



Alliance for Trust in Media

MINNESOTA JOURNALISM CENTER

HUBBARD SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM & MASS COMMUNICATION



Research Brief: *Chicago Sun-Times* Texting Initiative

About the Initiative

When the Democratic party convened in Chicago for their national convention in August 2024, the *Chicago Sun-Times* saw an opportunity to engage with audiences in a new way. With the support of the Alliance for Trust in Media, the *Sun-Times* contracted with the SMS texting platform Subtext to distribute updates to readers about how the convention and any accompanying protests were affecting their city. The *Sun-Times* used its existing channels and those of Chicago Public Media to invite audience members to sign-up, receiving occasional messages from Ellery Jones, innovation editor at the *Chicago Sun-Times* and WBEZ, who served as the “voice” and the “face” of the initiative, texting with a personalized, informal, and conversational tone.



The initiative carried on beyond the convention as the *Sun-Times* converted the group into a place to receive regular updates about the corruption trial of former Illinois House Speaker Michael J. Madigan. The pitch to readers was to “be the first to know when the jury reaches a verdict and go behind the scenes to see the impact the case will have on Illinois.”

Welcome to the DNC Group Chat, Chicago.



I'm Ellery Jones — I work on the digital team at the Sun-Times.

The 2024 Democratic National Convention will be a momentous event for Chicago. Inside the United Center, the Democratic Party will be rallying around Vice President Kamala Harris, the party's nominee after a last-minute decision from President Joe Biden to not run for reelection, and Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, Harris' pick for vice president.

Outside, massive pro-Palestinian and other protests [are expected](#). Organizers say they expect [as many as 25,000 people](#) to participate.

The Chicago Police Department is preparing for mass arrests, going so far as to [revive a defunct courtroom](#) at a Chicago police station to handle them. [CPD's handling of past protests](#) looms large over the convention, which has drawn [comparisons to the 1968 DNC](#).

A Chicago convention deserves local Chicago coverage, and I'm here to help you decode the DNC.

During the Democratic National Convention and through the presidential election in November, I'll be sending breaking news updates, articles and analysis to the DNC Group Chat. I'll keep you up to date on all the latest action both inside and outside the United Center with free text messages. From road closures and protests to political maneuvering and speeches, we've got you covered.

You can [sign up below](#) or text ELECTION to 260-233-9818.

I'm looking forward to hearing from you!



Research Questions: What Did We Hope to Learn?

We wanted to understand:

- What types of readers signed up to participate in this texting initiative?
- How does engaging with the *Sun-Times* in this way impact recipients' sense of trust and connection with the organization?

How We Studied the Initiative

The research we conducted involved three main components:

- First, we collected the messages exchanged on the platform over the course of the initiative and are analyzing the style and content of the messages broadcast over the course of the initiative and the (anonymized) responses from recipients who signed up to participate in the experiment. Note: this part of the analysis is ongoing.
- Second, We distributed a survey on the texting platform, inviting participants to answer several questions about who they are (e.g., their demographics, political attitudes, engagement with news) and tell us more about why they signed up and what they liked and disliked about the initiative itself. We received a modest response rate ($N = 163$). Those who completed the survey were eligible to opt-in to a lottery for a gift card.
- Third, we also conducted follow-up in-depth virtual interviews ($N = 26$) during the latter half of 2025, with those willing to discuss their experiences with researchers. These interviews allowed us to delve more deeply into why participants signed up for the texting initiative and how engaging with the *Sun-Times* in this way affected their views of the organization.

Key Findings

Participants who had signed up to receive text messages and participated in the survey skewed older and were highly engaged with news:

- Most were existing readers of the *Chicago Sun-Times* with positive views toward the organization
- Most were closely connected to journalism in some fashion with more than six-in-ten (61%) saying they “knew a journalist personally,” which is several times higher than the national average.
- A majority (51%) were 55 years old or older
- Most were highly interested in politics (52% “extremely” and 41% “very interested”)

Participants generally said they liked receiving information from the *Sun-Times* via text-message.

- Respondents overwhelmingly described Ellery, the voice of the initiative, as “authentic,” “friendly,” and “professional.” Interview participants, in particular, emphasized that while striking a sociable tone was critical, they would be open to replication of this approach by other media professionals or personalities.

Participants had an overwhelmingly positive experience

Poor
 Neutral
 Good
 Excellent



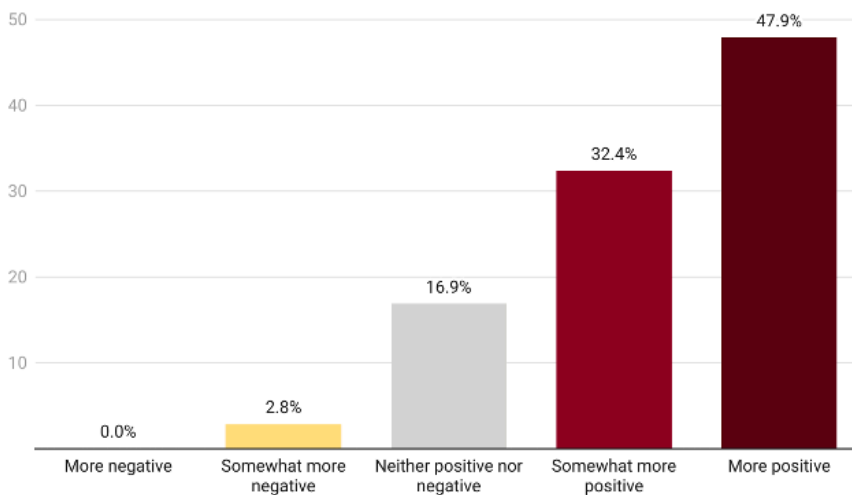
Note: Respondents were asked “Overall, how would you rate your experience receiving text messages from the *Chicago Sun-Times*?”

Chart: Alliance for Trust in Media • Source: Survey of participants in Sun-Times texting initiative ($N = 163$) • Created with Datawrapper

- With respect to the content of text messages, interview participants appreciated information that felt “exclusive,” ultimately fostering a kind of parasocial relationship from the knowledge that “there are real people behind these texts”
- Interviewees also emphasized the value of news updates that were simultaneously timely and “place-based”

Although most were already generally trusting toward the *Sun-Times*, the majority of survey respondents also said that receiving messages through the initiative contributed toward a more positive feeling toward the organization.

Participants said receiving text messages made them feel much more positive about the Sun-Times



Note: Respondents were asked “To what extent did receiving text messages from the Chicago Sun-Times make you feel more or less positive about the Chicago Sun-Times as an organization?”

Chart: Alliance for Trust in Media • Source: Survey of participants in Sun-Times texting initiative (N = 163) • Created with Datawrapper

Implications and Next Steps

- We are continuing to analyze the corpus of text messages as well as results from our in-depth interviews to better understand people’s motivations for signing up and what they generally got out of the experience.
- Our preliminary findings suggest that this initiative was mainly successful in reaching already relatively deeply engaged audiences and primarily offered an avenue for deepening those existing relationships with the organization. Those who did sign-up to participate generally valued the convenience and accessibility of receiving news and information in this format.
- The findings point to the importance of recruitment strategies for getting the word out to audiences who are otherwise less engaged with news and therefore unlikely to hear about the opportunity through conventional channels.
- The success of the initiative also seems to be relatively conditional on the personality and voice of the staffer who represents the organization in most of the exchanges.