-time election guide user into an engaged citizen, who is then more likely to subscribe to their newsletter and become a long-term reader of Injustice Watch. This community-focused, value-driven approach has made the guide “one of the only journalism products out there that people anticipate.”

Community-led information systems

In Pilsen, Arturo Valle, a 48-year-old firefighter, founded and moderates the [Pilsen Neighborhood Facebook Group](#), now 47,500 members strong. He described creating it because other local groups felt divided by language.

Some, in his opinion, weren’t inclusive enough. Some only posted in Spanish, while others only in English, and he felt that alienated neighbors who wanted to stay up to date on Pilsen information.

“I speak Spanish, too,” he said. “But to me, it was like a slap in the face because what about the other non-Hispanics?”

He has been offered money for the group and refused.

“I don’t expect anything in return,” Valle said. “I just want people ... the businesses to thrive.”

Valle described treating verification seriously.

“I tell them, ‘Send me screenshots,’ and I tell people, ‘Send me proof.’”

Cultural competency and language

Some residents said they gravitate toward outlets that reflect their language and identity. Eddie Lei, 30, described seeking information via WeChat and ChicagoChinaRen.com, especially during moments like ICE raids.

Joanne Liu, 53, described following SinaTV on YouTube because of its neutrality and economic focus.

Chicago’s information ecosystem is enormous—but uneven. It produces abundance without equal visibility, and credibility without consistent trust. People are informed, but often through fragments,—and many residents are forced into the role of editor, verifier, and translator for their own communities.

Chicago demonstrates how fragmentation looks when scaled—when the information supply is enormous but the pathway to trusted, usable news is still unbalanced.

For many suburban residents living just outside the city’s orbit, the challenge is different but related. Chicago dominates the professional coverage, leaving communities to build their own hyperlocal systems through apps, newsletters, and institutions like libraries.

Indigenous Audiences

Illinois’ Indigenous population made up [about 1.4% of the state](#) in 2023, according to World Population Review. Unlike other states studied, Illinois has only one federally recognized tribe: the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation, recognized in April 2024. The American Indian Association of Illinois reports that members of [more than 150 tribes](#) live across the state, including the Ojibwe, Potawatomie, Lakota, Dakota, Navajo, Zuni, Menominee, Oneida, Choctaw, Cherokee, and many others.

We held a separate listening session for Indigenous residents because we recognize this audience has a dual information reality unlike other audiences. They have local civic needs alongside tribal and Indigenous-centered needs, and those needs are rarely met by the same sources.

Participants described a patchwork of information—mainstream outlets, tribal newsletters, Facebook groups, and word of mouth—with no consistent hub. That fragmentation creates vulnerability. Misinformation can spread, events are missed, and community visibility weakens.

“Most of the places I get my news sources are actually online now,” said Sheila Cloud, an Ojibwe woman and retired medical/insurance collector who lives in West Ridge.

Participants cited tribal newsletters such as [Hocak Worak](#), [Kalihwisaks](#), and [DeBahJiMon](#), noting their value and their limits.

“There used to be a Native station on cable, but they don’t have it anymore,” said Clovia Molitaire, 75, a Lakota woman originally from Pine Ridge, South Dakota, now living in Harwood Heights.

Molitaire described how Indigenous community events used to gain visibility because someone knew how to navigate distribution systems:

“Years ago, my husband and I and a group of us were involved in putting on a Native American event for like 15 years ... And every year when we put on our event ... it was put into all the local newspapers. ... But it was because she knew how to navigate that whole system and get that information out.”

Then Molitaire named the core problem:

“But I think a lot of our community organizations or people just don’t know how to navigate that system to get that news out to them.”

Eric Cloud, 18, who was born and raised in West Rogers Park, said he grew up with traditional news media, but he has switched to social media.

He also mentioned the importance of [Native Chicago News](#), a public Facebook group with 594 members led by Dr. Dorene Wiese that keeps the Indigenous community informed on news, events, and opportunities in Chicago.

“Growing up, my trusted news source was cable TV, just watching the news when it came on,” said Cloud. “But now it’s leaning more toward social media, like Twitter, TikTok. But if I want trusted news, I would Google it.”

Indigenous participants described the urgent need for a centralized Indigenous media hub—not simply to inform, but to unify, protect, and affirm.

Indigenous participants described the urgent need for a centralized Indigenous media hub—not simply to inform, but to unify, protect, and affirm.

For Indigenous residents, fragmentation is not merely inconvenient. It can be isolating, making community visibility harder to sustain and civic navigation more difficult.

Voices in the LGBTQ+ Community

Illinois’ LGBTQ+ media ecosystem grapples with fragmentation and scarce resources, as legacy outlets and emerging publications work to sustain trust, reach, and relevance.

Established outlets like [Windy City Times](#) sit alongside newer, hyperlocal and community-run publications such as [The Lavender Newsletter](#), while advocacy organizations like the [Chicago Black Gay Men’s Caucus](#) serve as narrative and information hubs within specific communities.

Together, they illustrate the resilience and challenges of LGBTQ+ information networks across Illinois.

Legacy infrastructure in transition: Windy City Times

Founded in 1985, Windy City Times has long served as a central news source for Chicago's LGBTQ+ community. Publisher Matt Simonette described today's local media environment in stark economic terms.

"Chief among the challenges are continually declining revenue streams, causing editorial staffs to have to do more work with fewer resources," he said. "That leads publications into a desperate cycle where quality and quantity of content goes down, leading to reduced readership and, ultimately, further diminished revenues. Additionally, many readers now prefer accessing news from social and/or national media and don't make the time for local news."

Like many legacy outlets, Windy City Times shifted to fully digital in 2020, ending its biweekly print edition while continuing news coverage online. The publication maintains a substantial digital archive and steady monthly readership, yet sustainability still hinges on resources.

"Simply put, it all starts with financial resources," Simonette said. "We need to be able to pay journalists to cover local meetings, conduct local investigations, and crunch numbers for data journalism that promises to paint ever-clearer pictures of our communities."

"Best practices dictate ongoing engagement with our readership, via means such as community meetings or social media, but our staff members need to be better paid for that extra time and energy."

"Lastly, publications must be able to fund the employment of a person exclusively dedicated to raising revenue."

He also underscored the structural shift underway in local news funding.



"It is now obvious that local news will be funded by a hybrid model in the years ahead—foundations, advertising, donations, subscriptions,"

Matt Simonette
Publisher Windy City Times

“It is now obvious that local news will be funded by a hybrid model in the years ahead—foundations, advertising, donations, subscriptions,” he explained. “That means community publications will have to think of themselves less as competitors than as members of the same team.

“Otherwise, they will never be able to streamline the incredibly time-consuming process of finding and accessing revenue. Sharing revenue-raising resources (and content as well) through collectives will have great potential to lift up all our figurative boats.”

His comments echo themes heard statewide: declining ad revenue, digital transition pressures, and the need for collective infrastructure rather than isolated survival strategies.

Nuance across race and geography

Stakeholders cautioned that LGBTQ+ media in Illinois cannot be treated as monolithic. Chicago remains deeply segregated along racial and neighborhood lines, and that separation is reflected in media consumption patterns, nightlife, community organizing, and storytelling.

While Windy City Times is longstanding and widely respected, participants noted that its audience historically has skewed White and North Side-based. In response to critiques about representation, the publication has relaunched community-specific newsletters intended to better serve Black and Latino LGBTQ+ readers.

Community leaders emphasized that understanding LGBTQ+ information flows requires intentional outreach beyond flagship outlets. Organizations such as the Chicago Black Gay Men’s Caucus operate as trusted messengers within Black queer networks, particularly around health equity, HIV prevention, and policy advocacy.

For many constituents, narrative power moves through advocacy groups, social networks, and culturally specific spaces as much as through traditional media platforms.

For many constituents, narrative power moves through advocacy groups, social networks, and culturally specific spaces as much as through traditional media platforms.

This segmentation raises important considerations for reporting and funding alike. When examining media ecosystems serving LGBTQ+ Illinoisans, race, geography, and class significantly shape where communities seek and trust information.

Downstate and hyperlocal voices

Outside Chicago, LGBTQ+ media presence grows thinner and more precarious.

