



## **Trust Talks Episode 14: Building a Robust Media Landscape**

**Lauren Woods:** Hello, I am Lauren Woods and I have the privilege of stewarding the media and storytelling portfolio as a program manager at the Chicago Community Trust. Welcome to episode 14 of Trust Talks. When the Trust decided to pursue our ambitious goal of reducing the racial and ethnic wealth gap, we knew that we needed to equip residents with the civic tools they needed to respond to a systemic and systems level issue like the wealth gap. Through our Building Collective Power Strategy, we are working to enable residents to address the systemic ways the wealth gap impacts our everyday lives. Of the three focus areas of building collective power, people, how we connect residents to one another, voice, how we meet the information needs of all of Chicago and action, the ways residents work together to make collective impact. The voice pillar of our work is critical in shifting narratives, shaping conversations, and meeting the information needs of Chicago.

Our Media Maker Grant Program focuses on supporting local journalism, civic storytelling, media makers, and narrative building platforms. Since launching our strategy, we have awarded more than \$12 million to the local media ecosystem, deepening our understanding of the diverse and complex needs of our newsrooms. And even though Chicago is not a news desert, and even with the promising results we've seen through targeted interventions, more diverse reporting, more news coverage on the south and west sides, more authentic collaboration happening across newsrooms, we still cannot rest on our laurels because there remains a need for sustainable support and investments to ensure the longevity and impact of local news outlets. We are peers in a network of journalism funders across Chicago that include the MacArthur Foundation, Driehaus Foundation, Polk Brothers, The Joyce Foundation, The Field Foundation, all of whom have said yes to Press Forward. We have a coordinated ecosystem of newsrooms, media leaders who are highly collaborative and who work together.

So much so that we've already seen policy wins by pushing the city of Chicago to designate 50% of their ad dollars to be spent in local newsrooms. This all made it possible to say, what if? What if journalists, newsroom leaders, civic leaders and donors all came together to bring new dollars and their best thinking to how we will support our local media ecosystem in Chicago?

Now, before I continue, I want to pause and welcome our guests because they represent the diversity of thought and responsibility as we discuss the state of local news in Chicago. Joining us in today's conversation, we have Sylvia Rivera, Director of Local News from MacArthur Foundation. Welcome, Sylvia.

**Sylvia Rivera:** Thank you for having me.

**LW:** We have Mauricio Peña, Editorial Director of Borderless Magazine. Welcome, Mauricio.

**Mauricio Peña:** Thank you for having me.

**LW:** We have Mackenzie Warren, the Director of the Medill Local News Accelerator at Northwestern University.

**Mackenzie Warren:** It's a privilege to be here. Thank you for the invitation.

**LW:** And finally, we have Christie Hefner, businesswoman, convener, advocate, and enthusiastic donor of Press Forward Chicago.

**Christie Hefner:** Happy to be here.

**LW:** Welcome everybody. I have been waiting to have this conversation and to be in conversation with you all. With that, I want to ask my first question to you, Sylvia, you are the inaugural Director of Local News at the MacArthur Foundation, and on your short few weeks on the job, I'm sure you've been able to hear how communities across the country are expressing their needs as it relates to information. While Chicago has a unique story, can you talk a little bit about Press Forward, why this is important, and why a city with a diverse news ecosystem like Chicago should be a part of it?

**SR:** Well, first of all, thanks for the introduction and for the invitation. I've been on the job for the last few weeks, but I've been thinking about these issues my entire career. Press Forward is really a call to action and a national movement to leverage \$500 million to revitalize local news and information ecosystems across the country. We have seen that our democracy has been weakened by the fact that our civic infrastructure, which includes local news, has been weakened and that has really limited and impeded our ability to participate in ways that lead us to healthy communities. And so a lot of the conversations that led up to Press Forward as a national movement have been the result of decades now of disinvestment in local news, bad policies and legislation really that has led to the weakening of local news enterprises, media deregulation. Just the fact that over the last two decades we've seen local ownership of local press, of radio stations, of TV stations diminish.

