

Local media: Surviving and thriving in a news desert

Lessons learned from Local Media for Democracy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Local Media for Democracy was a pioneering programme aimed at reviving the local media landscape in the European Union by conducting the first comparative study on news deserts, providing grants for media projects, and strengthening capacity and sustainability of participating outlets.

This report explains the phenomenon and challenge of news deserts in Europe. It details the LM4D's design, implementation and results, and highlights its capacity development tools. It also includes selected project case studies with emphasis on their impact on news deserts, to serve as inspiration of what is possible. The report offers relevant key findings and recommendations for future programming of this kind.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

International Media Support would like to thank all Local Media for Democracy (LM4D) grantees for participating in the programme, successful implementation of their projects and for contributing to this report, especially the teams of: Context.ro, Denik Alarm, InfoGIFT, Investigative Centre of Jan Kuciak, Lika Club, Mensagem de Lisboa, Monitorul de Botosani, Naše Broumovsko, Nyugat, Okraj, Prasti Popieriai, Sul Informação, TuLodz, Xronos, and ZON.si.

We wish to thank the following media consultants for their time and expertise in creating capacity development tools for LM4D: Madalina Ciobanu, Luba Kassova and Richard Addy, Michael MacLeod, John Mills, George Montagu, Katarzyna Vanevska, Dzianis Vasilkou, and Ed Walker.

We would also like to thank Paola Condemayta from Journalismfund Europe for her contribution to compiling this report.

Local media: Surviving and thriving in a news desert. Lessons learned from Local Media for Democracy
Published in Denmark by IMS in 2024

Authors: Iryna Vidanava, Clare Cook
Publisher: IMS
Design: Vitaly Dzehtsiarou
Copy editor: Mike Ormsby

ISBN

IMS
Nørregade 18
1165 Copenhagen K
Denmark
+45 8832 7000
info@mediasupport.org

© 2024 IMS

The content of this publication is copyright protected. International Media Support is happy to share with you the text in the publication, under the Creative Commons Attribution - ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a summary of this license, please visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>

Join the global work for press freedom and stay up to date on media issues worldwide.

✉ IMSforfreedia
📷 [IMSforfreedia](https://www.instagram.com/IMSforfreedia)
📘 [IMSInternationalMediaSupport](https://www.facebook.com/IMSInternationalMediaSupport)
🌐 [ims-international-media-support](https://www.ims-international-media-support.org)

IMS (International Media Support) is a nonprofit organisation supporting local media in countries affected by armed conflict, human insecurity and political transition. We push for quality journalism, challenge repressive laws, and keep media workers of all genders safe so they can do their jobs. Peaceful, stable societies based on democratic values rely on ethical and critical journalism that aims to include, not divide.
www.mediasupport.org

Contents

Foreword	4
1 Introduction	6
2 Programme design and implementation	9
2.1 <u>The challenge: Addressing news deserts</u>	10
2.2 <u>Research on news deserts in Europe</u>	11
2.3 <u>Grants</u>	12
2.4 <u>Capacity building</u>	13
3 How local media countered news deserts	21
3.1 <u>Overview of programme results</u>	22
3.2 <u>LM4D grantees</u>	24
3.3 <u>Case studies</u>	26
3.3.1 <u>Launching new and improved media products to decrease news deserts</u>	26
3.3.2 <u>Developing local apps for enhanced user experience</u>	32
3.3.3 <u>Engaging with audiences and building communities</u>	38
3.3.4 <u>Using crowdsourced information and automating editorial work</u>	44
3.3.5 <u>Expanding local and regional access to content</u>	50
4 Key learnings and recommendations	57
5 Conclusion	59

Foreword

For two decades, IMS has supported democratic forces around the world to help fight the tide of authoritarianism. It was a strategic departure for us, in 2022, to focus on local media in the EU member states. But with high levels of media capture and manipulation by corporate and government actors, challenges such as threats to journalists and media, state laws targeting freedom of expression, and disinformation destabilising communities, local news is in a fragile state within EU countries as well as countries affected by armed conflict, political transition, weak democratic systems, and authoritarian rule. For this reason, IMS is working in partnership with other media development organisations and key stakeholders on projects to strengthen plural and diverse news ecosystems within the EU.

News outlets are closing at an unprecedented rate and in many places the voices of marginalised communities go unheard.

IMS' local programme teams provide capacity development and are gathering a deep

understanding of what works on the ground. Our multifaceted approach to media development allows us to provide contextually relevant support that helps local media play their vital role as promoters of transparency and democracy.

The Local Media for Democracy (LM4D) programme was conceived and designed to achieve exactly that: to recognise and strengthen local media operating in news deserts and to provide local communities with the timely, accurate, and relevant information they need to make informed decisions about what matters.

Local media carry a torch to illuminate what is needed to safeguard a peaceful world. Media inform the public on matters relevant to the local community, provide information that empowers people to participate in democracy, and strive to exclude biased or inaccurate information. We need audiences to value local news. If local news meets people's needs, they will be more likely to become loyal or active audiences, potentially offering economic support.

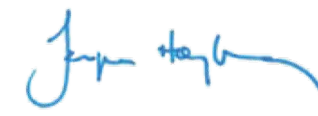
Local communities are where the continued decline in public interest reporting is most keenly felt.

For many local public interest news outlets, financial viability is a key concern. Legacy print media are struggling to monetise their move to digital and many operate in contexts of market failure. Few digital natives have equitable access to advertising returns or government advertising, and have to run small operations on shoestring budgets. All are in an exhausting cycle of mitigation through revenue diversification.

This report is a timely contribution to understanding what works for local media – and how funders can best support them. The vital importance of local outlets in a healthy media ecosystem can sometimes seem overlooked. The LM4D initiative has helped spotlight local media's unique ability to provide perspectives from the ground and cater to otherwise underserved audiences. This initiative puts local media centre stage again, wielding their pens and hosting crucial conversations.

I firmly believe that local media are the most familiar with local needs and have the right networks to effect democratic change. We must recognise local media as a crucial component of healthy media ecosystems. They are more attuned to the specific challenges and opportunities in their regions and are better positioned to implement effective solutions that are demand- rather than supply-driven. Often punching above their weight, small news providers can scaffold the building of communities – amplifying the voices of underrepresented groups and creating a forum for debate.

Working to support local media is not merely about protecting the provision of local information and news. By ensuring that local media are able to provide communities with relevant and accurate information, we are reinforcing the very foundation upon which transparency, accountability and democratic development rests.



Jesper Højberg,
IMS Executive Director

1. Introduction



1. INTRODUCTION

Local Media for Democracy (LM4D) was a pilot 18-month programme co-funded by the European Union. The aim of LM4D was to address news deserts inside EU countries. While the barrier to launch news production is low, media around the globe are struggling to survive because of changing audience consumption patterns and structural changes to the business model of journalism.

The programme had the overall objective of reviving the EU's local media landscape through measures that would build resilience, independence, and sustainability by improving the capacity of local media in terms of innovation, business strategies and audience engagement. LM4D was implemented by a consortium that included the [European Federation of Journalists](#), [Centre of Media Pluralism and Media Freedom \(CMPF\)](#), [International Media Support \(IMS\)](#) and [Journalismfund Europe](#). Grants were managed and administered by Journalismfund Europe, with IMS contributing to pre-application

and grant management processes, as well as running the capacity development support. The European Federation of Journalists – LM4D consortium lead – coordinated the programme's implementation and supported it with public outreach and advocacy efforts. The programme ran from February 2023 to July 2024.

The LM4D programme included extensive research on news deserts in Europe, direct funding to local, regional and community media in the EU 27 member states, and capacity building to the selected grantees. The LM4D's two calls generated 215 project applications from the 22 EU member states. The high interest in the programme signaled the strong need for funding by local media and the urgency of the news desert problem across Europe.

LM4D awarded almost 1.2 million Euro and provided a capacity-building programme to 42 grantees from 17 countries, including 28 grantees in Central and Eastern Europe. Each grantee implemented a project over the period

of six-seven months. The supported media and non-profit organisations were of varying sizes, forms, and experiences. They included traditional local newspapers, radio stations, cutting-edge digital outlets and startups, news websites, niche and investigative journalism media outlets, and professional newsrooms as well as less experienced teams of journalists and community media activists.

A key principle was localisation. Localisation refers to the set of reforms, actions, and behavioural changes that are undertaken to ensure efforts are led by local actors, strengthen local systems, and respond to local communities. This report is primarily aimed at two target groups: those working in the media development sector and media practitioners. It includes a deep dive into what was done, how and why. It is, therefore, a useful resource to guide future programming, to showcase innovative possibilities based on experience, and to highlight services aimed at overcoming news deserts.