In Urbana-Champaign, The Lavender Newsletter operates as a community-driven publication “by and about” local queer residents. The newsletter explicitly centers anti-racism and liberation perspectives and emphasizes transparency about its editorial stance, positioning itself as an alternative to traditional claims of objectivity. Its subscription-based digital and quarterly print model reflects a grassroots approach to sustainability.

Statewide efforts have faced continuity challenges. The nonprofit Illinois Eagle, based in Springfield and created to cover LGBTQ+ and social justice communities outside the Chicago metropolitan area, is currently dormant. Its pause reveals the fragility of LGBTQ+ news infrastructure beyond major population centers.

Structural themes in the landscape

We have seen several recurring dynamics emerge:

- Revenue fragility limits operations.
- Digital migration expands reach but compresses margins.
- Representation gaps persist across race and geography.
- Advocacy organizations function as de facto information hubs.
- Collaborative, hybrid funding models are essential for sustainability.

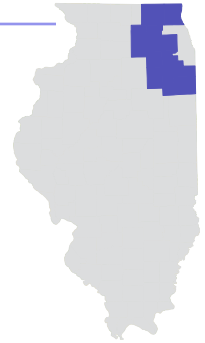
As Illinois’ local media ecosystem evolves, LGBTQ+-focused outlets illustrate both the power of long-term community trust and the urgency of infrastructure investment.

Sustaining this media infrastructure will require more than short-term project support. It demands coordinated capital strategies, shared revenue systems, leadership pipelines, and funding models designed for the distinct racial, geographic, economic, and generational realities of the state’s LGBTQ+ communities.

In the suburbs surrounding Chicago, residents described a different version of the same challenge: Information exists, but people often must assemble it themselves, relying on neighborhood apps and local institutions to replace many of the functions traditional local news once provided.

Chicago Suburbs and Collar Counties

Outside Chicago, which sits inside Cook County, residents described a different kind of deficit: not a lack of information sources, but a lack of hyperlocal visibility. The shadow of Chicago dominates coverage, leaving suburban communities to rely on apps, libraries, and informal channels to fill basic civic needs. It's worth noting that the suburbs of Chicago and the "Collar Counties," as they describe themselves, are home to some 3.15 million people.



"I get most of my news from streaming," said Jody Henderson, who lives in Gardner in Grundy County. "However, ... the lack of news sources in Grundy County ... there's a lot less news out here."

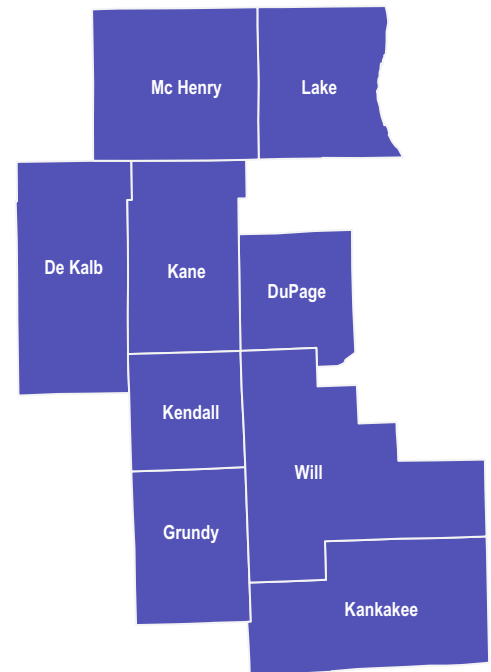
Fernando Duarte, 36, who moved from Chicago to Will County's Romeoville, said:

"Chicago, you could find news anywhere real fast. Here, I use the Nextdoor app. ... Sometimes I'll just Google it."

Across suburban communities, Nextdoor emerged as a primary civic channel, along with Patch, Facebook groups, newsletters, and local libraries. Notably, NPR was also called out as a trusted source.

Derrick, 53, lives in Zion, which is in Lake County. He described his library as filling roles local journalism once held:

"The Zion Public Library does a lot of public outreach. ... They were really big when the Covid situation was going on ... we have a very robust library system. And that has kind of replaced a lot of things that local news did."



Arab-Middle Eastern suburban listening session: WhatsApp as civic infrastructure

In a closed session held at the Mecca Center in Willowbrook, 21 miles southwest of Chicago, participants described WhatsApp networks as essential civic channels.

“One of the biggest ones would be Muslim community WhatsApp groups,” said Maggie, a former teacher.

One Syrian participant described her husband as her news verifier:

“My husband is in six WhatsApp groups. ... Every single group is just blowing up. And he goes and verifies all this information ... then comes in and tells me this is what’s happening.”

These digital micro-networks have become the backbone of civic information exchange. Yet, they also carry risks: Misinformation spreads quickly, and residents must constantly verify what they see.

Traditional outlets like ABC, CBS Chicago, or WBEZ were mentioned, but mostly as background noise or secondary sources.

As one speaker put it, “If I’m going to look for local news, it’s out of necessity. TikTok shows me local things I care about. I don’t seek out CBS.”

Instead, social media algorithms and peer-to-peer channels shape residents’ understanding of what’s happening around them.

The [Mosque Foundation](#) in Bridgeview has stepped into the civic information void by inviting local representatives to discuss taxes, host financial literacy sessions, and promote civic engagement from the pulpit.

“They’re really big on civic engagement ... they want people to know their rights,” one participant said.

Participants described high media literacy, distrust of mainstream framing, and a desire for coverage that goes beyond crisis. They want information that reflects community humanity and civic progress.



Chicagoland community members at an Arab-Middle Eastern community listening session at The Mecca Center in Willowbrook on Oct. 16, 2025. (Photo by Eric Ortiz)

South Suburban Cook County (The Southland)

In parts of suburban Cook County, visibility gaps intersect with deeper structural disinvestment, creating even steeper barriers to sustainable local journalism.

Amethyst Davis, founder of the [Harvey World Herald](#) in Harvey, 24 miles south of Chicago, described both the urgency and the structural difficulty of building a newsroom in the Southland.



Thornton Township High School students and soccer team players hold a jersey celebrating a longtime teacher. (Photo by Christopher Lockridge/Harvey World Herald)

Launched in 2022, the Harvey World Herald, a Pivot Fund grantee, is the only local newsroom in the city. Davis said it is “particularly hard to make in-roads providing factual, nuanced reporting to a community like Harvey, when legacy news media continue to parachute, spread misinformation, and stunt progress.”

“For every story the Harvey World Herald has produced holding power to account,” she said, “there are two or three stories from Chicago mainstream media platforming those same wrongdoers.”

Davis also pushed back on the industry assumption that misinformation is primarily a social media problem.

“Misinformation is often spoken of in terms of its proliferation on social media, but social media influencers have not monopolized misinformation,” she said. “This is taboo for most journalists to acknowledge: that journalists often spread misinformation to the public.”

“For generations, this industry has always obfuscated fact versus fiction,” she added. “Building a new institution that works for the public good is inherently cumbersome in an industry that is functionally anti-democratic.”

Resource gaps in the Southland

The suburbs south of Chicago, known as the Southland, include what Davis describes as “arguably the largest swath of racially segregated concentrated poverty in suburban Cook County.”

“Familial wealth, common in philanthropy, does not flourish in this region,” she said. “There are neither law firms or media lawyers to assist journalists.”

Legal assistance, business development programming, and transformational dollars, Davis said, “would make the world of difference for tiny organizations in Illinois.”

In many suburban communities outside Chicago’s economic core, local wealth, philanthropic infrastructure, and professional support systems are limited. For emerging newsrooms, these structural deficits compound the difficulty of long-term sustainability.

Political visibility, economic invisibility

Davis pointed to a broader contradiction.

“America is pushing suburban and rural communities into invisibility,” she said. “These areas increasingly do not have the economic strength—be it in the tax base, business sector—to be home to a financially sustainable news organization.”



Harvey World Herald founder Amethyst Davis, left, with team members Amina Sergazina and Justin Osby in the field during a Thornton Township special electors meeting at South Suburban College in February 2025. (Photo provided by Harvey World Herald)

At the same time, she noted, suburban and rural voters have reshaped American political life in the 21st century, driving national discourse and shaping presidential election outcomes.