And so now we're seeing the symptoms of decades now of this type of disinvestment. We're in this perilous sort of situation now of, "Oh wow, we can actually see the through line of what happens when these information spokes are weakened." We're actually seeing the effects of that now. And so that's why this imperative to rebuild this infrastructure came about. MacArthur has obviously taken a very central role in this call to action in leading others to think about all of the things that we can do in our communities and nationally to pool our resources together and to invest in this really important moment. Now that can't be done on its own. We can't fix in 5, even 10 years the issues that have been at play now for decades. And so what this is really going to take is a collaboration from a national and local level because ultimately it's the folks on the ground that know what the needs are best.

And so in addition to raising the \$500 million on a national level, we want to be able to catalyze an additional \$500 million from local communities via Press Forward chapters. And there's no better place than Chicago to really set up the example of what it looks like to have a strong information and news ecosystem. And although it's true that we are not in a news desert, we also know that even in places that don't consider themselves news deserts, we sometimes misrepresent and under-represent the most vulnerable communities in our city. So it's a really important point for reflection, but we have all of the assets to do the good work and that's why we're here today.

**LW:** Am I correct in hearing you say we want to raise an additional \$500 million?

**SR:** Collectively, yes. With all of the Press Forward local chapters, we know that we need billions to really think about how to influence and to strengthen the ecosystems across the country. And the sustainability models are not going to look the same for a larger, let's say, non-profit organization as it would be for, what I would call a micro news organization. These are all going to be different types of models and we all need to think about this collectively in terms of the revenue pie is going to look

differently across the board. And as a philanthropic community, we need to understand the nuances and the differences and be willing to invest both in the big and small.

**LW:** Mauricio, I want to invite your voice into the conversation because as the Editorial Director for Borderless Magazine, I'm wondering if you can add more texture to what Sylvia has just laid out for us, and talk a little bit about how the strength of a local news ecosystem influences your editorial decisions.

**MP:** Yeah, I think as Sylvia mentioned, I think Chicago is a very robust city in terms of its news ecosystem, but there are those gaps. I would argue that there is a language issue when it comes to, and maybe a news desert when it comes to language access to coverage. A third of the city is Spanish speaking, and we have seen some of the cuts that happen in newsrooms. The first thing that gets cut is Spanish language media. And so while we do have broadcast news, not everyone publishes in Spanish. We're missing 30% of the city. And so for me and Borderless, we make sure that we're publishing all of our stories in Spanish and we are reaching these gaps where frankly the entire ecosystem isn't meeting that need.

And so for us, we have a lot of conversations about what's missing and what we can do better as a newsroom. We have weekly staff meetings about what we're hearing, what we're getting from folks. A lot of immigrants reach out about resources that they just don't know. And so we have a lot of resource guides to make sure that these folks are getting this information they need, but that also informs the feature stories and the investigations that we're doing to hold city officials accountable to make sure that this group of folks is getting the coverage that they deserve. As a son of immigrants, I know how difficult it is to navigate those spaces to this day. I mean, I took my dad to the DMV in December to help translate for him and make sure that he's understanding. And so there's a lot of just basic information that people aren't getting and so that at Borderless I make sure that we're making decisions as a group to reach folks to get this basic information to them.

**LW:** As a follow-up, if you had to call out any specific capacity building needs that support all of what you just shared, what might you call out as something that would be helpful?

**MP:** Borderless is at an inflection point and we are making sure that we are building sustainably. For us, it's just getting the people power to do this coverage. I have a goal to make sure that we are increasing our output by the end of the year, and that takes people. So right now we're all hands on deck. I am doing some reporting as well as editing and supervising and mentoring, but that's part of it. I knew that when I signed up, when I joined the team that it is a very small but mighty team and I want to make sure that we're successful. So right now, I think it's just having the resources to add more reporters to cover all of the intersections of immigration issues, whether that's affordable housing, whether that's environment. A lot of people think of immigration as a very linear kind of topic, but there's so much intersection of immigration and immigrant communities deserve comprehensive coverage.