The purpose of this report is to:

- share programming methodology
- share best practices and inspiration for local media on how they can take action in short time frames
- offer practical examples of media initiatives to overcome news deserts
- advocate for continued long-term support for local media in Europe

1. INTRODUCTION

HOW LOCAL MEDIA COUNTERED NEWS DESERTS

PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT AND EXPANDING ACCESS TO CONTENT: As a result of programme, 20 new local and hyperlocal websites, microsites and thematic projects were created, and six legacy local media modernised and upgraded their websites in news deserts across Europe. Participants diversified their genres and formats by successfully launching E-newsletters, podcasts, and videos.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: LM4D's community-centric approach emphasised the need to understand and engage with audiences, both online and offline. Half of the LM4D partners organised public events such as focus groups, town hall discussions, debates, pop-up newsrooms, open-editorial meetings, and workshops on media literacy and citizen journalism.

ORGANISATIONAL VIABILITY: At least 15 partners conducted journalism trainings for their teams or community members, 13 media piloted new revenue streams or increased existing ones, 10 developed strategic documents, practical guides, media-kits and other license and knowledge products, and seven media automated their editorial and management processes to improve efficiency.

1. INTRODUCTION

KEY LEARNINGS

From the programme's outcomes and the associated experience of delivering capacity building to 42 grantees, it is possible to determine five priorities for supporting media that operate in diverse and challenging circumstances and work to overcome news deserts.



SUBSTANTIVE GRANTS

IMS believes in long-term core support. But grants for a key product or service development can unlock initiatives within newsrooms and trigger further cycles of innovation and growth. In this programme, these were managed and administered by consortium partner Journalismfund Europe, with IMS contributing to pre-application and grant management processes.



PUTTING IMPACT FIRST

IMS developed an impact framework that allowed all participating media to start project implementation from a position of impact and was introduced to each cohort at the start of the programme. Understanding the impact their project would have in the local community and media organisation itself allowed for a sharpened view on project objectives and design, target groups and key performance indicators, data collection and monitoring, human resources and risk management.



TAILORED CAPACITY BUILDING AND MENTORING

Needs indicated in project applications were thoroughly analysed and then clarified through one-to-one interviews with LM4D partners. We identified and sorted needs into groups, then designed a series of online workshops with expert media consultants and practitioners with knowledge and experience relevant for small- and medium-sized media outlets. This was particularly cost effective as trainers developed lasting resources for other media partners in other contexts, ensuring a particularly impactful programme for modest investment. When possible, we also offered individual consultations and mentoring. The capacity-building programme was practice oriented and tightly linked to the projects but viewed through strategic lenses for organisational development. It was overseen by an experienced media manager and consultant with a deep understanding of every project and liaison with LM4D partners throughout the programme.



PEER TO PEER KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AND SUPPORT

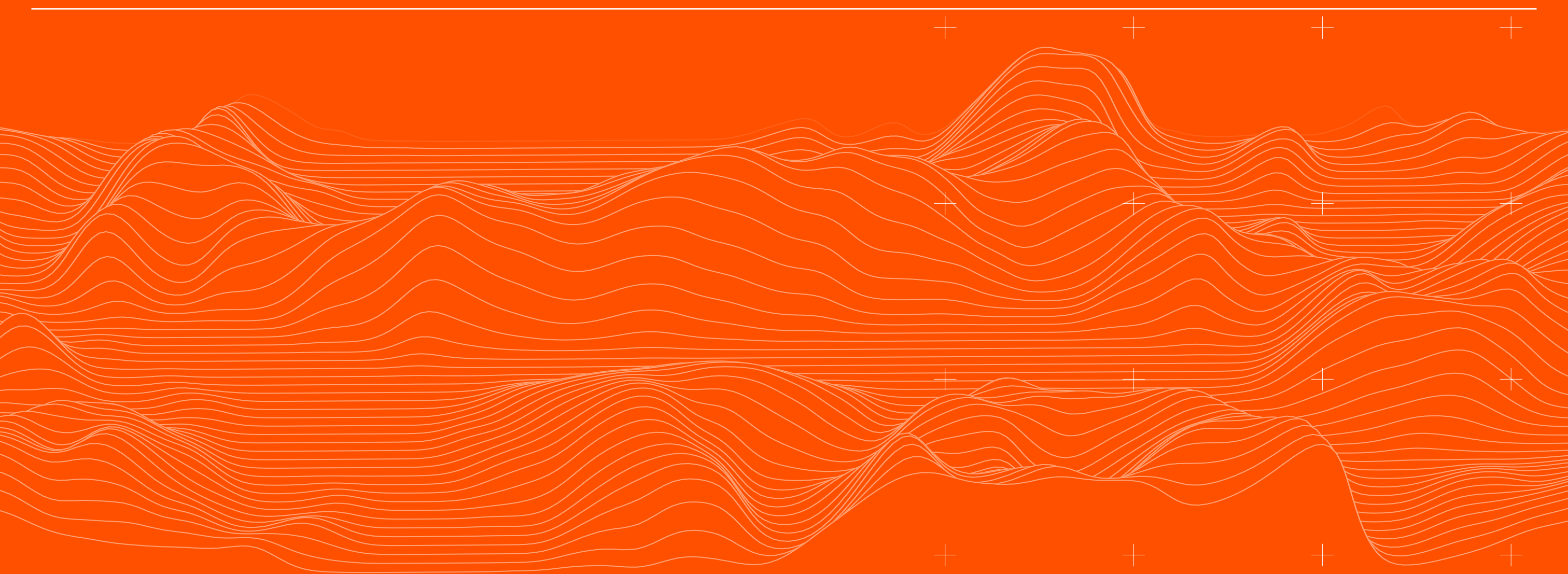
Creating a safe and closed community is key to enabling the sharing of similar experiences, despite different contexts. Such safe spaces allow media to candidly share challenges and work through solutions together by sharing and learning, not only from industry experts but also from each other.



RESEARCH-INFORMED PRACTICE AND PRACTICE-INFORMED RESEARCH

Defining and mapping news deserts provided an essential framework within which to target support. It also served, and continues to serve, as an advocacy tool at the local, regional, national and international levels providing much-needed empirical evidence to sharpen legal and regulatory focus areas moving forward.

2. Programme design and implementation



2.1 [The challenge: Addressing news deserts](#)

2.2 [Research on news deserts in Europe](#)

2.3 [Grants](#)

2.4 [Capacity building](#)

2.1 THE CHALLENGE: ADDRESSING NEWS DESERTS

Local news ecosystems tend to be complex and fluid. Public interest journalists, organisations and content producers can spring up while others wither quickly. Legacy media can reposition into new channels and products, while closing others. Corporate and print-first models at scale have progressively streamlined to maximise profits. Mainstream media can lose traction in an ultra-local space increasingly populated by independent operators, and the decline in the number of local journalists – which is widespread across the EU – largely stems from the growing tendency of centralising newsrooms in major cities. Mainstream media can also face political control exerted via direct or indirect ownership of local media, a state of affairs particularly prevalent in Central and Southern European EU member states. In some geographic areas or community interests, the fragmentation of news supply means coverage is sporadic and disjointed, or non-existent. Minority groups and their languages are underrepresented