“Journalism philanthropy has not shifted in concordance with these trends,” Davis said.

“Transformational dollars aren’t simply reserved for big city news organizations. We cannot microgrant suburban and rural newsrooms into sustainability. That’s not the thinking for big cities. It’s not logical to assume otherwise for tinier communities that don’t boast the financial privileges of an urban area.”

Her perspective underscores a key theme across the Illinois landscape. In economically disinvested suburbs, sustaining local news requires funding strategies proportional to structural challenges, not scaled-down versions of urban investment models.

In economically disinvested suburbs, sustaining local news requires funding strategies proportional to structural challenges, not scaled-down versions of urban investment models.

Recommendations

Funding journalism remains urgent. But Illinois makes clear that **reporting capacity alone does not solve information gaps**. Residents across the state are not waiting for news to arrive through traditional channels. They are piecing together what they need through social media, group chats, community institutions, local leaders, and firsthand networks.

This means philanthropy has an opportunity to evolve from funding “newsrooms” to strengthening **the full civic information ecosystem**—with audience, visibility, trust, and sustainability treated as core infrastructure.

1 FUND AUDIENCE REACH—NOT ONLY PRODUCTION

Strong reporting cannot close news deficits if it does not reliably reach the people who need it. In every region we studied, residents described discovering information through **shares, feeds, and trusted networks**, not by visiting a homepage or memorizing an outlet name.

Funders can support outlets in building strategies that reflect this reality—including distribution partnerships, community messengers, and formats designed for how people consume information (mobile-first, social-first, audio/video, multilingual).

This also means success must be measured differently. Awards, staffing growth, and institutional prestige matter—but they do not substitute for community penetration. **Reach, repeat engagement, and** relevance must be part of the definition of impact.

2 TREAT DISTRIBUTION AS CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE

Illinois shows that distribution is not “marketing.” It is how information becomes usable in real life. In Central Illinois, residents described Facebook pages functioning as daily news hubs. In the suburbs, Nextdoor and Patch serve as hyperlocal alert systems. In Indigenous and immigrant communities, information often travels through small, private, trust-based channels.

Funders should consider supporting the connective tissue that makes reporting visible. This—including newsletter growth, partnerships with libraries and community hubs, platform-native storytelling, and systems that allow residents to encounter verified information where they already are.

3 INVEST IN CULTURAL COMPETENCY AND BALANCED COVERAGE AS TRUST-BUILDING

Trust is not simply about accuracy. It is also about whether residents feel seen, respected, and understood. Across Illinois—especially among Black, Latino, immigrant, and Indigenous participants—residents described frustration with media that reduces their communities to crime, crisis, or politics, while leaving achievement, culture, solutions, and daily life under-covered.

Funders can help newsrooms build credibility by supporting reporting that is grounded in lived realities and shaped with communities, not just about them. This includes investing in community listening, identity-competent reporting, and coverage that reflects the full humanity of neighborhoods—not just their hardest moments.

4 SUPPORT VERIFICATION AND LOCAL TRUST SYSTEMS

Illinois residents are already verifying information through Google searches, social cross-checks, and personal networks. Many do not assume information is reliable simply because it comes from a newsroom. Some prefer raw video because they distrust how stories are framed. Others rely on elders, friends, or community leaders as their most trusted source.

Funders can strengthen local information ecosystems by supporting verification practices and “trust infrastructure,” including community partnerships, explainers, rapid-response reporting during crises, and consistent, transparent reporting practices that reduce the vacuum where rumor spreads.

5 BUILD SUSTAINABILITY BEYOND FOUNDATION DOLLARS

A healthy ecosystem cannot rely on grants alone. Newsrooms and entrepreneurs need the capacity to raise revenue, build resilient operations, and survive inevitable funding shifts. Without that, even high-impact outlets remain vulnerable to sudden collapse if philanthropic support decreases or ends.

Funders can increase long-term impact by pairing newsroom grants with wrap-around support, including business strategy, revenue diversification, fundraising systems, and audience growth planning. Sustainability support should be treated as part of journalism’s public service function, not as an optional add-on.

6 FUND GEOGRAPHY—AND FUND THE GAPS

Chicago’s ecosystem is large and mature, but it is not evenly developed. Outside the city, many suburban and rural communities described fewer options, less visibility, and weaker access to hyperlocal civic information. Residents do not stop needing information when local coverage shrinks. They simply fill the gaps through informal and unaccountable systems.

Funders should prioritize communities living with the steepest deficits and recognize that many of the most relied-upon information providers are not traditional outlets. Community entrepreneurs, moderators of local groups, and trusted civic institutions often function as the local information backbone. They deserve investment, training, and support commensurate with the role they already play. Illinois reinforces one of the central lessons of this project. Audience is not guaranteed, and awareness is not automatic. An outlet can be highly respected in journalism and philanthropic circles and still be largely invisible to residents.

Funders have an opportunity to close that gap by investing not only in journalism as a product, but in information as a public good. One that must be reachable, relevant, and trusted to have real civic impact.

Appendix:

Existing and Emerging Media Entrepreneurs

As part of our research, Illinois community members identified **125+ existing and emerging media entrepreneurs** shaping the local information ecosystem. This [directory](#) organizes those entries by **region**, with **category tags** to make the landscape easier to scan while keeping the research details intact.

Category tags used:

Weather | Crime/Safety | Civic Info | Community Forum | Culture/Lifestyle | Business/Economy | Education/Youth | Service/Advocacy | Government/Official | Politics/Elections | Housing/Real Estate | Events/Discovery | Aggregators/Platforms

Southern Illinois

Derk Brown

Tags: Crime/Safety | Civic Info | Community Forum

Runs one of the region's largest local news Facebook pages (328K followers), covering crime and community issues in East St. Louis. Known for fair, trusted reporting and strong community engagement. Described as accessible and responsive. Fills accountability and information gaps in communities long underserved by traditional newsrooms.

89 Block News

Tags: Crime/Safety | Civic Info | Community Forum

Independent community outlet on Facebook (12K followers) focused on the 89 blocks of East St. Louis. Praised for timely, factual reporting on everyday neighborhood concerns, public safety, housing, and youth. Functions as an information hub and trusted voice.

Sarah Boyles

Tags: Crime/Safety | Civic Info

Independent journalist based in Salem, Illinois (a former sundown town in Marion County), covering true crime and local breaking news. With 152K followers on Facebook, respected and trusted. Helps victims tell their stories and continues reporting until cases are resolved, especially missing persons and unsolved crimes.

Swinford Media Group

Tags: Civic Info | Culture/Lifestyle | Education/Youth | Business/Economy

Arm of Swinford Publications LLC. Owns The Marion Star, The Herrin Independent, The Carterville Courier—the highest-circulation weekly newspapers in Williamson County, printing 5,000 copies per edition. Father–son leadership (Bill and Riley Swinford). Print-first distribution with a strong social-first strategy (Facebook as primary platform rather than websites). Facebook pages: Marion Star (19K), Herrin Independent (5.1K), Carterville Courier (1.4K). Popular sponsored livestreams (high school sports, veterans ceremonies, graduations, Chamber awards, funerals), supported by underwriting sponsors. Produces two podcasts: high school football (“Coaches at Crown Brew Getting Coffee”) and local business (“Squared Up”).

WFCN News

Tags: Crime/Safety | Weather | Civic Info | Education/Youth

Part of Swinford Media. Posts breaking news, weather, and sports on Facebook (102K followers), YouTube (1.62K subscribers), Instagram (501 followers). Started by Aaron Price in 2017. Merged with Swinford in June 2023 to expand regional coverage.

WTF? Carbondale

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info | Crime/Safety

Facebook group (51K followers) where residents share breaking news, observations, and community commentary—often surfacing information and sentiment before traditional outlets. Described as a “digital town square where you have the opportunity to complete the conversation.”

East St. Louis School District 189

Tags: Education/Youth | Government/Official | Civic Info

District Facebook page (15K followers) functions as a trusted, high-utility information channel for families and residents with timely updates on school operations, resources, and services.