**LW:** Chicago is filled with a lot of small and mighty teams like Mauricio and Borderless. And I think this is a perfect allude to you Mackenzie and thinking from your position as the Director of the News Accelerator at Medill at Northwestern University, you hear a lot about the capacity building needs from organizations very similar to Mauricio, that range with small operating budgets and large operating budgets, all still having important and impactful stories to tell. Can you share a little bit about your work at the Accelerator, why that work is important and how an opportunity like Press Forward can complement the work that you're doing at Northwestern?

**MW:** Sure, I'd be glad to and thank you for that question, Lauren. First, I want to step back and say why the Local News Accelerator exists, and that's because we believe every Chicagoan has a birthright to trustworthy, accurate local news and information. That is a human right. And we've talked a little bit about whether Chicago is a news desert or Mauricio made the good point that there could be layers of news deserts. We could agree on, I think, this that the way news has been delivered traditionally in this country is part of a reinforcing loop of discrimination that we need to stop. So that's a key reason why the Local News Accelerator Exists.

The second key reason why it exists is the First Amendment is under assault. There are five freedoms enumerated in the First Amendment of the US Constitution, one being the freedom of speech and another being freedom of the press. And both of those are being retracted as we speak. And so we need the most robust local news and information organisms or sort of a patchwork of 105 that we know of here in Chicago alone to deliver the trustworthy news and information to every Chicagoan that they need.

Now to your question about how we work, I think is a little bit of your question. So the Local News Accelerator does three things. We deliver results through discipline and diversity. What I mean by results, it's not we're trying to or we're hoping to. It's that we are delivering new better business results and new better results against our local news organizations' missions that they stand for. So we're about to embark on a project working with Borderless Magazine here. We've worked with organizations large and small, profit, for profit, broadcast in television and radio, online only, print. The one thing that they share in common is that they need to beat and outrun outmoded business models. We are a business incubator designed to help news organizations of any kind exceed their performance right now.

**LW:** Wow, that work is certainly needed in Chicago and it is part of the abundance that exists in our city, and we think about the abundance of capacity, the abundance of resources that are available, and we see the work that is happening at Northwestern as being a part of a continuum of capacity building resources. If we were to extend that continuum of capacity building, we also think about a broader way of identifying problem solvers that are part of that continuum, and donors are certainly in that continuum of capacity and support. And so I want to invite you, Christie, into the conversation. I first met you in November at a fundraising dinner for Press Forward Chicago, and I learned some very interesting things about you that I think might inform why we have felt the warmth of your enthusiasm as it relates to Press Forward. Can you share a little bit about your personal history and why and how that informs your work as a donor?

**CH:** Well, I think what you're alluding to is what I shared about my first job after college, which was that I wrote film reviews for The Boston Phoenix. The Boston Phoenix followed in the tradition of The Chicago Reader, which was the first Alt-Weekly and like those publications was basically built around three pillars, robust arts and culture coverage, really strong political reportage, and investigative journalism. And the lesson for me of that experience apart from learning to write better was that my film editor was a woman named Janet Maslin, and if you're a film aficionado, that name might be familiar to you because she went on to be one of, in my opinion, the most distinguished film critics of The New York Times.

The reason why I think that's relevant is that while all of the work of the community-based local journalism enterprises that we're talking about here today are in and of themselves worthy, worthwhile and important, it is also true that they are the training grounds for the next generations of writers, storytellers, and journalists. And without those, we don't have a pipeline either of the stories that otherwise would not get told or the diverse talent that we need to tell those stories. So that was my early introduction to the importance of smaller media outlets and the role that they could play in not

only delivering impactful coverage and journalism to the communities, but also being these training and breeding grounds.

I also have had the good fortune of being on the board of the Nation Institute and working two years pro bono as publisher of the Columbia Journalism Review, where we worked to sort of transform it from being a more trade-oriented publication to a multimedia publication and digital platform that really looked at the importance of business models for the future of journalism and what in fact journalism was going to mean in the 21st century. And then obviously in my 20 years as CEO of Playboy Enterprises, we transformed the company from a publishing company to a media company. And more recently I worked with Edwin Eisendrath in getting the Sun-Times on a sustainable path and then spinning off The Reader and then getting The Reader transitioned to non-profit.