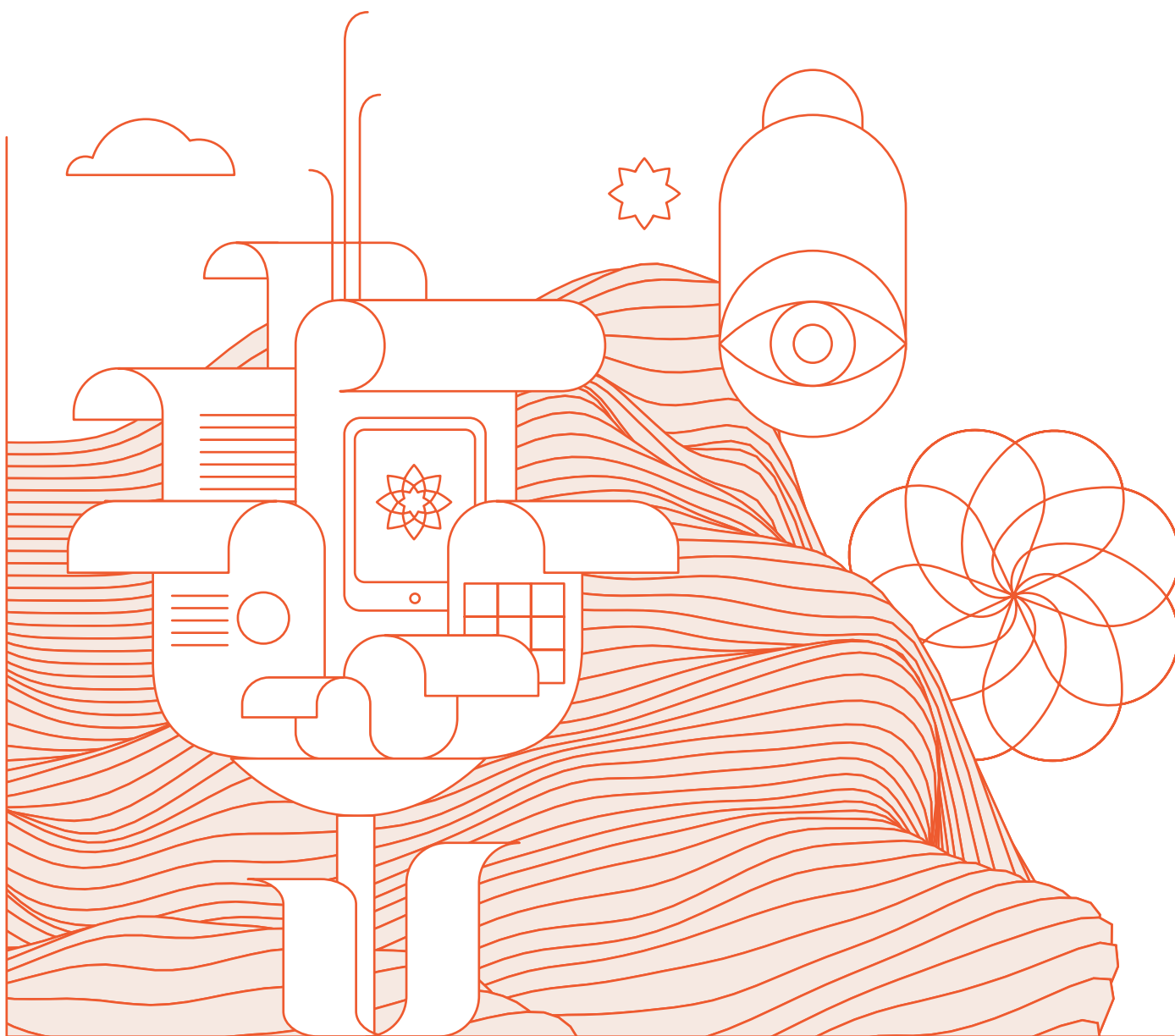
The LM4D programme defines a news desert as a geographic or administrative area, or a social community, in which it is difficult or impossible to access sufficient, reliable, diverse information from independent local, regional and community media.

News deserts can exist due to a lack of original content, frequency, quality, independence, or not covering local issues. News deserts can also involve mixing news and comments, bias or one-sidedness, as well as lack of transparency, and data availability. The concept is closely linked to the structure of digital distribution where big technology platforms such as Meta and Alphabet retain control over content distribution. Few media have access to audience information or

the algorithms which dictate content visibility and are rarely involved in any negotiations or review of how these operate. Audience demands are constantly shifting. There is a lack of audience research, especially of marginalised communities, including minority language speakers and those in diaspora or in transit, all of which make the job of local news provision more difficult.

Local news is often produced by small teams on shoe-string budgets. Nevertheless, given their proximity to a local community, they play a critical role in overcoming news deserts by offering a platform for debate, meeting information needs, and bolstering social cohesion and accountability.

2.2 RESEARCH ON NEWS DESERTS IN EUROPE



The Centre of Media Pluralism and Freedom (CMPF) conceptualized and conducted a study that defined and mapped existing and emerging news deserts in the EU, identified related challenges and good practices, and provided policy recommendations targeting media stakeholders and national and European policymakers to address these challenges.

CMPF collaborated with country-based researchers in all 27 EU member states who collected data and analysed the situation with local and community media in their respective countries. The study was primarily based on a structured questionnaire consisting of 55 questions (variables) of a legal, economic and socio-political nature.

The variables were clustered within the following indicators:

- Local media infrastructure
- Market and reach
- Safety of local journalists
- Editorial independence
- Social inclusiveness
- Best practices and open public sphere

CMPF produced a [preliminary report](#) that detailed its research methodology and terminology in July 2023; it was the first comparative study on news deserts in Europe. After collecting and reviewing data gathered via the questionnaires, CMPF researchers published the final study [“Uncovering news deserts in Europe. Risks and opportunities for local and community media in the EU”](#) in February 2024. It provided a definition of what an EU news desert is, created a fact sheet for each EU country and used the data it gathered to create interactive maps for half of the 27 EU countries.

2.3 GRANTS

The LM4D grant programme was designed for independent media outlets, community media, and teams of individual journalists from the EU27. Its projects sought to benefit local citizens and communities by providing quality, ethical and pluralistic content in the public interest and by building the independence, resilience and sustainability of local, regional and community media. LM4D did not fund regular operational costs but encouraged new, innovative and experimental projects. Only one project application per applicant was eligible; the project's maximum duration could not exceed seven months.

Following a call for project application, the LM4D consortium held several webinars to explain the programme's objectives and its focus on overcoming the challenge of news deserts in Europe, reach out to interested media organisations, and generate diverse, quality and innovative project proposals. Journalismfund Europe and IMS also organised a series of one-

to-one pre-application sessions online, through which potential applicants could ask specific questions, present project ideas and receive feedback from LM4D programme coordinators and media experts. Since English was not a native language for most potential applicants and local media did not always have English-speaking team members, several webinars and consultations were offered in a number of European languages.

The programme's two calls generated 215 project applications from the 22 EU member states. The independent jury selected **42 projects** ([17 in the first round](#) and [25 in the second](#)) from **17 countries**. The high interest in the programme signalled not only the effectiveness of LM4D's outreach strategy, but also local media's strong need for funding and the urgency of the news desert problem across Europe.

Journalismfund, the LM4D grant administrator, awarded almost **1.2 million Euro** in total for the programme. The supported projects were carried

out by media and non-profit organisations of various sizes, forms and experience, ranging from traditional local newspapers and radio stations to cutting-edge digital outlets and startups, from news websites to niche and investigative journalism outlets, from professional newsrooms to less experienced teams of journalists and community media activists. While all the projects sought to overcome news deserts in their respective location or to produce and distribute quality, public interest journalism to underserved audiences, their secondary objectives and activities varied considerably. Some projects focused on only one activity and outcome but most included several.

The significant diversity of the partners and their projects was both rewarding and challenging for the project team behind LM4D which, in addition to grants, also provided capacity-building support and aspired to create a safe environment for knowledge sharing and networking among

the programme's participants. Finally, since LM4D was a pilot programme it was crucial to assess the impact of the projects on news deserts, target audiences and the viability of participating media organisations themselves for possible future replication.

2.4 CAPACITY BUILDING

As part of the LM4D consortium and programme, IMS was responsible for designing and delivering capacity building for the participating partners.

The programme's objectives were:

- Assist the partners in building resilience and sustainability by improving their capacity in regard to audience understanding and engagement, product and service innovation, and business strategies.
- Increase the capacity of local media to reach underserved audiences and communities.
- Document the impact of the LM4D projects on target audiences and on the sustainability of local media.

