

Chicago Sun-Times drops its paywall. Will other local newspapers follow?

It was big news in January when nonprofit WBEZ radio in Chicago [acquired](#) the Chicago Sun-Times, raising \$61 million from foundations and individuals to acquire the daily paper under the umbrella of Chicago Public Media. Now, the Sun-Times is taking another step into a new media landscape by [taking down its digital paywall](#) and, like WBEZ, asking the community to support its journalism.

“This is a long-term commitment we are making to the community,” said Celeste LeCompte, chief audience officer for Chicago Public Media. “We have a responsibility to tell core stories to the community... High quality journalism shouldn’t be available only to those who can afford it.”

Matt Moog, chief executive of Chicago Public Media, hinted this summer that the merged outlet planned to drop the paywall. Moog [noted](#) at an event at Northwestern University that there was “some risk” associated the initiative, “but we are really committed.” He said the the two outlets had 200,000 members and subscribers between them, and they hoped to add another 100,000 digital subscribers by dropping the paywall.



(Photo by Thomas Hawk via Flickr)

Borrowing from public radio's playbook, the Sun-Times has been using its high-profile staff members to speak directly to readers this week to try to accomplish that. Sun-Times Washington Bureau Chief Lynn Sweet was on WBEZ, offering to have coffee with anyone who signed up as a founding member. In an email, Editorial Page Editor Lorraine Forte asked digital subscribers to become a founding member. "As the editorial page editor of the Chicago Sun-Times, my goal is to foster a robust dialog with the diverse communities that make up Chicago," she said. "Everyone's voice should be heard when it comes to the important issues that matter in our city."

Scores of enthusiastic readers on Reddit also praised the move, calling it "amazing news," and "great!" "We're enormously excited about people's enthusiasm," LeCompte said.

The Sun-Times, like many local papers, has been through uncertain times, with multiple owners in recent years. Its major competitor, the Chicago Tribune, owned by hedge fund Alden Golden Capital, has seen big cuts in staffing. One Reddit commenter wrote of the Sun-Times dropping its paywall: "Bye, Trib."

Chicago Public Media will now be one of the largest nonprofit news organizations in the country. And the Sun-Times example

of memberships and foundation support, along with collaboration with a powerful radio station, could emerge as a model for other local newspapers that are floundering.

The shift to a membership model was one of the tenets mentioned in the original announcement of the Sun-Times' purchase.

"Community support, through both individual memberships and philanthropy, is essential for sustaining local journalism and has long been a cornerstone of public media," it said, noting that "WBEZ is more than 60 percent listener-supported."

As a nonprofit, the Sun-Times will adopt the membership model of its sister radio station and ask readers to donate \$5 a month, or \$60 a year, for unlimited access to its digital news. That will come with certain membership benefits, access to special events and thank-you gifts like mugs and umbrellas.

But the contribution is voluntary, and everyone will be able to read the digital product, while the printed paper will retain its subscription model.

In cutbacks around the country, some papers have reduced the number of days they deliver a tangible printed newspaper to subscribers' homes, citing the cost of presses, newsprint, delivery and ink.

They've asked readers to go online instead, a shift that not every reader wants to make. While some publishers have gone so far as to envision a future without any print newspapers, the Sun-Times is not one of them.

"We don't have any plans to stop printing," said LeCompte. "We have very engaged subscribers."

To that end, Chicago Public Media intends to hold listening sessions with readers and have reporters at the newspaper and

the radio station collaborate while still reporting to their independent editors. CPM currently has about 18 positions open.

Questions for the future of news

The mash-up of a local newspaper and a public radio station is another attempt to get the business of journalism right after its interruption by the Internet and the advertisers' move to online platforms.

With those changes, hundreds of newspapers have died, leaving so-called 'news deserts' in some underserved areas. Without hometown papers covering local public affairs, democracy itself is endangered, scholars and publishers argue.

From late 2019 to the end of May 2022, more than 360 U.S. newspapers closed, according to a [report](#) by Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism. Since 2005, the country has lost more than one-fourth of its newspapers and is on track to lose a third by 2025, the report by Medill's Local News Initiative found.

At the same time, many readers have turned to social media for "news" that is often found to be inaccurate and adds to a seeming torrent of misinformation.

Scholars and publishers have called the situation a 'crisis' and a 'threat to Democracy.' How can people make decisions about their government, they ask, if they don't have access to accurate information?

But good reporting is expensive. And many new models have been tried. Paywalls, like pop-up ads on news websites, aren't popular with many readers. And some who've studied newspaper profitability argue that they don't really help sustain news budgets.

Several large newspapers, like The New York Times, with 8.4

million online subscribers as of May 2022, are exceptions.

The ability to succeed behind a paywall is largely “a factor of reputation and quality,” said Dr. Reo Song, associate professor of marketing at California State University at Long Beach.

Many papers offer digital news for minimal fees that they later increase, annoying and often losing readers. “For many small, local papers, a paywall is not successful,” Song said.

Chicago is a big city, with scores of monied foundations. But not every local newspaper in financial trouble is in a metropolis where so much money can be raised to sustain quality journalism.

Meanwhile, hundreds of nonprofit web sites have been founded in recent years to cover the local, state and national news in areas abandoned by newspapers. Most are not associated with television or radio nonprofits.

Among those digital nonprofits, there is still the issue of size and the ability to raise money from individuals and foundations. One 2019 study showed that of the \$469.5 million raised by foundations and donors between 2009 and 2015, three national nonprofits – ProPublica, the Center for Public Integrity and the Center for Investigative Reporting – took in 40 percent of that money.

In a larger context, hundreds of smaller nonprofits get by by on a shoestring, according to Bill Birnbauer of Monash University in Australia, who authored the study.

Chicago itself is hardly a news desert. The Midwest office of ProPublica is there. Its current lead piece is an investigation into a troubled Chicago

hospital. Chicago is also home to several innovative start-ups, such as City Bureau and Block Club Chicago, as well as

niche newspapers serving its rich diversity of ethnic groups and neighborhoods.

He suggested at the time that “some news sites may have to merge with local public radio and television broadcasters or other nonprofits to improve their viability.”

However, he wrote, “some may ultimately fold due to financial problems – no matter how well their work serves the public interest.”

“We want Chicago area residents to feel the Sun-Times is theirs, and something they want to participate in and contribute to,” new Sun-Times Executive Editor Jennifer Kho said in a statement. “Membership will give us another tool to deeply engage our community...Holding us accountable to our readers.”

Sharon Walsh is the founding editor of the nonprofit [PublicSource](#) in Pittsburgh and a long-time staff writer for The Washington Post.