Carbondale Connected

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info

Community-run Facebook group (33.2K followers) for local news, discussion, and debate. Minimal moderation. Serves as a real-time pulse of community sentiment rather than a traditional news source.

Carbondale Uncensored

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info | Culture/Lifestyle | Education/Youth

Facebook group (2.2K followers) offering an open space for conversations about life in and around Carbondale (SIU campus life/nightlife, local news/events). Encourages honest dialogue and community updates.

RiverBender.com

Tags: Civic Info | Crime/Safety | Business/Economy | Culture/Lifestyle

Independent digital-first outlet for the St. Louis Metro East. Founded in 2005 by John and Dawn Hentrich (based in Alton). Expanded to include other local sites (e.g., EdGlenToday.com, MetroEastStar.com). Recognized as a reliable, consistent coverage source across multiple towns.

Granite City Times Front Page News

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info | Business/Economy | Weather

Public Facebook group (24.2K followers) providing hyperlocal updates for Granite City and surrounding areas (weather, businesses, municipal issues, events, civic institutions).

The Daily Egyptian

Tags: Education/Youth | Civic Info

Student-run newspaper at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. Provides campus and local reporting and trains future journalists; contributes workforce development capacity to the regional ecosystem.

Urban Voices

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info Culture/Lifestyle

Black-centered publication serving Southeast Missouri and Southern Illinois. Highlights stories that uplift culture, community, and truth. Amplifies local voices through news, commentary, and the arts, centering priorities often absent in mainstream coverage.

Kevin Boucher

Tags: Community Forum | Culture/Lifestyle

Independent, community-driven media project led by longtime broadcaster Kevin Boucher. Shares local stories through photography, interviews, and radio segments. Focuses on nature, everyday life, and human connection. Distributed via Facebook and public radio.

Central Illinois

Illinois Storm Chasers

Tags: Weather | Civic Info

One of the leading sources for weather information statewide. Based in Paxton (Ford County). Provides hyperlocal alerts and safety information across Facebook (423K), Instagram (9.2K), X/Twitter (7.1K), YouTube (2.7K), and online.

Chambanamoms.com

Tags: Culture/Lifestyle | Civic Info | Events/Discovery

Community-centered site focused on family life, events, parenting resources, and inclusive community information in Champaign–Urbana. Not hard news, but an important ecosystem node prioritizing caregivers and services often overlooked by traditional outlets. Facebook: 28K followers.

217 Problems

Tags: Community Forum | Crime/Safety | Civic Info

Facebook page (185K followers) serving Springfield/Decatur region. Evolved from gossip/humor/memes into fast-breaking hyperlocal news. Valued for speed and reach, also cited as unreliable/not accuracy-driven—illustrating tradeoffs of scale-first social publishing.

The Lavender Newsletter

Tags: Civic Info | Community Forum | Culture/Lifestyle

Independent digital publication by and for the queer community in Urbana-Champaign and surrounding areas.

Downtown Bloomington IL

Tags: Business/Economy | Events/Discovery | Civic Info

Facebook page (14K followers) run by the Downtown Business Association promoting revitalization, local businesses, events, and downtown development.

What's Happening in Bloomington/Normal IL?

Tags: Community Forum | Events/Discovery | Civic Info

Private Facebook group (10.6K members) sharing hyperlocal events, announcements, and community updates. Peer-to-peer exchange prioritizing immediacy.

Springfield IL Subreddit

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info

Local forum for hyperlocal politics, events, civic updates, and discussion. 17.7K+ followers and 7.8K weekly visitors.

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Subreddit

Tags: Community Forum | Education/Youth | Civic Info

Supports UIUC students/staff with campus news, events, cultural discussion, and peer support. 113.5K+ followers, 81K weekly visitors. Also functions as a broader Champaign-Urbana information space.

Spotted in Champaign

Tags: Community Forum | Culture/Lifestyle | Civic Info

Private Facebook group (64.9K members) for funny/informative posts about the Champaign area. High engagement. Often surfaces controversies and rumors. Viewed as less trusted but influential.

Experience Champaign-Urbana

Tags: Events/Discovery | Culture/Lifestyle

Public Facebook page (13K followers) sharing events, attractions, and activities. Primarily a tourism/civic promotion channel.

Not In Our Town: Bloomington-Normal

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info | Service/Advocacy

Facebook group (4.6K members) centered on equity, civic values, and dialogue on local social concerns.

Home Sweet Home Ministries

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info

Bloomington nonprofit serving people experiencing homelessness and hunger since 1917. Also functions as a community information source. Leads initiatives including The Bridge tiny house community.

The Normalite

Tags: Civic Info | Business/Economy

Weekly newspaper serving Normal, Illinois (founded 1903). Entrepreneur Billy McMacken acquired Normalite Newspaper Group in August 2025, including The Normalite (circulation ~4,000) and seven other Central Illinois papers. Plans include digital expansion, increased advertising, hiring correspondents, and strengthening community/sports coverage. Notes fragility. Legal notices are major revenue. State requirement changes pose risk.

The Vidette

Tags: Education/Youth | Civic Info

Digital news outlet serving Illinois State University. Founded in 1888. Student-run. Covers campus and local issues. Active across social platforms.

The Daily Illini

Tags: Education/Youth | Civic Info

Independent student-run newspaper of the University of Illinois. Covers campus, local news, culture, and events. Key training ground.

Harbinger Student Media

Tags: Education/Youth | Civic Info

Student media at Illinois Central College serving since 1967. Provides campus news/information.

The WITT Corporation

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info | Community Forum

Bloomington-based nonprofit operating a private Facebook group (21K members) created during COVID-19. Shares events, mutual aid requests, giveaways, and community support information.

Telly

Tags: Aggregators/Platforms

Experimental “free TV” device delivering headline scroll alongside advertising. Aggregates sports/entertainment/national news. An ambient distribution model.

Support Decatur IL Small Business

Tags: Business/Economy | Community Forum

Private Facebook group (17.6K members) sharing openings/closings, promotions, and local business realities.

Citizens of East Peoria

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info | Events/Discovery

Private Facebook group (15.8K members) sharing jobs, pets, events, and community happenings. Generally positive/civic tone.

Meteorologist Jacob Dickey

Tags: Weather

WCIA 3 meteorologist with large Facebook following (200K) for real-time storm updates.

Meteorologist Kevin Lighty

Tags: Weather

Chief meteorologist for WCIA Channel 3 with strong Facebook following (120K).

Illinois Storm Community

Tags: Weather | Community Forum

Public Facebook group (421.9K members) for crowdsourced storm/tornado tracking. Early-warning/situational awareness network.

Smile Politely

Tags: Culture/Lifestyle | Events/Discovery

Independent online culture magazine for Champaign-Urbana publishing thousands of articles on restaurants, arts, and local events.

Peoria Area Association of Realtors

Tags: Housing/Real Estate | Business/Economy

Distributes local real estate updates via text messaging. Niche but trusted housing-market channel.

Northern Illinois

Shakia Yancey and ETF Entertainment LLC

Tags: Culture/Lifestyle | Business/Economy | Civic Info

Black independent media entrepreneur building a multiplatform ecosystem in Rockford through ETF Entertainment (Elevate The Family). Operates Elevate TV streaming network. Produces Urban Sessions podcast mixing community news/entertainment. Publishes a community resource magazine via ETF Elevate Roku TV spotlighting regional businesses/services. Emphasizes independence and ownership (streams directly on her own network).

Sycamore Public Library

Tags: Civic Info | Education/Youth | Service/Advocacy

Functions as primary local information infrastructure in a town with limited broadcast news. Distributes updates, hosts civic programming, and provides guidance on services/events. Trusted nonpartisan anchor.

What's Happening in Sycamore

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info | Events/Discovery

Private Facebook group (23.8K members) serving as a real-time hub for announcements, events, and school updates. Fast-moving crowdsourced ecosystem with strengths/limitations.

Greater Quad Cities (Northwestern Illinois)

Greater Quad Cities Hispanic Chamber of Commerce

Tags: Business/Economy | Civic Info

Supports Latino-owned businesses. Serves as a trusted conduit for economic opportunities, events, and civic resources via newsletters/events/social media—often filling gaps in mainstream coverage.