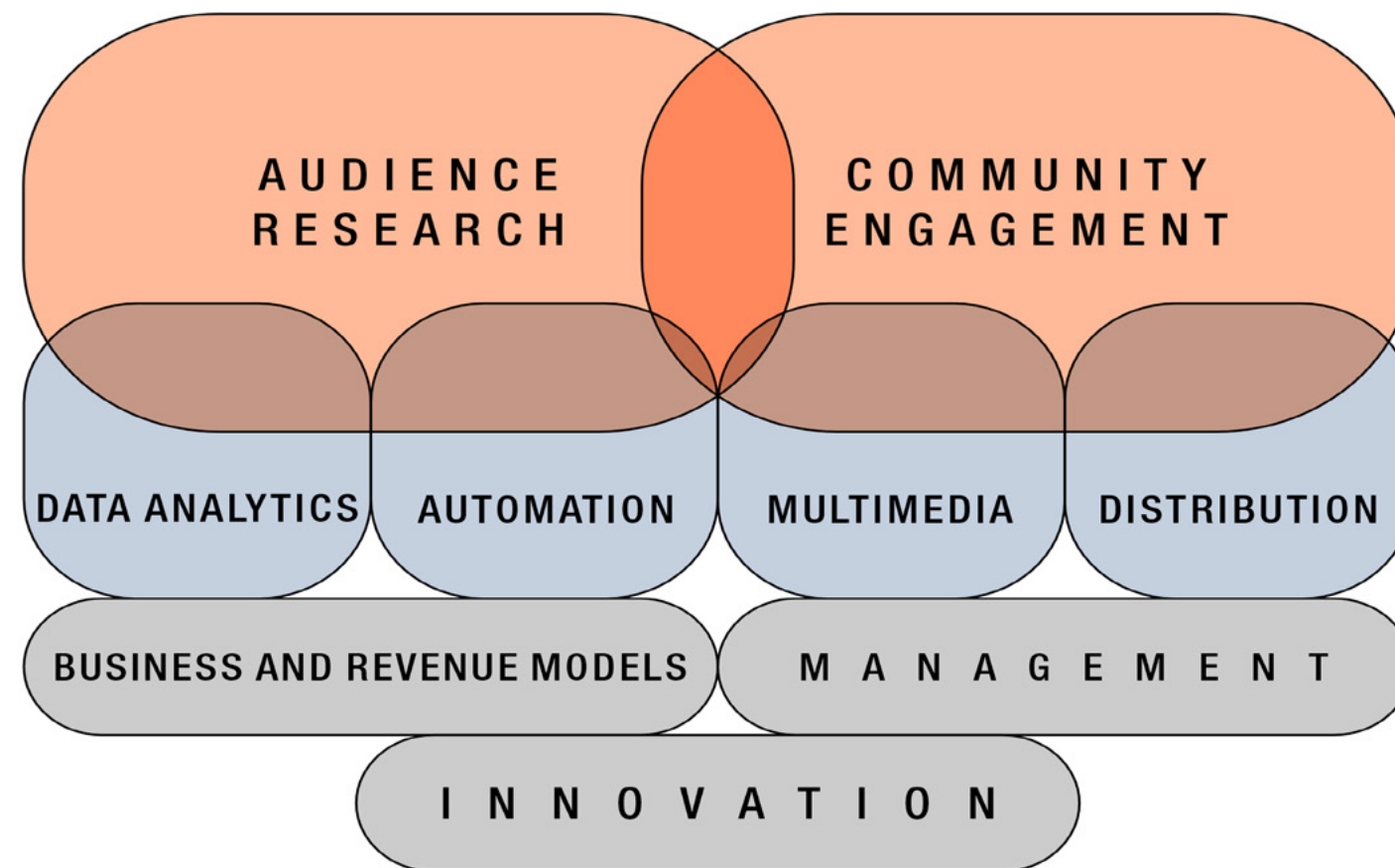
The capacity building consisted of needs assessments and mentorship, thematic webinars tailored to partners' needs, knowledge exchanges

among the partners, and measuring impact. While the capacity-building component was elective and not obligatory for LM4D grantees, the majority took part in and benefited from it.

CAPACITY-BUILDING PROGRAMME

IMS carried out detailed needs analyses by reviewing project applications and conducting one-to-one interviews with the programme's grantees. The needs assessments confirmed the strong interest of partners in undertaking capacity building, expert consultations, and peer to peer knowledge sharing. IMS identified partners' different needs, sorted them into groups, and designed a capacity-building program consisting of online workshops with expert media consultants and practitioners possessing knowledge and experience relevant for small- and medium-sized media outlets.

AREAS OF NEEDS



The capacity-building programme respected participants' limited time and resources: the sessions were 2.5 hours in length and held online once or twice a month. The webinars were practice-oriented and tightly linked to specific projects but, at the same time, were designed to enhance the overall strategic development of the LM4D partners. Additionally, IMS developed thematic capacity-building guides and tools and distributed them to all 42 LM4D partners.

IMS designed the capacity-building programme using a diversity, equity and inclusion approach, especially since many of the projects by the LM4D grantees were aimed at expanding their reach to and engagement with non-mainstream audiences, including minority and marginalised groups. As part of the needs assessment, IMS conducted a survey among the LM4D partners on gender strategies in their media organisations. Based on the survey results and in partnership with the audience consultancy AKAS, we organised an expert webinar explaining studies on the news gender consumption gap. This

provided grantees with recommendations and inspiration to better balance their content for diverse audience demographics and increase sustainability of their media organisations.

From September 2023 to June 2024, IMS conducted 14 webinars on the following topics:

- Audience understanding and research methods
- Audience engagement and community growth
- Digital analytics for media
- Content distribution strategies
- Business models and revenue innovations for local media
- Business development and financial management
- Why and how to attract women audiences

Finally, from November 2023 to May 2024, IMS provided individual expert consultations and mentoring to ten interested media outlets.

The sessions focused on content distribution on social media, generating native advertising revenue, targeted ad campaigns, content marketing strategies, business innovation, financial planning, social media data analytics, eNewsletter monetisation, and promoting audio and video content on social media.

IMPACT FRAMEWORK: TOOLKIT

A set of tools and guidelines that help the grantees to define targets for, track and measure the impact of activities in media projects in a clear and organised way. It also allows project teams to assess risks, track a project's progress towards established targets and, if necessary, correct its course in a timely fashion.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: WORKSHEET

A set of concepts, methods, and resources for media outlets to better understand and plan community engagement activities. It includes an exercise on mapping a local ecosystem, explains types and levels of community engagement, and offers a Participatory Strategy Map approach, along with short cases studies and additional resources on community engagement.

AUDIENCE RESEARCH METHODS: RESOURCE PACK

A short guide to eight audience research methods, including online surveys, a/b testing, one-to-one interviews, focus groups, personas, observations, design sprints and co-creation. Each method is accompanied by a short introduction, a description of potential ways to conduct the approaches, its advantages and limitations, case studies and links to further resources.

BUSINESS AND REVENUE MODELS: DESIGN KIT

A collection of tools and concepts for media outlets to sharpen sustainability thinking within journalism. It consists of a Rapid Value Proposition model that helps to explore points of difference from other media, a Revenue Elevator tool that identifies how to add revenue dimensions to value propositions, and an IMS Business Model Canvas that helps to understand how key elements of a media outlet's business model can fit together.

DATA ANALYTICS BASICS FOR MEDIA: VIDEO TUTORIALS

A series of six short episodes explaining how to determine website audience engagement using Google Analytics 4, how to reach and engage with audiences on Facebook and Instagram, how to identify and fix user experience (UX) issues on websites and social media, how to better measure video and audio reach, and how to know if paid promotion is proving effective. The tutorials are available in [English](#) and [Polish](#).

READY RECKONER

An easy-to-use, Excel-based tool for sizing the market and financial planning for new media products and revenue streams, or scaling existing ones.

AUDIO AND VIDEO PROMOTION ON SOCIAL MEDIA: PRACTICAL GUIDE

A guide that outlines strategic methods and provides recommendations on distributing and promoting audio and video content, and on leveraging both free and paid advertising avenues to maximise reach and engagement on various platforms, including YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram.

GENDER CONSUMPTION GAP

An easy-to-use formula and concept to monitor and measure the existing gap in website gender demographics and a set of recommendations on strategies to diversify the content offer.