So I've had the opportunity to work in different aspects of the media as well as with a family-owned newspaper and television company. I think as has been said very eloquently here, it's hard to overstate the importance of what we're talking about here. We talk a lot about the diminishing trust in media and we talk a lot about the risks of misinformation and disinformation as threats to our and other country's democracies, and those are real concerns and threats. What an institution like Press Forward and its ability to support and amplify an ecosystem represents is a way to actually address those problems, to not just identify them but actually impact them. Because in spite of the relatively low lack of trust of the media writ large, there's quite high trust in local media and community media. And so whether it's about getting information out about what happens if you fill out the census or where to get vaccinated or how to register to vote, it's really, really critical that there are outlets that people can turn to that they trust and that foster, not polarization and divisiveness, but sense of community.

**MW:** Could I offer a sign of hope in picking up on something that Christie said. In the United States, we know that engagement with news is down, but it's actually strong and growing in the south and west sides according to our research.

Secondly, trust, the point Christie was just making right now, across the board in the United States is down but is consistently high and growing amongst readers on the south and west sides in Chicago.

And third, fascinatingly, willingness to pay is skyrocketing amongst residents on the south and west side. Now that's the part of the city that you might expect all three of those dynamics to be going actually the other way, and I think it speaks to the strength and credibility of local news. So the trust crisis and the pay crisis and the engagement crisis that we're facing in the United States is expressed and we see it and we feel it at the national level, but that's where I think there's this opportunity for local media to pour in.

**LW:** I really appreciate the call-out for trust because I think that as we've said all in this conversation, Press Forward is really more than a grant making opportunity. It is a new way to think about all of the players that are involved and to think about how we share responsibility and the sustainability of local news. This is a little bit [inaudible 00:23:01], but I would love to just know your heart's thinking as it relates to trust. How do we build trust?

**MP:** I think one thing that I saw at my time at DNAinfo at Block Club Chicago and at Borderless, I mean it's that on the ground reporting that engenders that trust. I think in particular at Block Club, I was a southwest side reporter founding reporting team member at Block Club and people saw ... You were the figure, you were the person that they knew and got to know. And so just seeing you at meetings, seeing reporters at meetings being accessible, I think that's just so important and can't be overstated.

**CH:** I think, as Mauricio said, it's that understanding that it's not just for the community. It's of the community. And I think that's critical in terms of credibility. I also think though on the journalists and journalism enterprises side, there's a real need for and a benefit from transparency. There's a tendency to assume that people understand how that works and they don't. The best example I can give is actually something that appeared in what is a relatively new column in The New York Times, which is certainly an established, well-respected publication. But itself recognized the need to be more transparent about how journalism works, which they do in part through the column that they publish on the inside front cover about the story behind the story.

And the example that I use is they learn that a very significant percentage of their readers thought that an anonymous source literally meant someone calling up and saying, "Lauren, I heard that Sylvia is actually cheating on her taxes." I don't give my name, I don't tell you anything else. And then you write the story and say, "An anonymous source reported that Sylvia was cheating on her taxes." Do not understand that it's a vetted source, that is vetted by more than one source, that there's a reason why they're choosing and a legitimate one not to be named. It seems like a small thing, but it's a big thing if you think when you're reading a story and it does not name the source that that means it simply was somebody calling anonymously with a tip. So that obligation to be transparent will also I think help build trust.

**SR:** For the record, fake news.

**CH:** Exactly. I took the outrageous example I could think of Sylvia.

**SR:** But just to build on that, I mean, I think you are touching on a point related to media literacy and civic literacy in general because I think that that's part of the work that we have to do as an ecosystem is to really think about the fact that there has been a gap for so long and that some of the work that needs to be done is to really train the community and to engage with the community in a way that makes this news and information that we're trying to deliver accessible. And especially in this area with so much misinformation and disinformation that folks can distinguish fake news. And so often it really becomes an issue of life and death. We saw that in the pandemic. And we saw the fact that if you did not have access to reliable, accessible, trustworthy information, the most vulnerable communities in Chicago, especially in Black and brown communities, were at most risk of being impacted. We see how that plays out in real life.