Mercado on Fifth

Tags: Business/Economy | Culture/Lifestyle | Civic Info | Events/Discovery

Culturally rooted marketplace in Moline that doubles as an information and engagement hub for Latino residents. Disseminates resources and updates through trusted in-person networks.

QC Empowerment Network

Tags: Business/Economy | Civic Info | Service/Advocacy

Black-led initiative connecting residents across divides. Annual Black Business Expo (10th event in 2025). Facebook: 2.7K followers. Circulates economic opportunity and community resources.

Quad Cities African American Resource Directory

Tags: Business/Economy | Civic Info

Aggregates information on Black-owned businesses, nonprofits, and services. Centralizes trusted resources and strengthens economic connection. Functions as a civic information platform.

Martin Luther King Center

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info | Culture/Lifestyle

Rock Island institution opened in 1975. Provides programming/advocacy and disseminates trusted updates. Credibility built through decades of relationship and presence.

East Moline Main Street

Tags: Business/Economy | Events/Discovery | Civic Info

Volunteer-driven organization revitalizing downtown East Moline. Uses Facebook (7.8K followers) to share events, business updates, and civic initiatives. Operates as a practical hyperlocal publisher.

Lonnie Westerfield

Tags: Civic Info | Business/Economy

Owner of Celebrity Beauty Supply in Davenport, Iowa. Trusted community figure whose business acts as an information exchange node. Shares updates via relationships and social media (Facebook 5.8K).

KALA-FM

Tags: Civic Info | Culture/Lifestyle

Community radio (88.5/106.1) based at St. Ambrose University in Davenport with Spanish-language programming serving Latino audiences. Broadcaster Luis Lara cited as a reliable voice.

Diana Rodriguez, KWQC Channel 6

Tags: Weather | Civic Info

Bilingual meteorologist providing Spanish-language weather updates on social media. Fills safety-critical language access gaps.

Greg Aguilar

Tags: Civic Info | Service/Advocacy

Local leader/public servant sharing verified news/updates through social channels (Facebook 4.5K, Instagram 1.2K). Trusted intermediary for immigration, policy, and resources.

Daisy Moran

Tags: Civic Info | Service/Advocacy

Director of the Center for Nonprofit Excellence at the Quad Cities Community Foundation. Shares trusted civic/nonprofit information via social (Facebook 1.5K, Instagram 668). Functions as an information broker.

DeKalb Illinois Issues

Tags: Civic Info | Community Forum

Facebook page (56K followers) focused on civic/political/quality-of-life issues in DeKalb and DeKalb County. Forum for awareness and discussion.

Indigenous

American Indian Center of Chicago

Tags: Culture/Lifestyle | Service/Advocacy | Civic Info

Nonprofit founded in 1953 serving Native residents via cultural programming, advocacy, and information sharing. Trusted channel for community updates and connection.

American Indian Association of Illinois (AIAI)

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Education/Youth | Civic Info

Native-led nonprofit founded in 2007 by Dr. Dorene Wiese (White Earth Band Ojibwe). Supports Native education, leadership development, cultural preservation, and policy advocacy. Serves urban/rural Native populations representing 150+ tribes.

Native Chicago News

Tags: Civic Info | Community Forum

Public Facebook group (694 members) led by Dr. Dorene Wiese. Shares Indigenous-focused news, events, and advocacy updates. Trusted hub for Native Chicagoans.

Native Chicago Artist's Guild

Tags: Culture/Lifestyle | Community Forum

Facebook community (779 members) sharing Native arts, cultural news, and creative opportunities. Supports artists and cultural organizing.

Native Chicago Education

Tags: Education/Youth | Civic Info | Community Forum

Facebook group (498 members) sharing education resources and Indigenous news. Reflects longstanding Native-led education commitments (including historical roots in Native education institutions and programs).

Native Media Dream Team

Tags: Education/Youth | Culture/Lifestyle | Civic Info

Youth media project on Facebook (56 members), launched in 2023 through AIAI's Native Scholars program. Supports youth storytelling, skills, and self-representation.

Indigenous Democrats

Tags: Politics/Elections | Community Forum

Public Facebook group (13.2K followers) supporting Indigenous political candidates and allies. Information sharing and organizing tool.

NDN Collective

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Culture/Lifestyle | Civic Info

National Indigenous-led nonprofit/media organization founded in 2018 (Rapid City, South Dakota). Builds Indigenous power via narrative change, organizing, and resource redistribution through NDN Fund/Action/Media.

Indian Country Today

Tags: Civic Info | Culture/Lifestyle

National digital newsroom covering Indigenous policy/culture/accountability. Connects local tribal experiences to broader narratives.

DeBahJiMon

Tags: Civic Info | Culture/Lifestyle

Tribal newspaper of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe (Minnesota), covering government updates and cultural life. Functions as news outlet and cultural record.

Hocak Worak

Tags: Civic Info | Culture/Lifestyle

Official tribal newspaper of the Ho-Chunk Nation (Wisconsin), offering news, public notices, governance updates, and cultural reporting.

Kalihwisaks

Tags: Civic Info | Culture/Lifestyle

Tribal newspaper of the Oneida Nation (Wisconsin), covering government decisions, community updates, and cultural life.

Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe (official web + Facebook)

Tags: Government/Official | Civic Info

Official website and Facebook (17K followers) serve as primary channels for public notices, services, events, and emergency information.

WOJB Radio

Tags: Civic Info | Culture/Lifestyle

Wisconsin community radio (88.9 FM + TuneIn). Owned/operated by Lac Courte Oreilles tribal members. Only tribally focused station in Wisconsin independent of tribal government. Emphasizes social issues, Ojibwe cultural history, music/arts, volunteerism, and community events. At risk due to loss of federal funding for independent tribal radio operators.

Chicagoland (Suburban + Regional)

The Crazy Riot Show

Tags: Civic Info | Community Forum | Culture/Lifestyle

Waukegan-area podcast by Carlos Smith with a large Facebook following (132K). Provides local reporting/commentary and a platform for community members and businesses.

Austin Cantu

Tags: Civic Info | Service/Advocacy

Waukegan-based community leader trusted for local issue advocacy and information sharing (Facebook 3.2K friends, Instagram 415 followers).

Arab Chicago

Tags: Culture/Lifestyle | Civic Info | Service/Advocacy

Community media hub serving Arab and Muslim communities across Chicago and Chicagoland. Instagram (75K), Facebook (177K). Provides trusted identity-centered information and cultural visibility often overlooked by mainstream outlets.

The Harvey World Herald

Tags: Civic Info | Crime/Safety | Community Forum

Only local newsroom in Harvey. Covers local news, governance, and accountability issues while strengthening civic participation in an undercovered suburban region.

Mosque Foundation

Tags: Civic Info | Service/Advocacy | Culture/Lifestyle

Bridgeview-based faith institution functioning as a trusted civic hub through programming and community engagement.

Palos Islamic Center

Tags: Civic Info | Culture/Lifestyle | Service/Advocacy

Palos Park-based center supporting religious/community needs and interfaith engagement (e.g., interfaith book club). Trusted engagement hub.

WhatsApp (Chicago Muslim Communities)

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info | Aggregators/Platforms

Primary civic information and verification system in many Muslim communities. Decentralized newsroom embedded in family/neighborhood groups. Fast, multilingual, highly trusted through social ties. Enables rapid spread of unverified info and highlights opportunities for embedded fact-checked content.

American Civic and Humanitarian Coalition

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info

Community organization advancing civic participation and humanitarian initiatives. Connector for immigrant and marginalized communities.

Will County Center for Community Concerns

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info

Joliet nonprofit providing programs/services that help low- and moderate-income residents move toward self-sufficiency.

Spanish Community Center

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info

Nonprofit (founded 1969) improving quality of life for Latinos, immigrants, and low-income residents through educational/social services. Includes family advocacy programs in Kankakee.

Lawndale News

Tags: Civic Info | Culture/Lifestyle | Business/Economy

Bilingual Spanish–English weekly based in Cicero. Free paper covering jobs, community news/events, international issues, entertainment, sports, health, and education. Targets young bilingual Hispanic/Latino audiences.