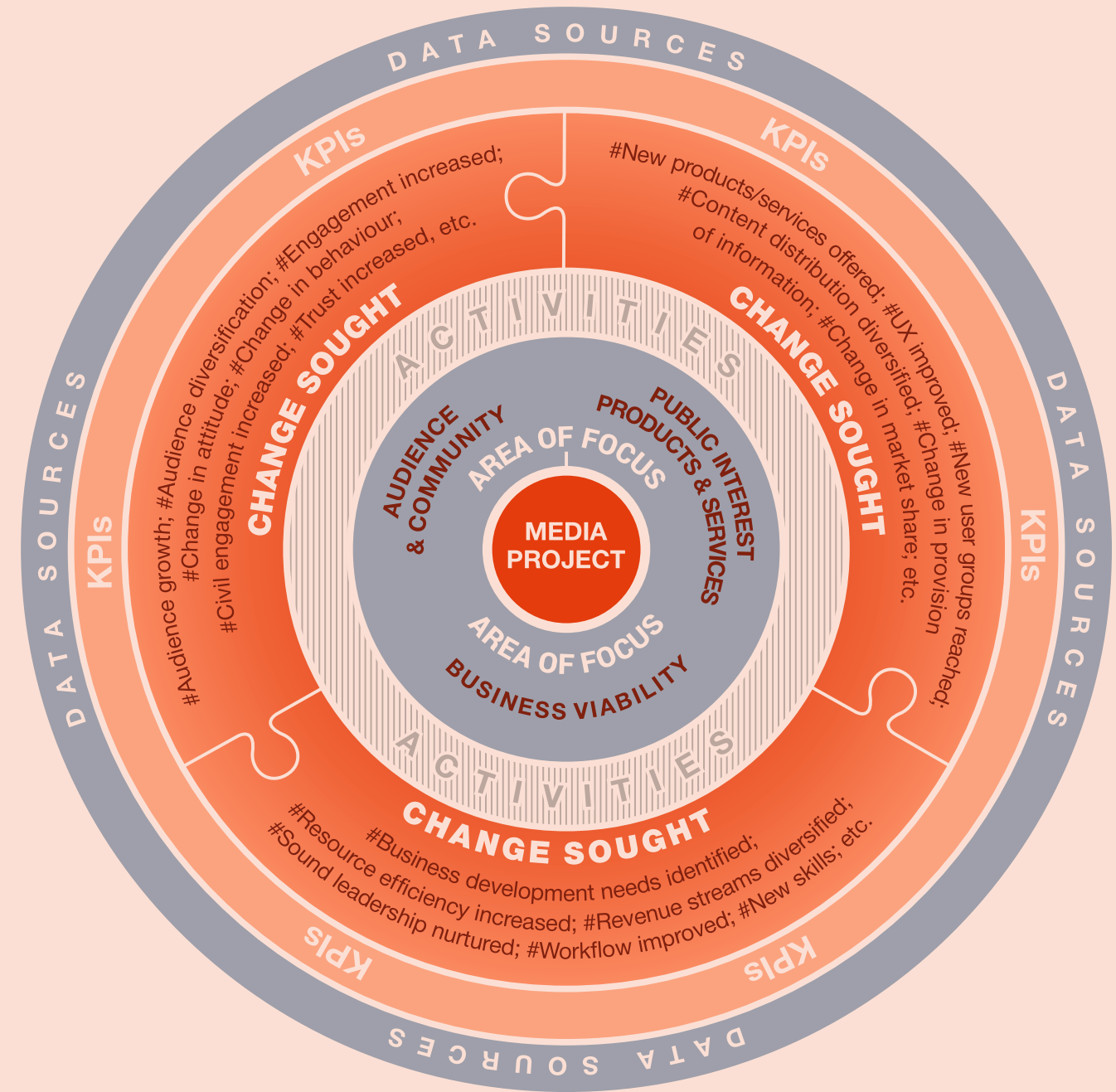
TOOLS IN FOCUS: IMPACT FRAMEWORK

IMS designed an LM4D impact framework to assist partners in planning and implementing their project efficiently within the programme’s tight timeline and to maximise their project’s impact on target audiences and media outlets. The impact framework consisted of a set of guidelines and tools to help the grantees to define, set targets for, track and assess the impact of the activities in their project in a clear and organised way. The ambition was to go beyond tracking ‘what’ and ‘how many’, but also to offer a deeper assessment of actual impact. It is hoped that sharing the impact framework can serve as an effective methodology to be applied in other media projects for rigorous and meaningful evaluations.

This methodology enhanced a user-centric approach, linked project activities to key performance indicators (KPIs) and outcomes, and helped to identify and collect data from the start to the end of the projects. It also allowed the project teams to assess risks, track a project’s progress towards established targets and, if necessary, correct its course in a timely fashion.

- The impact framework included:
- Hypothesis Statement Template
 - Hypothesis Statement Guide
 - Impact Measurement Worksheet
 - Impact Measurement Worksheet Demo
 - Impact Guide

IMPACT MODEL
 The LM4D programme understood impact as a measurable change resulting from project activities in one or more areas, including the targeted audiences and communities, planned public interest products and services, and the business viability of participating media organisations.



Impact Hypothesis Template and Guide

The impact measurement process began with the formulation the project's hypothesis statement, which summarised for whom the project was being carried out and why. The hypothesis formed the outline of the impact plan, which traced whether the intended change occurred or not. Each project hypothesis statement should have been specific, contained and manageable. If a project had several objectives and activities, it was appropriate to create more hypotheses.

To assist partners with formulating and finetuning their project hypothesis statements, IMS developed a template and guide containing guidelines on how to structure hypothesis statements, examples of media products and services, of relevant user pains and user gains, and demos of hypotheses for media projects.

IMPACT HYPOTHESIS STRUCTURE*

Fill in the blanks to improve your thinking about your project from the user perspective.

Our

content / product / service

will

change sought

for

audience / user segment

by

verb e.g. reducing, avoiding a user pain

and by

verb e.g. increasing, enabling a user gain

We will track our progress

e. g. your goal in terms of KPIs

by using

data sources

* The LM4D Impact Hypothesis Structure was developed from Strategyzer's [Value Proposition Template](#) and the Solutions Journalism Network's [Impact Tracking Guide](#)

IMPACT HYPOTHESIS GUIDE

Examples of products and services:

- New website
- Subsection on existing website for new geographical or topic area
- Network of local (investigative) journalists
- Content series
- New formats: video/podcast/multimedia
- App
- E-newsletter
- New content distribution channels, i.e. social media
- Marketing campaign to reach out with new audiences or grow existing audience
- Public events: town hall debates/lectures/workshops/trainings
- Reader or member club
- User Generated Content module
- Crowdfunding, etc.

Examples of user pains:

- Feeling left out
- Not knowing what is going on
- Wasting time
- Feeling frustrated
- Feeling overwhelmed with information overload
- Not knowing who to trust
- Nothing of interest to me, etc.

Examples of user gains:

- Benefitting from new content to make informed decisions
- Having new access points to information
- Feeling more able to do something
- Making new contacts or friends
- Being interested to take part in local life
- Feeling more connected
- Feeling less stressed about missing out
- Consuming information on a most convenient device and time, etc.

EXAMPLES OF HYPOTHESES STATEMENTS

Example 1 (first draft)

Our

newsletter
content / product / service

will

better inform
change sought

for

women who live in Mir
audience / user segment

by

reaching them and saving them time and reducing the feeling of not having their information needs met
verb e.g. reducing, avoiding a user pain

and by

delivering it weekly in their mailbox
verb e.g. increasing, enabling a user gain

We will track our progress

aiming for 100 new female subscribers in two months and 50% opening rate
e. g. your goal in terms of KPIs

by using

mailchimp database statistics and a subscriber survey
data sources

Example 2 (improved)

Our

new section on the website
content / product / service

will

provide original local content
change sought

for

citizens in Nitra
audience / user segment

by

reaching them and reducing frustration about the lack of coverage of their own area
verb e.g. reducing, avoiding a user pain

and by

publishing daily news updates, weekly column with local feature stories and monthly event calendar
verb e.g. increasing, enabling a user gain

We will track our progress

creating 100 original pieces of content produced by local reporters or citizen journalists and monitoring their engagement rate
e. g. your goal in terms of KPIs

by using

audience surveys, content and engagement metrics on Google analytics
data sources

Impact Measurement Worksheet and Impact Guide

Once a hypothesis statement was formulated, the project team could move on to filling out the impact measurement worksheet. The worksheet included the hypothesis statement as a cornerstone, a list of main activities, descriptions of affected groups, the changes sought for each group, and a data measurement plan. The latter helped to assess data already tracked and available as benchmark base, set KPIs, identify new information to be collected, plan logistics, and estimate resources needed.

IMS also developed an impact guide with examples of changes sought, KPIs and data sources for each key focus area and a demo version of an impact measurement plan, which partners could draw on for inspiration and reference.

IMPACT MEASUREMENT WORKSHEET**

Your Impact Framework

1. Key Activities	2. Affected Groups	3. Change Sought
What are your activities? i.e. what does your product or service consist of?	Which groups will be affected by these activities?	How will these groups be affected? What changes do you hope to see?

Add more rows or split cells if needed

Your Measurement Plan

4. Current Status	5. KPIs	6. New Data
What data do you have already? Have you already got systems set up for collecting relevant information? e.g. analytics, surveys, interviews, research, etc	Which indicators will you use to capture and measure changes?	What new types of data (quantitative and qualitative) will you need to collect? Will you need for this?

Add more rows or split cells if needed

7. Logistic	8. Challenges
What are the key actions to collecting data and carrying out related analysis? Who in your organisation will be responsible? What is the timeframe within which data will be collected and the related analysis carried out? i.e. start date - end date	What are the main challenges you can foresee in collecting this data? Both internal to your organisation and external. How do you plan to mitigate against these risks?

Add more rows or split cells if needed

** The impact measurement worksheet was developed from the [Future News Pilot Fund](#), which sought to identify and showcase innovation within public interest news in the UK and test the ground for future investments

IMPACT FRAMEWORK

I. Draft Impact Framework

1. Key activities

What are your activities?
i.e. what does your product or service consist of?

2. Affected Groups

Which groups will be affected by these activities?

3. Change sought

How will these groups be affected?
What changes do you hope to see?

II. Draft Measurement Plan

4. Current Status

What data do you have already? Have you already got systems set up for collecting relevant information?
e.g. analytics, surveys, interviews, research, etc.

