

## FROM REACH TO RELATIONSHIP

Insights from a Knowledge Exchange on Audience  
Engagement Strategies for Public Interest Media in Europe  
PM4D Webinar Knowledge Brief | 12 February 2026

### CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

Independent public interest media across Europe are operating in an environment shaped by audience fragmentation, platform dependency, attention scarcity and persistent financial pressure. In this context, audience engagement is no longer a secondary communications function, but an increasingly central part of editorial strategy, distribution planning and long-term sustainability.

This knowledge exchange, organised under the Pluralistic Media for Democracy (PM4D) programme, brought together 34 participants from 21 media organisations across 11 European countries to examine how independent outlets are building stronger relationships with their audiences through practical, low-lift engagement and storytelling strategies.

The session was designed as a practitioner-led peer exchange grounded in newsroom experience rather than external theory. Two contributors anchored the discussion: **Michaela Pichová**, Editor-in-Chief of *Naše Broumovsko* in the Czech Republic, and **Alex Enăşescu**, founder of *Iaşul Nostru* in Romania. Their presentations offered two distinct but complementary entry points into the same challenge: how to remain relevant, visible and trusted in local information environments where audience attention is difficult to earn and sustain.

The exchange also drew on the reflections of participating media organisations, whose questions and observations helped surface broader tensions around distribution, community connection and the uncertain path from audience growth to sustainability. This brief synthesises the main lessons, patterns and implications that emerged from the event.

### FROM AUDIENCE REACH TO AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIP

A central idea running through the exchange was that meaningful audience engagement cannot be reduced to visibility metrics alone. The discussion suggested a broader shift from thinking primarily about reach toward thinking about relationship: not simply how many people encounter content, but whether audiences recognise themselves in it, trust it and see continued value in returning to it.

This distinction mattered in both case studies. In one, engagement was built through field-based, community-centred reporting that strengthened recognition and belonging among local residents. In the other, engagement emerged through a strategic rethinking of distribution, where platform-native journalism helped an outlet become more visible, relatable and commercially legible to both audiences and advertisers.

Rather than presenting audience engagement as a communications add-on, the session showed it to be an organisational capacity that cuts across editorial choices, product design, distribution strategy and business development. Strong journalism remained essential, but on its own it was not considered sufficient.

### COMMUNITY-CENTRED JOURNALISM AS ENGAGEMENT PRACTICE

The presentation from *Naše Broumovsko* illustrated how audience engagement can be built through proximity, participation and representation. Working in the Broumovsko micro-region, a peripheral border area with around 20,000 inhabitants, the outlet has developed a strongly local orientation shaped by everyday reporting on towns, villages and residents whose lives are often overlooked in national media.

Its PM4D-supported project, *Voices of Broumovsko*, focused on three groups that are often marginalised in public discourse: workers, seniors and young people under 30. The project paired professional journalists with local community reporters, used fieldwork methods and structured interviews, and produced written profiles, videos, Instagram shorts and a public debate.

This approach generated both tangible outputs and broader relational effects. According to the presentation, the project produced 82 multimedia outputs involving 26 respondents, while the outlet also reported feedback that interviewees were later recognised in public, readers began suggesting new personalities to cover, and the newsroom felt it was genuinely becoming a community media outlet.

What stands out here is that engagement was not treated as a matter of posting more content on more channels. It was built by making local people visible, giving space to external contributors and creating conditions in which audiences could recognise the outlet as part of community life rather than as a distant information provider.

## DISTRIBUTION AS A STRATEGIC FUNCTION

The presentation from *Iaşul Nostru* offered a different diagnosis of the audience challenge. Founded in 2021 as a weekly local newsletter in Iași, Romania's second-largest city, the outlet had achieved some recognition and paid subscribers, yet remained stuck in growth terms.

The crucial insight from this case was that the main problem was not content quality but distribution. The newsletter had reached around 6,000 subscribers, including 150 paid subscribers, but the presentation argued that newsletters are inherently difficult to share and that the newsroom had focused too heavily on journalism while underinvesting in distribution and sales.

This led to a strategic pivot toward Instagram as a primary journalism channel, supported by a 5,000 euro micro-grant and a clearer recognition that the outlet needed a second channel capable of producing a cascade of favourable outcomes. The project developed platform-native formats including interviews, profiles, vox pops, local business spotlights, explainers and reels.

One year later, the reported outcome was a roughly 30-fold increase in Instagram engagement, entirely organic, alongside inbound advertising requests and a stronger sense that the outlet was moving closer to sustainability. The broader lesson was not that Instagram is universally the answer, but that distribution must be treated as a strategic capability rather than an afterthought.

## SOCIAL MEDIA BEYOND DIRECT MONETISATION

A recurring concern among participants was uncertainty about how to monetise social media. This uncertainty has often delayed investment in platforms even when outlets recognise their growing importance for visibility and audience contact.

