Chicago Sun-Times AI-generated summer reading list

IMPLEMENTED 2025 · MEDIA AND PUBLISHING · US · BAND F · PARTLY PROVED
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A bought-in summer section in the Chicago Sun-Times recommended books that do not exist. Its freelance writer said he used AI and did not check the output. The paper removed the section, did not charge subscribers for the edition and later published a newsroom AI policy.

ABOUT THIS SYNOPSIS

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NOTICE WORDING LAST UPDATED 16 NOVEMBER 2026

AT A GLANCE

What went wrong: AI output or malfunction; Weak oversight or controls.

AI used: Generative AI used by a freelance writer to help produce a syndicated section; the tool is not named.

Implemented: 2025. Grade: band F, Failure, Partly proved.

Headline result, as reported: Sun-Times review found 10 of 15 recommended books did not exist and every checked story had errors, May 2025

1 · The case

The facts, as reported by the 5 sources listed at the end. Where a source is silent, the field says "Not reported".

Organisation

Chicago Public Media (Chicago Sun-Times), with King Features (Hearst). Chicago daily newspaper run by Chicago Public Media, its nonprofit owner, which also runs WBEZ. In March 2025 the paper announced that 20% of its staff had accepted buyouts, per NPR. Canvas block: 8. Governance and risk. Also 4. Operations and process, 3. Customers and proposition.

Business challenge

The challenge. Chicago Public Media's chief executive, Melissa Bell, said buying special sections from King Features was a creative way to keep hitting revenue goals during the move from print to digital revenue. Staff-written sections had taken time from daily work, by her account.

How it was addressed. For two years the Sun-Times gave home-delivery print readers about 10 special sections a year, at an extra $3 each, per WBEZ. The 'Heat Index' summer section was bought from King Features, a Hearst unit, and written almost entirely by a freelance writer. It was not submitted to Sun-Times journalists for review and was published without saying King had produced it. The writer said he used AI to help produce the content and did not check what it generated. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

Who implemented it

King Features (Hearst) (Industry partner): Syndicator that produced and sold the special section.
The AI was used by a freelance writer working for King Features; the tool is not named.

Technology (SEAM pillar E)

SEAM types: not established; the sources do not say how the system works. Deployment: Not reported. Vendors and products: Not reported.

Where it was built in: Used by a freelance writer working for King Features to help write the 'Heat Index' section; not used by the Sun-Times newsroom.

What changed

Before: syndicated special sections inserted under the Sun-Times banner without newsroom review. After: the section was removed from the digital edition and e-paper archive, subscribers were not charged for the edition, the paper said it would identify third-party content in print, and Chicago Public Media said it would stop buying editorial sections from King. Its newsroom AI policy, updated February 2026, says AI-generated content must never be published without human review. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

Cost of failure

Print subscribers were not charged for the premium edition, per CBS News; such sections normally cost home-delivery readers an extra $3, per WBEZ. King Features ended its relationship with the writer. Total cost: Not reported.

What it saved

Not reported [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

Governance and control

The section bypassed newsroom review, by the chief executive's account, and she set out a series of human mistakes by the writer, King Features, the Sun-Times and Chicago Public Media. King Features said it had a strict policy against AI-created content and the writer had not disclosed his AI use; the writer told the Sun-Times he found no AI policy in his contracts. The February 2026 newsroom policy requires human review of AI-generated content and created an internal AI Oversight Committee.

S2 · Accountable owner · Claimed
Chief executive Melissa Bell set out human mistakes by the writer, King Features, the Sun-Times and Chicago Public Media, and said she had approved continuing the practice without investigating the editions. [3]

A1 · Safe use · Claimed
The newsroom AI policy, updated February 2026, limits generative AI to permitted uses and prohibits generating editorial content without human authorship and oversight. [5]

A2 · Human in the loop · Missing (independent source shows it was absent)
The section was inserted into the paper without review from the editorial team, by the chief executive's account and the newsroom's report. [2] [3]

A3 · Monitoring and assurance · Claimed
After publication the newsroom fact-checked the section and found errors throughout; the 2026 policy sets up an internal AI Oversight Committee. [3] [5]

A4 · Vendor AI · Missing (independent source shows it was absent)
King Features said it banned AI-created content but the writer used AI without disclosing it; the content reached print without the paper's own checks. [2] [3]

A5 · Agent controls · Not reported
The chief executive said the freelancer used an AI agent; no controls over it are reported. [2]

A6 · Standards and regulation · Not reported
No regulator or court action reported.