5. KPIs

Which indicators will you use to capture and measure changes?

6. New Data

What new types of data (quantitative and qualitative) will you need to collect? Will you need for this?

7. Logistic

What are the key actions to collecting data and carrying out related analysis? Who in your media will be responsible? What is the timeframe within which data will be collected and the related analysis carried out?

8. Challenges

What are the main challenges you can foresee in collecting this data? Both internal to your organisation and external. How do you plan to mitigate against these risks?

IMS presented and explained the impact framework to each cohort during the inaugural webinar. Programme partners were able to familiarise themselves with the impact methodology and to practice drafting project hypothesis statements and receive immediate feedback from IMS media viability experts. Following the webinar, the partners had two weeks to formulate their hypothesis statements and complete their impact worksheets. IMS packaged and distributed all of the impact framework's templates and guides as Word documents that were easily translatable into the partners' native languages.

An IMS media viability advisor reviewed the impact plans and, during one-to-one needs assessment meetings, consulted with the partners on how to improve them. The partners used the finalised impact plans as a guiding document towards achieving the changes they had defined and planned through their projects.

3. How local media countered news deserts



[3.1 Overview of programme results](#)

[3.2 LM4D grantees](#)

[3.3 Case studies](#)

[3.3.1 Launching new and improved media products in news deserts](#)

[3.3.2 Developing local apps for enhanced user experience](#)

[3.3.3 Engaging with audiences and building communities](#)

[3.3.4 Using crowdsourced information and automating editorial work](#)

[3.3.5 Expanding local and regional access to content](#)

3.1 OVERVIEW OF PROGRAMME RESULTS

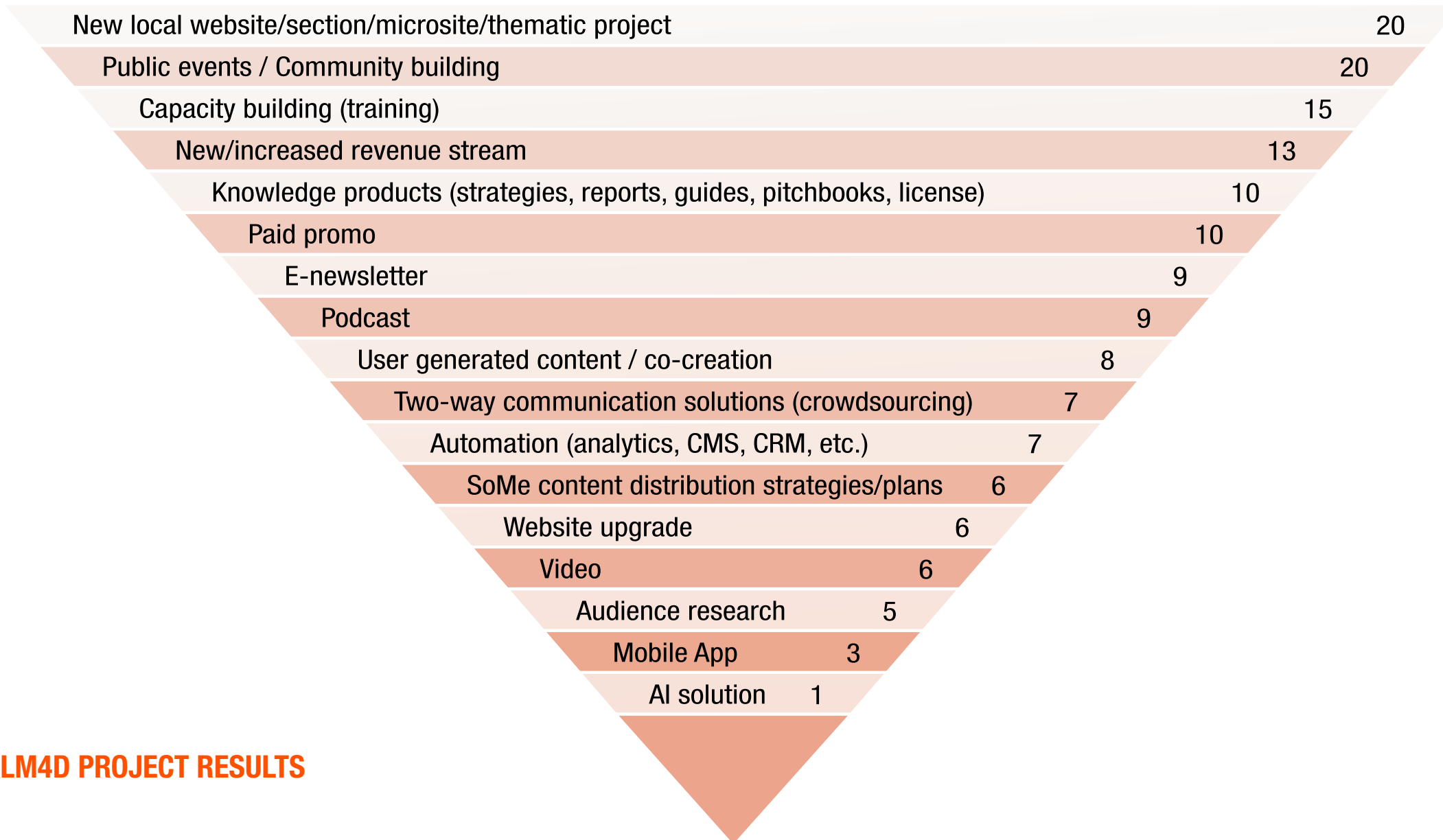
Through funding the creation of innovative products and solutions, supporting the development of content, marketing and business strategies, providing guidance on revenue diversification and financial planning and stimulating the sharing of best practices among news outlets of similar sizes, LM4D contributed to the long-term sustainability of local media in the EU.

LM4D successfully implemented 42 projects in 17 EU countries. As a result, the programme created 20 new local and hyperlocal websites, microsites and thematic projects. Six local media outlets modernised and upgraded their websites in news deserts across Europe. Independent, public-interest local and community media diversified their genres and formats by successfully launching newsletters, podcasts and videos. Most of the projects included multiplatform content distribution to ensure that they reached diverse, yet well-defined target groups, such as younger, older, and marginalised audiences.

LM4D's community-centric approach emphasised the need to understand and engage with audiences. Half of LM4D's partners organised public events, including focus groups, town hall discussions, public debates, pop-up newsrooms, open editorial meetings, media literacy events and citizen journalism workshops. To reach out to remote areas and establish two-way communication channels with their readers, several local media developed and deployed online crowdsourcing solutions, such as automated modules and chatbots integrated with their websites or WhatsApp.

At least 15 partner outlets conducted journalism training for their teams or community members, 13 media piloted new revenue streams or increased existing ones, 10 developed strategic documents, practical guides, media-kits and other license and knowledge products, and seven automated their editorial and management processes. All of these activities contributed to making the participating media outlets more efficient and effective.

The majority of the projects included multiple activities implemented over a six- to seven-month period. The programme's outcomes were all the more impressive given that the outlets participating in LM4D comprised a mere 5-10 people on average or, in many cases, even smaller project teams.
























Being clear from the outset - about the intended impact of their projects on the local community and their own outlets - enabled a sharper focus on project objectives and design, target groups and key performance indicators, data collection and monitoring, human resources, and risk management.

LM4D brought together a diverse group of innovative and dedicated public interest local media outlets and established a platform for them to exchange ideas and solutions. Creating a safe and comfortable community was key to enabling the sharing of similar experiences across diverse contexts. Such safe space allowed the participating media to discuss openly and honestly the challenges they face and work together on solutions by learning not only from media sector experts but also from each other.