Paul Goddard

Tags: Civic Info | Crime/Safety

Facebook-based news personality (70K followers) described as “boots on the ground,” often posting accurate information ahead of traditional outlets (per interviewee description).

Region News Source

Tags: Civic Info | Crime/Safety

Hyperlocal digital outlet founded by Paul Goddard with 217K Facebook followers, serving Northwest Indiana and adjacent Illinois communities. Social-first breaking news, crime, community updates.

Village of Matteson (official)

Tags: Government/Official | Civic Info

Official Facebook page (16K followers) sharing municipal services, meetings, events, and emergency notices. Authoritative local channel.

Eisenhower Library

Tags: Civic Info | Education/Youth | Service/Advocacy

Harwood Heights library serving as an information hub via newsletters, updates, and programming in a low-coverage environment.

Harvey Historical Society

Tags: Civic Info | Community Forum | Culture/Lifestyle

Public Facebook group (2.5K members) run by Ryan Roman Synwalski. Blends current events with historical framing.

Kane County Newsletter

Tags: Government/Official | Civic Info

Newsletter distributing practical local updates on events, services, and civic resources.

Lake and McHenry County Scanner

Tags: Crime/Safety | Civic Info | Weather

Local outlet covering crime, courts, weather, traffic, and government. Facebook: 282K followers.

Village of Lake in the Hills Messenger

Tags: Government/Official | Civic Info

Municipal newsletter + Facebook page (9.7K followers) sharing updates, events, and announcements.

Huntley Connections

Tags: Government/Official | Civic Info

Village newsletter available in print (monthly) and online (twice monthly) with civic announcements and updates.

Huntley Community School District 158

Tags: Education/Youth | Government/Official | Civic Info

Facebook page (9K followers) for district updates and resources.

Talamore Community and Events

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info

Private Facebook group (1.8K members) providing neighborhood updates and community discussion.

Waukegan Neighbors

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info | Events/Discovery

Facebook group (28.6K members) sharing local events, resources, and civic matters. Trusted hyperlocal hub.

North Chicago (informational Facebook group)

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info

Facebook group (3.8K members) sharing municipal news, events, and community issues.

What's Happening in Elburn

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info | Events/Discovery

Private Facebook group (11.3K members) serving as a central source for Elburn updates and events.

Zion Public Library

Tags: Civic Info | Education/Youth | Service/Advocacy

Trusted neighborhood resource hub and access point for local knowledge in a low-coverage area.

Chicago

15 West

Tags: Civic Info | Service/Advocacy | Culture/Lifestyle

Launched June 2025. Emerging bilingual (English/Spanish) hyperlocal newsroom addressing access gaps for neurodivergent and underserved communities on the West Side and surrounding suburbs. Operated by Lucky Jefferson. Led by founder/editor/photographer Nabeela Washington. Accessibility-first journalism.

Tayo

Tags: Civic Info | Culture/Lifestyle | Service/Advocacy

Chicago-based hypercultural journalism/community engagement org founded in 2020 as a COVID-19 information hub for Filipino communities. Built credibility via culturally fluent storytelling, multilingual outreach, and direct engagement. Cofounded by Leezel Tanglao and Mark Calaguas. Coalition-based, research-informed model blending journalism, media literacy, and organizing. Preparing to spin off from Filipino Young Leaders Program (FYLPRO).

AFIRE Chicago

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info

Alliance of Filipinos for Immigrant Rights and Empowerment. Partnered with Tayo on spring 2025 Seeding AFIRE community engagement sessions examining how Asian communities get/trust/share information. Treated lived experience as data and dialogue as journalism.

Chicago Suburb Spotlight

Tags: Civic Info | Events/Discovery | Culture/Lifestyle

Instagram page (20K followers) offering hyperlocal suburban coverage by three community reporters who are realtors: Amber Martin, Patty Wojtach, Marty Rinehart.

ZackTV1

Tags: Culture/Lifestyle | Civic Info | Crime/Safety

Independent YouTube channel (306K subscribers) often described as “hood journalism.” Founded in 2009 by Zack Stoner (“Hood CNN”), documenting neighborhoods, artists, language, food, everyday life overlooked by mainstream outlets. Stoner was killed in 2018 (age 30). Family continues the channel.. Known for 2017 field reporting on Kenneka Jenkins case (later civil settlement).

Chicago Critter

Tags: Crime/Safety | Civic Info

Street-based crime/news outlet with large social footprint: Instagram (287K), Facebook (142.9K), TikTok (32.6K), Snapchat (28K). Self-described as “original street-based content/media.”

True Star

Tags: Youth Media | Civic Info | Digital Strategy

Chicago-based youth media organization providing training and production opportunities for young journalists. Founded in 2004 and led by cofounder/executive director DeAnna Sherman. Emphasizes strong reporting paired with social media strategy to expand reach and visibility in a crowded digital ecosystem.

North Lawndale Community News

Tags: Civic Info | Service/Advocacy

Weekly community newspaper based in North Lawndale. Published by Strategic Human Services. Funded through grants, subscriptions, and advertising.

Edgewater Chicago Neighborhood News

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info

Facebook group (4.2K members) sharing neighborhood business info, events, and public safety.

Block Club Chicago

Tags: Civic Info

Nonprofit newsroom delivering reliable, nonpartisan coverage of Chicago neighborhoods. Known for deep, community-driven reporting.

Windy City Times

Tags: Civic Info | Culture/Lifestyle | Community Forum

Respected LGBTQ+ publication serving Chicago’s queer community. Covers local news, culture, and politics while providing a platform for underrepresented voices.

Dunning Community Discussion Board

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info | Events/Discovery

Public Facebook group (17.9K members) for local issues/events/resources. Goal is to “promote, improve, and connect.”

Portage Park Community News

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info | Events/Discovery

Private Facebook group (15.1K members) sharing neighborhood updates, events, notices, lost pets, and discussion.

West Ridge Neighborhood

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info

Private Facebook group (3.7K members) helping residents stay connected and informed.

Rogers Park News

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info | Crime/Safety

Public Facebook group (**36.3K members**) for news and community conversation.

Described as a hub notifying neighbors “when something is beautiful, dangerous, found or entertaining.”

Chitown Crime Chasers—CCC (Chicago Hood News)

Tags: Crime/Safety | Civic Info

Facebook page (290K followers) sharing crime information. Founder describes self as a “violence interruptor” responding to scenes and posting updates.

CWB Chicago

Tags: Crime/Safety | Civic Info

Reader-funded (founded 2013) public safety-focused news service. Publishes conservative content, focusing on crime, police, and the justice system through a “law-and-order” lens. Originated as Crime in Wrigleyville + Boystown. Large Facebook distribution (96K).

Newcity

Tags: Culture/Lifestyle

Arts/culture coverage in Chicago and the Great Lakes. Founded 1986. Monthly print with daily online updates.

SubX.News

Tags: Crime/Safety | Civic Info | Aggregators/Platforms

Hyperlocal digital platform run by John Kugler. Emphasizes user-submitted tips and raw reporting. Distributed via website and social platforms: Facebook (140K), X (39.4K), TikTok (44). Tagline: “News Aggregate Providing Information and Education ... Trying to Do Right by the People.”

My Block My Hood My City

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info | Education/Youth

Nonprofit founded 2015 by Jahmal Cole. Inspires youth/empowers communities via Explorers Program and citywide initiatives. Demonstrates scalable community-driven storytelling and engagement.

Jefferson Park Chamber of Commerce

Tags: Business/Economy | Civic Info | Events/Discovery

Neighborhood organization sharing business updates and events. Informal publishing role.

Chicago Public Libraries

Tags: Civic Info | Education/Youth | Service/Advocacy

Citywide network functioning as trusted civic information hubs via newsletters, calendars, and programming updates. Fills neighborhood information gaps (branches referenced: Jefferson Park, Budlong Woods, Independence).

The TRiIBE

Tags: Civic Info | Culture/Lifestyle

Black-led digital newsroom centering Black communities, culture, and lived experience.