What worked, what did not, what is unproven

WORKED

– Not reported

DID NOT

– Ten of the 15 recommended books did not exist, per the Sun-Times review.

– All 10 stories with named sources had multiple errors, and some included phony sources and quotes, per the review.

– The section was published under a Sun-Times banner without newsroom review or a third-party label, by the chief executive's account.

UNPROVEN

– How King Features changed its own checks after its internal review: Not reported.

– How many papers beyond the Sun-Times and The Philadelphia Inquirer carried the section: Not reported.

Timeline

May 2025 Syndicated 'Heat Index' section with a partly fake reading list runs in the Sunday Sun-Times on 18 May [3]

May 2025 Chicago Public Media's chief executive says the list was made with an AI tool; the paper removes it from the digital edition [2]

May 2025 Newsroom review finds errors across the section; Chicago Public Media says it will stop buying editorial sections from King Features [3]

Feb 2026 Chicago Public Media newsroom AI policy updated, requiring human review of any AI-generated content [5]

2 · Grade and SEAM assessment

MarLuc's opinion, made on the evidence above. How cases are graded: marluc.co.uk/case-studies/how-we-rate

Level of change and impact

Claimed: Not applicable. Grade: F, Failure. Proof: Partly proved. Level of change: Not graded.

No level assessed: band F, published false information in a bought-in section, removed and not charged for. The AI was used by a supplier's freelance writer, not by the newsroom.

The SEAM view and lessons learnt

The failure sat at the join between a supplier and the publisher: content bought to meet revenue goals went out under the paper's name without its editorial checks. The tool was used by the freelancer, but the cost to trust fell on the paper. For a larger organisation, bought-in content published under its brand needs the same checks and AI terms as its own.

1. Put AI use and disclosure terms in supplier and freelance contracts.
2. Review bought-in content before it carries your brand.
3. Label third-party content so readers know who produced it.

Evidence

Score 2 of 4. Organisation's own review: the Sun-Times newsroom fact-checked the section, reported by WBEZ; independent reporting by NPR, NBC News and CBS News.

Evaluation method. Organisation's own fact-check of the section, published by its newsroom; press reporting.

Sources disagree. King Features said the writer broke its strict policy against using AI to create content; the writer told the Sun-Times he reviewed his contracts with King and found no AI policy.

Status. Closed: section removed in May 2025. Chicago Public Media's newsroom AI policy was updated on 13 February 2026.

3 · Original sources

Read these in full. To challenge a fact or a grade, use the contact form at marluc.co.uk or the link on https://marluc.co.uk/case-studies/chicago-sun-times-ai-summer-reading-list

[1] NPR: How an AI-generated summer reading list got published in major newspapers
https://www.npr.org/2025/05/20/nx-s1-5405022/fake-book-list-ai-chicago-sun-times

[2] NBC News: Chicago Sun-Times admits summer book guide included fake AI-generated titles
https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/chicago-sun-admits-summer-book-guide-included-fake-ai-generated-titles-rcna208325

[3] WBEZ: Special section with fake book list plagued with additional errors, Sun-Times review finds
https://www.wbez.org/media/2025/05/30/special-section-king-fake-book-list-errors-sun-times-review

[4] CBS News Chicago: Summer reading list with AI-generated titles of books that don't exist runs in Chicago Sun-Times
https://www.cbsnews.com/chicago/news/summer-reading-ai-generated-titles-chicago-sun-times/

[5] Chicago Public Media: Acceptable Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy in the Chicago Public Media Newsroom (updated February 2026)
https://chicago.suntimes.com/ai-policy

Chicago Public Media (Chicago Sun-Times), with King Features (Hearst) website: https://chicago.suntimes.com

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