LM4D PROJECT RESULTS

3.2 LM4D GRANTEES

 <p>TUŁÓDŹ.PL</p> <p>TUŁÓDŹ tulodz.pl Łódź, POLAND</p>	 <p>InfoGIFT</p> <p>InfoGIFT info.gift Miastko, POLAND</p>	 <p>JAWORZNICKI PORTAL SPOLECZNOSCIOWY</p> <p>jaw.pl Katowice, POLAND</p>	 <p>lowiczanim.info PORTAL NOWEGO ŁOWICZANINA</p> <p>LOWICZANIN.INFO lowiczanim.info Łowicz, POLAND</p>	 <p>GAZETA RADOMSZCZANSKA radomszczanska.pl Radomsko, POLAND</p>	 <p>JAWNY LUBLIN jawnylublin.pl Lublin, POLAND</p>	 <p>PORTAL PLOCK portalplock.pl Plock, POLAND</p>
 <p>TYGODNIK SIEDLECKI</p> <p>tygodniksiedlecki.com Siedlce, POLAND</p>	 <p>ZAWSZE POMORZE</p> <p>zawszepomorze.pl Gdańsk, POLAND</p>	 <p>CZABAN ROBI RABAN</p> <p>czabanrobiraban.pl Czarna Białostocka, POLAND</p>	 <p>MENSAGEM DE LISBOA</p> <p>amensagem.pt Lisbon, PORTUGAL</p>	 <p>7MARGENS</p> <p>setemargens.com Lisbon, PORTUGAL</p>	 <p>SUL INFORMAÇÃO</p> <p>sulinformacao.pt Faro, PORTUGAL</p>	 <p>REGIÃO DE CISTER</p> <p>regiaodecister.pt Alcobaça, PORTUGAL</p>
 <p>CONTEXT</p> <p>context.ro Bucharest, ROMANIA</p>	 <p>RISE PROJECT</p> <p>riseproject.ro Bucharest, ROMANIA</p>	 <p>MONITORUL DE BOTOSANI</p> <p>monitorulbt.ro Botosani, ROMANIA</p>	 <p>UH.RO</p> <p>uh.ro Odorheiu Secuiesc, ROMANIA</p>	 <p>MARSACTU</p> <p>marsactu.fr Marseille, FRANCE</p>	 <p>PRESSELIB</p> <p>presselib.com Pau, FRANCE</p>	 <p>Rue89 STRASBOURG</p> <p>rue89strasbourg.com Strasbourg, FRANCE</p>

 <p>SPLANN! splann.org Guingamp, FRANCE</p>	 <p>DENÍK ALARM denikalarm.cz Prague, CZECHIA</p>	 <p>NAŠE BROUMOVSKO nase.broumovsko.cz Broumov, CZECHIA</p>	 <p>OKRAJ okraj.cz Ostrava, CZECHIA</p>	 <p>DEBRECINER debreciner.hu Debrecen, HUNGARY</p>	 <p>NYUGAT nyugat.hu Szombathely, HUNGARY</p>	 <p>OVTAR24.SI ovtar24.si Lenart, SLOVENIA</p>
 <p>ZON.SI zon.si Hrastnik, SLOVENIA</p>	 <p>LA TORRE DE CIMPOZUELOS latorredeciempozuelos.com Ciempozuelos, SPAIN</p>	 <p>FERROL360 ferrol360.es Ferrol, SPAIN</p>	 <p>CHAYKA chayka.lv Daugavpils, LATVIA</p>	 <p>JELGAVNIEKIEM & NOVAJA jelgavniekiem.lv novaja.lv Jelgava, LATVIA</p>	 <p>RADIO "FM99" fm99.lt Alytaus, LITHUANIA</p>	 <p>PRASTI POPIERIAI prastipopieriai.lt Kaunas, Plungė, Jurbarkas, Neringa, LITHUANIA</p>
 <p>Investigatívne centrum Jána Kuciaka</p> <p>INVESTIGATÍVNE CENTRUM JÁNA KUCIAKA icjk.sk Bratislava, SLOVAKIA</p>	 <p>LIKA CLUB likaclub.eu Zagreb, CROATIA</p>	 <p>BRIAG briag.bg Ruse, BULGARIA</p>	 <p>XRONOS xronos.gr Komotini, GREECE</p>	 <p>IRPI MEDIA irpimedia.irpi.eu Rome, ITALY</p>	 <p>APACHE apache.be Antwerpen, BELGIUM</p>	 <p>DUBLIN INQUIRER dublininquirer.com Dublin, IRELAND</p>

3.3 CASE STUDIES

3.3.1 LAUNCHING NEW AND IMPROVED MEDIA PRODUCTS IN NEWS DESERTS

Piloting new public interest media products in Europe's news deserts was a main focus of the Local Media for Democracy programme. Almost half of the programme's 42 projects planned to expand coverage to new geographical areas by launching local media startups and hyperlocal websites or creating new thematic publications for underserved audiences. In addition, six projects sought to renew and upgrade independent local news websites that had been created ten or more years ago. All of these new and improved news media products were designed and launched over a short period of six to seven months, but they quickly resonated with their target audiences and had an immediate, visible and positive impact on the local media landscapes.

This section features three examples of new media products developed with LM4D funding and technical support in Czechia and Poland, two Central European countries that have been experiencing a dramatic decline in independent local media. The chapter highlights how the LM4D programme has contributed to improving this situation.

OKRAJ.CZ

LAUNCHING A LOCAL MEDIA STARTUP IN A CZECH NEWS DESERT

Case study

Location: Ostrava, Czech Republic

LM4D grant: €38,000

Project duration: seven months



CHALLENGE

Three Czech journalists with successful careers in the national media identified a news desert in their native Moravian-Silesian region. Research indicated that the number of regional and local newspapers in the country has halved in the last decade due to economic and political reasons; less than 30 are still being published. Given their dependence on advertisers and local governments, local media outlets are also often used as marketing tools by business owners and oligarchs, who limit any topics that might have a negative effect on their businesses or political campaigns. As a result, many Czechs in the country's regions find themselves without independent and impartial information about local affairs, which negatively impacts debates on local issues and democracy as a whole.

SOLUTION

The three young journalists joined forces to launch a new independent digital media Okraj (Periphery) for the Moravian-Silesian region – one of the many news deserts and the region

with the highest depopulation rate in Czechia. Okraj planned to offer comprehensive, analytical articles covering politics, the environment, minorities, and social and other local issues by employing investigative and data journalism, storytelling, and multimedia formats. The team would also organise a series of media literacy sessions for youth and seniors to engage with and empower local communities.

IMPLEMENTATION

Phase 1: Preparation and multiplatform launch

The journalists established a newsroom in Ostrava – the capital of the Moravian-Silesian region. The team defined the outlet's primary audience as 25- to 50-year-olds living in Ostrava, with higher education, employed or entrepreneurs, and having genuine interest in and desire to foster positive change in their city and region. Using the independent publishing platform Ghost.org, and with a clear editorial concept and target audience in mind, the team designed and developed the website in less than three months.

Okraj.cz debuted in early February 2024. Along with its first long-read articles and investigative reports on important local issues, the website included a [Manifesto](#) and [Code of Ethics](#) that proclaimed the outlet's independence and promise to follow public interest journalism. The team experimented with using AI-generated illustrations but was fully transparent about it, and even included the prompts it provided for image-generation in the articles so that readers could see how AI works and what biases its products might contain.

Along with the website, the team created Okraj pages on Instagram (as its flagship social media platform), Facebook and X to distribute content and engage with audiences, initiated a community on Discord to establish an online public discussion space, and launched an eNewsletter to update its readers about the project's progress and share insights about the articles and activities in Ostrava. The team also produced two episodes of "Okrajový Podcast" that discussed local journalism and published them on Spotify and Apple Podcasts.

Phase 2: Marketing and community building

The team contracted with an external expert to develop a marketing strategy for the local media startup. The expert guided the team in how to repackage articles for social media and best utilise infographics and short videos. The team created Reels videos to explain its work and promote local journalism on Instagram, and shared links to pieces on Okraj in local groups on Facebook, which often sparked discussions.

To increase the project's visibility among the local population, the team printed promo posters, which it displayed at cafés and community centres in Ostrava. The outlet organised two public debates on local journalism and development in Ostrava. The first took place on the day of the website's public launch and public launch and dozens of Ostrava residents attended in person. The event raised public awareness about the project and generated coverage of the startup in other regional and national media outlets.

Throughout the project's implementation, Okraj's founders also attended webinars and consultations on audience research and engagement, content distribution and community building, business development and revenue models, and financial management. IMS provided these as a capacity-building component of the LM4D programme. This regular learning enhanced the team's management skills and contributed to the project's long-term sustainability.



RESULTS

- The team successfully **established a new independent local digital media outlet**, which produces analytical and investigative content on important local issues and distributes it across multiple platforms in a region defined as one of Czechia's news deserts.
- The **website published 12 long-read articles on diverse local issues** in February-May 2024. The site had over 30,000 unique users in its first four months, threefold more than anticipated.
- The team **published 70 posts on Okraj's social media pages, which were followed by over 1,200 people**, including 800 followers on Instagram alone; the audience was primarily women aged 25 to 54.
- **100 people subscribed to Okraj's eNewsletter and 70 users joined the Okraj community on Discord.**
- **Okraj regularly received reader donations ranging from 5 to 50 Euro** via a transparent account on the website.

IMPACT

The emergence of a new independent local media outlet, founded by young journalists native to the region and committed to public interest journalism, became a significant event not only at the local level but for the entire Czech media landscape. Okraj immediately resonated with its target audiences, raised important local issues, and sparked public debate around them. The project was featured in other Czech and foreign media, and its team was invited to participate in numerous national and international events on local journalism, media education, misinformation, and transparency.