**LW:** I want to do a round of questions and I want you to answer them in 30 seconds or less. What excites you about this movement that we are a part of, that Press Forward is presenting? What is exciting? And then if you would like, you can also share what are you challenged by, but I want to start with the things that excite us about this moment.

**CH:** Well, one of the things that excites me, media from different perspectives is that this initiative, I think very clearly is going to foster shared learning and shared services, and those are two really powerful multipliers for a robust ecosystem that is very hard in the absence of entities that can bring people together as a convener, as a way of looking at what others are doing and finding those aspects that are not the journalism, but the support system for the journalism that doesn't have to be replicated by everybody. Because there's an extraordinary amount of really exciting journalism going on and really impressive entrepreneurship going on, but it tends to be disconnected from each other. Not surprising. That would be true in any industry unless there is a connector. And so without in any way, minimizing

the impact of the financial support for scale, I'm especially also excited about the idea of shared learning and shared services.

**MP:** I think I'm excited about transformative moment that we're in to be able to reach a lot of underserved communities in Chicago and across the nation really. But I think in Chicago particularly, this is a moment for a lot of non-profit small organizations to partner together to reach those underserved communities that haven't been served well. That's the excitement that I have around Press Forward.

**MW:** I'm excited on the demand side and on the supply side. So on the demand side, there's never been more consumption of news and information than today. More so than there was yesterday and the day before. The total tonnage of news being consumed and the amount of time that we're spending in our days, scrolling, reading, absorbing, analyzing, has never been greater. And on the supply side, smart young people still want to be journalists, despite all evidence to the contrary that it may be a dangerous, unrewarding, unfulfilling career path that's got twists and turns that you may not like, they're up for it. And so we will continue to have great news, content, information coming at us and an abundant opportunity to consume it.

**SR:** Well, just to add to that, I'm excited about how this moment has galvanized all of us who not only care about local news and information, but that care about racial justice, that care about public health, that care about education, that care about all of these things that I think we had not found a through line to tie this moment and the importance of thinking about how this is really the spoke that ties all of this together. So I'm excited about the moment and the movement, and I like drifting away from the news desert narrative because I think there are assets in all of our communities that we should look at this from an asset-based perspective. You're right, Christie, the moment is right in terms of we're building together, we're learning together, there's food for everyone at the table and that we can all eat. And so I think that that's what this movement is really about.

**CH:** I think just building on that too, there seems to be a kind of inflection point with regard to the way people are thinking about what is necessary to support local, independent media. And if previously a lot of the thinking was just a kind of hand-wringing about the more journalists jobs lost than coal miner jobs, a third of the country living in news deserts, all the stats that we're well aware of. But not a sense of there was anything that I could do about it as an individual or as a company or as someone who influenced a foundation.

Now there's this kind of awakening, if you will, that just as we think about our arts and cultural institutions as being on a spectrum, some of which are very sustainable and successful as for-profit entities, but others of which only flourish because there is a mix of earned income and contributed income. And we would never think that we wanted to live in a country where the only arts and cultural institutions we had access to were those that could survive to the Hunger Games analogy, simply on earned income. Think of how poor all of our cities and communities would be. And if we can make that pivot so that people feel both a sense of obligation but also a sense of satisfaction from being part of participating in the donated portion of the ecosystem that allows it to be as robust as it is, that's really exciting.

**LW:** As a grant maker, the most immediate challenge is how do we raise more money so that we can give more money away? I do think that it is important and is responsible for us in this conversation, again, to specifically name some of those challenges that may be an opportunity for this community that we're building to be ambitious and bold in a pursuit of working to address. So what is one specific

challenge that you would want to call out and invite our community that is joining together for a moment like Press Forward to really consider?

**MW:** I think one of the big problems, and it's something that the Local News Accelerator is set out to cure, is projects that get going without a true compass and map. So we undertake bespoke research for our partners that is specific to an existential project that they're taking on. And once you've done the research, now you've got a game plan. Now you can really make some good decisions and you can make some good alterations and you can make some adaptations and you can find partnerships and you can do deals without the bespoke research. And so I think that's a lot of organizations' get up and go without really having done the necessary research for this crucial project, whatever it is that they're working on. And that's something that we're setting out to eradicate.