City Cast Chicago and Hey Chicago

Tags: Civic Info | Aggregators/Platforms

Daily local news podcast (launched 2021) and free daily email newsletter providing accessible briefings. Part of City Cast network (owned by Graham Holdings).

Nadig Newspapers

Tags: Civic Info

Community-focused local newspaper serving Chicago neighborhoods with civic updates.

Black Chicago

Tags: Culture/Lifestyle | Events/Discovery

Instagram page (46.2K followers) highlighting things to do and blending culture with place-based reporting, especially in underrepresented neighborhoods.

Chicago Media Takeout

Tags: Aggregators/Platforms | Culture/Lifestyle | Crime/Safety

Instagram page (@ChicagoMediaTakeout1) with 94.2K followers sharing gritty, often sensational local content (frequently crime/conflict). Main page disabled at 365K followers, working to restore.

Chicago CRED

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info

Nonprofit reducing gun violence through outreach and pathways. Trusted source on violence prevention and community safety.

Chicago Black Gay Men's Caucus

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info | Community Forum

Community organization and trusted information hub for Black LGBTQ+ Chicagoans.

Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info

Promotes healing/restorative justice. Trusted community voice.

BUILD Chicago

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Education/Youth | Civic Info

Gang intervention/violence prevention/youth development organization on the West Side. Trusted information source.

YOUth Can Chicago

Tags: Education/Youth | Service/Advocacy

Youth development via art/music/technology. Family-facing connector.

Phalanx Family Services

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info

Nonprofit supporting economically disadvantaged children and families. Trusted guidance toward self-sufficiency.

Latinos Progresando

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info

Immigration legal services and community programs. Critical information/advocacy hub.

Pilsen Neighborhood (Facebook group)

Tags: Community Forum | Civic Info

Tightly moderated Facebook group (45.2K members) limited to Pilsen-specific posts. High-signal bulletin board supporting neighborhood identity amid gentrification.

Windy City Harvest/Farm on Ogden

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info

North Lawndale joint project of Chicago Botanic Garden + Lawndale Christian Health Center providing food access and agricultural education (Facebook 4.8K).

Resurrection Project

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info

Supports immigrant families through housing, financial services, and civic engagement. Trusted source.

Mano a Mano

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info

Family resource center with offices in North Chicago and Round Lake Park. Trusted for organizing, social services, and support.

North Chicago Think Tank

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info

Grassroots collective (Facebook 1.2K, Instagram 1K) focused on quality of life in North Chicago. Pro-Black/Indigenous framing. Trusted information hub.

Women's Business Development Center

Tags: Business/Economy | Service/Advocacy

Nonprofit advancing women's economic empowerment. Strengthens local economies and leadership pathways.

First Baptist Congregational Church

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info

Historic civic anchor and community information hub.

Legal Help Firm

Tags: Crime/Safety | Civic Info

Law firm with Facebook page (325K followers) sharing crime and death updates. Functions as an informal alert channel.

Illinois Voter Guide

Tags: Politics/Elections | Civic Info

Nonpartisan election information resource for candidate guides and voting logistics.

Chicago Votes

Tags: Politics/Elections | Civic Info | Education/Youth

Nonpartisan nonprofit building civic power among young people through education and participation.

Chicago Housing Authority

Tags: Government/Official | Housing/Real Estate | Civic Info

Provides housing/employment/resource updates via official channels. Includes Facebook group (39K followers).

PCC Community Wellness Center

Tags: Service/Advocacy | Civic Info

Healthcare provider. Trusted health information source.

Ring (Neighbors App)

Tags: Crime/Safety | Aggregators/Platforms | Community Forum

Hyperlocal civic information platform for alerts and neighborhood videos. Influential but unevenly verified.

Nextdoor

Tags: Community Forum | Aggregators/Platforms | Civic Info

Neighborhood platform for local updates and recommendations Variable trust and reliability.

Citizen App

Tags: Crime/Safety | Aggregators/Platforms

Real-time safety alerts sourced from scanners/user reports. High demand and high context/verification limits.

Zillow

Tags: Housing/Real Estate | Aggregators/Platforms

Real estate platform used as a go-to for housing, pricing, and school information. Key civic/economic touchpoint.

Illinois Report Card

Tags: Civic Info | Education/Youth | Government/Official

State-run public database for standardized school performance/demographics/outcomes.

Snapchat/Snap Map

Tags: Aggregators/Platforms | Community Forum | Crime/Safety

Real-time peer-generated local awareness tool. Unverified content but highly used for immediacy and visual updates.

Eventbrite

Tags: Events/Discovery | Aggregators/Platforms

Popular event listing/RSVP tool for local gatherings, workshops, and civic activities. Major node for navigating community life.

Bucket Listers Chicago

Tags: Events/Discovery | Culture/Lifestyle | Aggregators/Platforms

High-engagement lifestyle/events platform (Facebook 621K, Instagram 1.1M) shaping where residents find things to do. Demonstrates influence of audience-centered digital distribution.

Download the [CSV version \(easy Google Sheets import\)](#) ([PDF Version](#))

Funder Highlights:

What Funders Should Know About Illinois Right Now

Illinois is not a “news desert.” It’s a patchwork of **news deficits**. Residents can usually find information—but too often struggle to find coverage that **is reliable, useful, and equitable**, especially when it comes to civic life.

Social media is the operating system for local information. Facebook groups, scanner accounts, TikTok, YouTube clips, WhatsApp networks, and Nextdoor now function as real-time news infrastructure—fast, accessible, and widely used, even when accuracy varies.

Trust is local and relational—not institutional. Many residents verify what they hear through family, community leaders, librarians, small business owners, and tightly knit group chats. Not by defaulting to a newsroom brand name.

Chicago has abundance—but also unequal visibility. The city has no dominant civic information “front door,” and access to reliable news varies widely by neighborhood. Some residents don’t recognize highly respected independent outlets, even when those outlets have strong reputations in journalism circles.

Outside Chicago, “hyperlocal” wins. People want information that helps them navigate daily life—road closures, job fairs, school updates, tax changes, emergency response information, and local government decisions—quickly and in plain language.

The ecosystem’s most durable information nodes are often “nontraditional.” Community Facebook pages, ethnic and language-based networks, libraries, small local publishers, and entrepreneurial media builders are already filling gaps. Sometimes more effectively than legacy outlets.

Opportunities for Investment

Illinois does not call for a single solution. It calls for an investment strategy that recognizes how information now moves: through networks, platforms, trust nodes, and hyperlocal needs.

1. Build audience-centered local news models

Supporting journalism institutions is not enough if content does not reach or resonate with communities.

Investments should prioritize:

- Relevance (“does this help people today?”)
- Accessibility (language, format, device-first design)
- Distribution strategy (not “post and pray”)
- Feedback loops with residents

2. Fund hyperlocal entrepreneurs and community-rooted information hubs

Across Illinois, people already rely on:

- Facebook community pages
- Subreddit and neighborhood groups
- Local creators and newsletters
- Civic institutions (libraries, schools, churches)
- Local officials’ updates

These actors are already filling deficits—often without training, resources, or safeguards.

The opportunity is not to replace them. It is to **strengthen quality, ethics, and sustainability** through support.

3. Support cultural competency as core infrastructure

Residents want coverage that reflects their neighborhoods as complete human places, not crime scenes.

Investments can support:

- Community listening
- Hiring and training reporters rooted in place
- Solutions-oriented approaches
- Partnerships with trusted community organizations
- Representation and language access

4. Fund verification and media literacy where misinformation thrives

Social media is where information moves fastest—and where misinformation spreads fastest.

Multiple communities described using “verification” strategies because they do not trust what appears in feeds. Residents want tools that help them confirm:

- What is true
- What applies to their neighborhood
- What action they should take

Investing in verification isn’t a side project. It’s now a core feature of civic information systems.

5. Make sustainability a requirement, not a hope

Entrepreneurs and startups cannot thrive on grants alone. Illinois makes clear that local news sustainability must include business strategy, revenue diversification, and marketing/distribution capacity.