The exchange helped reframe this dilemma. Both the case studies and the participant discussion suggested that social media can generate substantial value even when direct monetisation remains limited or unclear, because its contribution often appears indirectly through trust, recognition, advertiser confidence, partnerships and grant readiness.

This point was especially visible in the Romanian example, where stronger Instagram performance translated into inbound advertising interest, and in the Czech case, where social platforms amplified stories that deepened community recognition and legitimacy. In both cases, social media was valuable not only as a traffic source but as a space where identity, relevance and credibility were actively constructed.

The discussion also challenged the assumption that virality should be the primary objective. As Alex Enăscescu argued, a video reel with very high reach may still have less impact than a distinctive explanatory piece that better serves audience understanding and connection. This suggests that strategic engagement depends less on chasing raw scale than on developing formats that audiences find specifically relevant, recognisable and emotionally resonant.

## PARTICIPATION, TRUST AND OFFLINE PRESENCE

One of the strongest messages to emerge from the event was that community connection is built through more than digital optimisation. In the *Voices of Broumovsko* case, field reporting, pair work between journalists and local contributors, public-facing debate and direct interaction with respondents all helped strengthen trust and deepen the outlet's social embeddedness.

This matters because many local media operate in contexts where legitimacy cannot be taken for granted. In peripheral or underserved regions, audience engagement may depend as much on whether people feel seen, heard and fairly represented as on whether content performs well in algorithmic systems.

The practical implication is that offline presence and participatory methods can be as important as digital reach. The event's discussion repeatedly pointed toward engagement as a long-term process of recognition and reciprocity, not simply a set of audience acquisition tactics.

## METRICS, OUTCOMES AND WHAT THEY DO NOT CAPTURE

The case studies included several concrete indicators of progress. *Naše Broumovsko* reported website readership for interviews ranging from 300 to 3,000 readers per article, Facebook views of up to 25,000 for shared interviews and up to 80,000 for reels, growth has been steady across the outlet's social media platforms throughout the project's period, leading to the creation of a new YouTube channel as well.

*Iaşul Nostru* reported that its Instagram engagement spiked within a year and that the outlet began receiving inbound advertising requests after the pivot to platform-native storytelling.

Yet the session also stressed that such metrics are only part of the story. The impact of PM4D-supported experimentation is not reflected only in clicks or follower counts, but also in stronger community relevance, greater confidence to innovate and improved positioning within local information ecosystems.

This is an important corrective. Audience engagement work often produces qualitative outcomes before it produces stable revenue, and some of its most significant effects may be reputational, relational or organisational rather than immediately financial.

## WHAT LOCAL MEDIA ARE GRAPPLING WITH

The participant discussion reinforced the relevance of both case studies. Common concerns included low click-through rates from social media to websites, difficulty sustaining attention for long-form content and hesitation about investing in channels whose monetisation pathways remain unclear.

These concerns reveal a broader challenge facing many independent media outlets: websites still matter as spaces of depth, credibility and archive, but they no longer function as the dominant entry point for audience discovery. This changes the practical terms on which local journalism must compete for attention.

Participants' reflections also suggest that engagement strategy is inseparable from local context. Available skills, organisational size, product maturity, market conditions and platform culture all shape what is realistic. The event did not produce a single model for success; instead, it highlighted the importance of aligning engagement choices with editorial identity, audience behaviour and internal capacity.

## WHAT THE KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SUGGESTS

Several conclusions emerged clearly from the exchange. First, distribution should be understood as a core strategic function rather than a downstream promotional task. Second, social media can create meaningful business value even when direct monetisation is weak or absent. Third, community-centred journalism strengthens not only relevance and trust, but also the long-term conditions for resilience.

The event underscored that audience engagement is most effective when it is grounded in clear editorial judgement. Neither case study advocated producing content solely to satisfy platform incentives. Instead, both pointed to the importance of building distinctive formats that are adapted to audience realities without surrendering journalistic purpose.

Finally, the exchange reaffirmed the value of peer learning. By comparing different approaches to community reporting, platform strategy and audience growth, participating outlets were able to move beyond abstract debate and examine the practical trade-offs involved in reaching, serving and sustaining local audiences under real-world constraints.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR MEDIA ORGANISATIONS AND SUPPORT PROGRAMMES

### For media organisations:

- Treat audience engagement as a cross-cutting strategic function linking editorial work, product thinking, distribution and business development.
- Invest in formats and channels that audiences actually use, while keeping editorial identity and audience relevance at the centre.
- Recognise that social media may create indirect value through trust, visibility and advertiser confidence before it produces direct income.
- Use participatory and field-based reporting methods where possible to strengthen legitimacy, recognition and community connection.

### For funders and support actors:

- Continue supporting experimentation that allows outlets to test new engagement and distribution approaches with manageable risk.
- Value qualitative outcomes such as trust, representation and organisational confidence alongside quantitative metrics.
- Recognise that local relevance and sustainability are often strengthened through context-specific strategies rather than standardised models.
- Support peer exchange as a practical mechanism for spreading applicable knowledge across diverse media environments.