**CH:** Well, I can think of two challenges, but I also think that Press Forward's existence addresses them. So I'll do both if that's okay.

**LW:** I like that.

**CH:** One challenge really, Sylvia alluded to when she was talking about the through line and the interconnectedness of different things, and on the challenge side, I would frame it as people saying, "Well, yes, this is important. Independent journalism is important. Community news is important. But my priority is climate change. My priority is reproductive rights. My priority is immigration reform. My priority is arts and culture, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera." And that's completely legitimate. And anyone's resources, to your point, Lauren, are not infinite. What I think Press Forward offers is a framing that helps people see how integrally important robust community-based local journalism is in all of those issue areas. In informing communities, in advocating for communities, in actually moving forward on those issues.

And the second would be, I think for a lot of potential donors who might similarly say, "Well, yes, I think this is important, but we don't have a journalism program officer, and frankly, we're a little nervous if we support this one entity and something gets published and someone on our board doesn't like it, that creates a problem." And again, those are legitimate concerns. What Press Forward represents is a vetted way to support the ecosystem without having to make individual decisions, without having to invest in the knowledge and expertise to be able to choose individual publications to support, but to know that you're actually making a difference.

**LW:** For our last question, I want to end in a very, very high note, a blue sky note. What is your blue sky vision for what local media could be in the future if everyone felt responsible for its sustainability? And then the second part to that question is, what specific action might one take to get us there?

**MW:** The second question is harder than the first, I think. As I was thinking about this, I want outcomes that are good in the community beyond just having great journalism because great journalism in and of itself is more of a means than an end. I want better health outcomes, I want better educational outcomes, I want better home ownership outcomes. And this speaks to the wealth gap that you're referring to. And so I would like to see journalism measure its success by improvements in the community, not improvements in its circulation or its bottom line. I mean, actually Borderless is probably the closest thing I can think of, but when was the last time a news organization said, "You know what? Our metric of success was 5,000 women that didn't have a mammogram, got one in this neighborhood that has low rate of screening?" That would be a hell of an outcome. And if we could



express success by achieving those things rather than sort of more trite business outcomes, like did we make this line item this month on this budget, that would be something a little bit more transformational than what we have right now.

**SR:** I agree with this idea that we all deserve to live in healthy and prosperous communities, and I think that having access to trustworthy news and information is critical. It's essential for just our civic health. And thinking about the responsibility now as funders, and I was recently on the other side, I was on the side of how do I get someone to invest in my idea, in my mission, in these folks that are doing the essential work for their community? And so now being on this side, I'm thinking about how do we equitably distribute resources to the folks that need it the most? How can we have the most impact? How do we measure the community impact that these civic media projects are really driving and leading?

**CH:** I think the one thing I would add consistent with the idea of impact and outcome because of the perilous times we're living in right now by which I'm referring to just the instability of democratic values and confidence in democracy, is we know how strong the cause and effect is between access to credible news that holds government officials accountable, that reports on whether people are actually getting the services that they deserve and need, that reports on elections and election results is with the participation in democracy, whether that's the percentage of people who vote or people running for office or challengers to incumbency. And at a time where there are large pressures out there trying to discourage people from having faith in government and in democracy, the power of, to your question Lauren, a really robust ecosystem of strong local news serving all of our communities, to have not instead of the other things that have been mentioned. But that particular singular impact of restoring more faith in and therefore more participation in democracy would be a really powerful result.

**LW:** I think that's the best place to put the pin in the conversation. This is an ongoing conversation that does not stop at this episode. If you are interested in learning more about Press Forward Chicago, visit us at [pressforwardchicago.org](http://pressforwardchicago.org). I want to thank my esteemed guests, Silvia, Christie, Mackenzie, Mauricio. A special thanks to my colleagues at the Trust, in particular, the Strategic Communications and Community Impact team. I want to thank Reparations Media and the Sound Foundation for helping us to produce Trust Talks, and I want to thank you all of our loyal listeners for tuning into this episode. Thank you everybody.