Funders can increase long-term impact by supporting:

- Fundraising capacity and coaching
- Membership models and earned revenue exploration
- Underwriting sponsorship support (especially for social-first models)
- Operational infrastructure (finance, HR, legal)
- Marketing and audience growth strategies

Key Findings

1. Focus on “news deficits” not “news deserts.”

Some communities have limited traditional outlets. But residents are not without information. They’re often awash in crime coverage and national politics, while working hard to find what they actually need: school board decisions, taxes, zoning, street closures, public services, and resources. Ron Smith, executive director of Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service, gave language to what we heard in Illinois over and over: We don’t have “news deserts.” We have “news deficits.”

2. Audience is not optional. Great journalism doesn’t work without reach.

Much of the field (and philanthropy) has focused on stabilizing newsrooms and protecting journalists’ livelihoods. Those goals matter. But Illinois underscores a parallel truth. Journalism can be strong and still miss the people it’s meant to serve. Residents told us—explicitly and implicitly—that information systems must be designed around real habits, not ideal ones. People want watchdog reporting. They also want journalism that helps them live their lives.

3. Geography shapes everything. Illinois has multiple ecosystems.

Chicago stands apart—large, mature, and highly fragmented. But access is uneven inside Chicago, across suburbs, and downstate. In many places, local information moves through institutions (libraries, schools, churches) and informal networks (Facebook groups, WhatsApp threads, “somebody who always knows what’s happening”).

4. Digital is the default entry point.

Across the state, people start with digital: search, social, and video. Legacy outlets still matter—WGN came up repeatedly—but the most common answer to “Where do you get your news?” was simple: social media.

5. Digital imbalance drives inequity

Even where information is plentiful, it is not equally distributed or equally respectful. Residents—particularly Black and Brown residents—described feeling seen only through a lens of crime, crisis, and political conflict.

As Pauline John in Springfield told us: “You never see a report about a Black woman opening a business ... or something promoting the community.”

And residents repeatedly pointed to what builds trust: reporters who show up, understand the place, and stay long enough to get the story right.

Audience ≠ Awareness: A Critical Funding Blind Spot

Philanthropy often treats “visibility” as a proxy for public impact. But Illinois shows how easily those two things diverge.

- An outlet can be **well-known to funders, journalists, and civic leaders** and still be largely absent from residents’ daily habits.
- An outlet can be **widely read or shared** without residents recognizing its name—because the journalism travels through screenshots, group chats, reposts, and algorithms.
- And a community can appear “covered,” while residents still experience deep **information deficits** around the issues that shape daily life: school decisions, public services, housing, taxes, safety, and local governance.

This matters because funding decisions that rely heavily on sector reputation risk investing in journalism that is admired—but not necessarily accessed. Illinois gave us vivid examples on both ends of the spectrum:

- **Block Club Chicago** was one of the most frequently cited newsrooms in our study—yet still unfamiliar to some residents. Often, people encounter Block Club’s reporting through redistribution, without recognizing the source.
- **City Bureau** is highly respected in journalism and philanthropic circles—yet many residents we spoke with did not name it as a trusted local source, even when they were deeply engaged in community information networks.

The question for funders is not only “Is this work excellent?” It is also: “Does it reach the people it claims to serve—and do those people know where to return tomorrow?”

Investment implication: Fund what strengthens distribution, habit, and trust—not only production.

Block Club Chicago: A Model to Build On

Building trust through deep neighborhood presence

Block Club Chicago shows how intentional community-rooted journalism can rebuild trust and relevance in a fragmented local news ecosystem. Founded to serve Chicago's diverse neighborhoods, Block Club's model centers on deep geographic coverage, consistent presence, and relationship-based reporting.

According to Shamus Toomey, publisher and co-founder of Block Club Chicago, the organization's community roots were built from the outset after launching in early 2018 as a [successor to DNAinfo Chicago](#), which shut down in late 2017. Rather than concentrating reporting resources in neighborhoods with the largest or most affluent audiences, Block Club stationed reporters across neighborhood clusters throughout the city, even before it had the resources to staff every area.

"We made a point to position them fairly throughout our very diverse and often-segregated city to make clear we are here to cover all of Chicago, not just the parts that historically draw media coverage," Toomey told The Pivot Fund.

As the newsroom grew, it filled in coverage over time, maintaining a commitment to equitable geographic distribution. This approach signaled to residents that Block Club was invested in their neighborhoods for the long term, not just during moments of crisis or heightened attention.

Block Club's reporting philosophy reflects a broad definition of what constitutes meaningful local news. They provide hard news alongside features, business openings, schools, community heroes, and everyday neighborhood life.

"We believe the diversity of stories—features, entertainment, business openings, schools, crime—helps our work resonate with readers," he said. "We want to have something, even if it's just one story, that appeals to each person."

Toomey, who was the former managing editor of DNAinfo Chicago (January 2013–November 2017), was the first editor-in-chief of Block Club Chicago until June 2022 and emphasized that [neighborhoods deserve coverage](#) that reflects the full lived experience of residents, beyond only crime or conflict.

“We want to cover the neighborhoods like a small paper would cover a small town ... to create a mosaic of news to reflect the full neighborhood experience,” he said. “Some neighborhoods only see legacy media report the crime in their neighborhood. That erodes trust—or prevents it from ever forming. We don’t want to operate that way.”

Central to Block Club’s trust-building is its reporting structure. Reporters are assigned to specific neighborhoods and remain embedded over time. Many live in the communities they cover, allowing them to build relationships, develop expertise, and provide context that parachute journalism cannot.



Block Club Chicago reporter Patrick Filbin interviews the boys cross country team at Lake View High School on Oct. 30, 2025. (Photo by Colin Boyle for Block Club Chicago)

“They are part of the community,” Toomey explained. “This allows them to make contacts, hear story ideas, and provide context.”

Trust, Toomey stressed, is earned incrementally and can be easily lost.

“We work to earn trust one story at a time, he said. “Each story builds the foundation of trust. One inaccurate story can knock that all down.”

Meeting residents where they are

Distribution has been another key driver of Block Club Chicago's reach and impact. From its earliest days, the organization launched neighborhood-specific newsletters written by the reporters covering those areas. Residents can subscribe only to the neighborhoods they care about, ensuring relevance and reducing information overload.

Each newsletter includes an introductory note from the reporter, often offering behind-the-scenes context or neighborhood-specific insights.

"We want them to connect with readers, to let them know they are real people in search of interesting stories for them," Toomey said.

Beyond newsletters, Block Club distributes its reporting across multiple platforms, recognizing that residents access information in many different ways. This multiplatform approach also reflects a reality identified in The Pivot Fund's research: People often rely on local reporting without always recognizing the outlet behind it.

Toomey acknowledged this dynamic, where information may travel and have no brand recognition.

"We understand that not all of our readers are going directly to our site, or sign up for our newsletters," Toomey said. "We reach many people through social media alone, particularly Instagram and TikTok, and often the source of the story is secondary to these readers."

In response, Block Club has experimented with watermarks, captions, and reporter-led social video to reinforce brand awareness while still prioritizing accessibility and reach.

Challenges and resource needs

Looking more broadly at the Illinois news ecosystem, Toomey pushes back against the idea that younger audiences are disengaged from news. Instead, he recognizes that consumption patterns have shifted.

"Younger people don't read the news the way their parents did," Toomey said. "But they are hungry for news and information that is useful and interesting."

Meeting those audiences across websites, newsletters, social media, mobile apps, messaging platforms, radio, television, and podcasts requires significant investment. Funding remains the most persistent challenge.

Toomey noted that digital newsrooms lack many of the traditional revenue levers that sustained print journalism, such as classified ads and legal notices. As a result, sustainability depends on a diversified revenue model that includes reader support, relevant advertising, major donors, and institutional philanthropy.

He pointed to initiatives like Press Forward as especially important in reframing journalism as essential civic infrastructure and expanding the pool of potential funders.

“More messaging to nontraditional funders is essential to let people know that many news outlets, particularly in rural and underserved areas, are dying. And they need support.”

Block Club Chicago’s experience underscores a broader lesson for Illinois and Midwest news ecosystems. Trust, reach, and sustainability are deeply interconnected.

Building them requires intentional design, long-term investment, and a commitment to serving communities as they are, not as legacy systems once imagined them.