The founders' user-centric approach, understanding of media trends and usage of modern technologies for content creation and distribution led to swift audience growth. The team's focus on community building around local issues and quality journalism secured strong public support.

Finally, the founders realised from the start that the new outlet's long-term sustainability and its editorial and financial independence required an effective business plan, revenue diversification, and strong project management. They invested time and effort in capacity building and developing a comprehensive business model. As a result, Okraj was successful in securing several grants from Czech and international media development organisations and in generating modest but steady reader revenue through donations.

DENIK ALARM

PILOTING A REGIONAL EDITION

Snapshot

Location: Prague, Czech Republic

LM4D grant: €25,000

Project duration: seven months



Denik Alarm – an influential Prague-based independent digital media outlet specializing in socio-economic and investigative journalism – planned to pilot its first regional edition with the objective to strengthen local journalism by establishing an editorial team operating directly in the field, involving local voices in its nationwide media coverage, and testing the feasibility of its regional expansion model.

The outlet launched the project in Most, an especially vulnerable micro-region and a news desert in Czechia. Denik Alarm created a regional subsection, Mostecko Alarm, on its main website but with its own design and menu featuring topics specific to the region. It announced an open call for local editors and journalists via its website, social media pages

and eNewsletter. Denik Alarm received dozens of applications, mainly from loyal readers in the Mostecko region. It assembled a local team of three young media professionals to identify key topics and create relevant content for the subsection. Two members from the Prague office supervised but did not interfere with the work of the local team.

Mostecko Alarm debuted in January 2024 and now regularly publishes in-depth regional articles. In addition, its team produced two series of podcasts on local history and architecture, and organised public discussions to build a community in Most. In March-April, Denik Alarm conducted a dedicated crowdfunding campaign that raised 9,000 Euro (111% of the target amount) for its regional edition.

IMPACT INSIGHT

The success of the regional pilot was grounded in Denik Alarm's strong media brand and loyal readership base, including in the targeted Mostecko region. These elements allowed the outlet to establish a dynamic regional editorial team, produce quality public interest content on important local issues, reach its target audience, build a local community, and secure financial sustainability for the regional edition.

TuLODZ

TAKING A LOCAL NEWS MEDIA OUTLET HYPERLOCAL Snapshot

Location: Lodz, Poland

LM4D grant: €40,000

Project duration: seven months



[TuLodz](#) – a popular independent news website in Lodz, Poland’s fourth-largest city – planned to launch a hyperlocal website in Piatek, a town of 2,500 inhabitants that is 30 km from Lodz but has no local media or reporters and is a typical news desert on the periphery of a large urban centre. To involve readers from Piatek in content creation, the new website would be enhanced via a two-way communication module.

Prior to launch of the hyperlocal edition, TuLodz team undertook several field trips to Piatek to become familiar with the town, meet with its inhabitants, solicit local topics and write initial articles for the future site. Piatek’s locals were surprised that outsiders were interested in their small town, excited that it would have its own professional news website, and welcomed the

journalists with enthusiasm. TuPiatek went live in early September 2023. At the same time, the project team created a local Facebook page and group. Two months later, it launched an eNewsletter and added a crowdsourcing module to the site.

[TuPiatek](#) website grew from 400 users in November 2023 to 3,200 users a month later, and to over 5,000 users by January 2024. Since this number was twice the population of Piatek, the website was able to expand its reach to neighbouring villages. By the end of the project, more than 1,500 people were following TuPiatek’s Facebook page and 800 people had joined the local group. TuPiatek began publishing new local content daily because local readers actively used an online-form to share information and stories with the editorial team in Lodz.

IMPACT INSIGHT

Establishing personal contacts with the local community before the website’s launch helped to build trust and raise awareness about the project. The crowdsourcing information web-module was instrumental in making the work of the remote editorial team more efficient and in producing greater, relevant and timely content for local readers; Piatek’s readers feel involved and valued. After this successful pilot, TuLodz launched two more hyperlocal websites in [Pabianice](#) and [Zgierz](#).

3.3.2 DEVELOPING LOCAL APPS FOR ENHANCED USER EXPERIENCE

Three media outlets developed mobile applications with support from LM4D. Their main objective was to improve user experience and engagement with local content. Croatia's Lika Club decided to build a local news app to deliver its content directly to smartphones, as 85 percent of its readers accessed the outlet's website from mobile devices. ZON in Slovenia sought to reach a younger audience by developing a mobile app. The Polish InfoGIFT app was designed to reward users for their greater in-depth reading of local media content.

The latter two apps were developed, built and tested by the end of the project period. Lika launched its app publicly and it generated more than 1,500 downloads in the first month. The key components of success for all three apps included clear goal setting, adopting a user-centric approach, sharply defined concepts and functionality, and building effective partnerships with professional designers, app developers, and marketing specialists. The main challenge was completing verification process for the apps on digital distribution platforms, specifically Google Play and the Apple Store. This process proved detailed and time consuming.

LIKA CLUB

DESIGNING AND LAUNCHING A LOCAL NEWS APP

Case study

Location: Lika-Senj County, Croatia

LM4D grant: €60,000

Project duration: six months

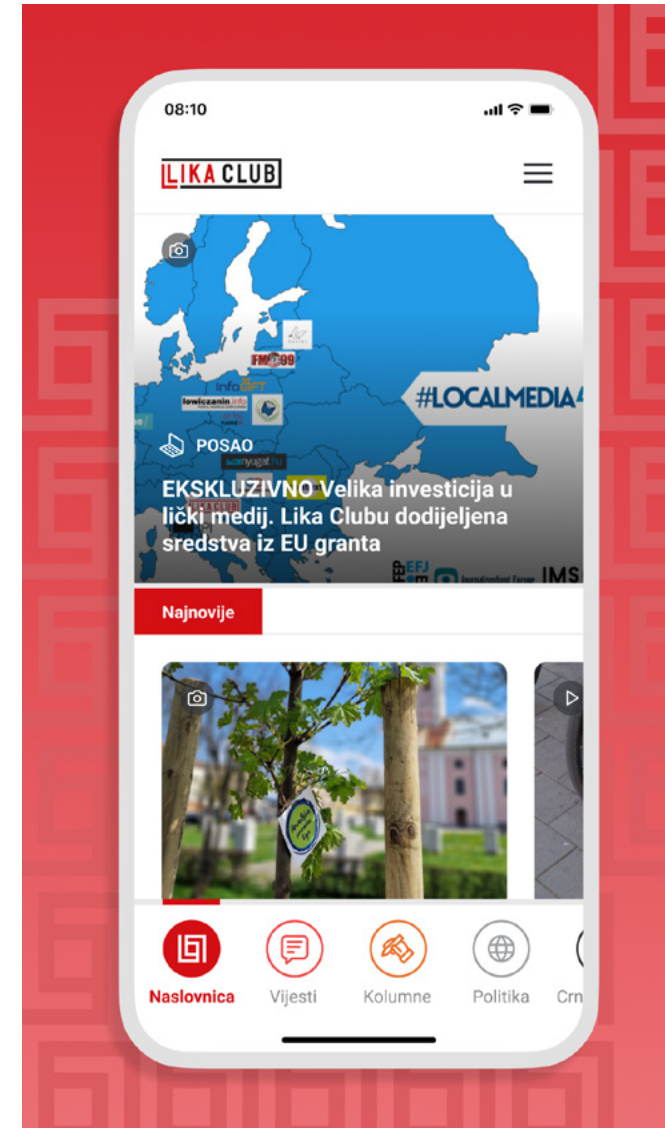


CHALLENGE

Founded in 2014 by a group of young media professionals, [Lika Club](#) is a leading independent local digital media outlet based in central Croatia; its home region covers a large territory but includes only 42,000 inhabitants. A winner of the .eu Web Awards in 2022, Lika Club's website numbers around 400,000 readers and generates over 800,000 pageviews annually. Not only are Lika Club's readers spread across a large, predominantly rural geographic area, but many now live in the capital Zagreb, other Croatian regions, and abroad. Moreover, 85 percent of users access the website from mobile devices. This challenge prompted the editorial team to develop the region's first local news mobile application.

SOLUTION

With the Lika app on their mobile phones, readers will have faster and easier access to unbiased local news and information, receive notifications about new articles, and be able to interact directly with the outlet's editorial team.



By focusing on local audience interests and needs, the app will contribute to strengthening the region's community. The app will provide the Lika Club team with more detailed and precise audience data, and will open up new revenue possibilities.

IMPLEMENTATION

With the LM4D grant, Lika Club planned to develop and launch the mobile app, conduct a promotion campaign for it, and organise a series of media literacy events.

Phase 1: Research and development

The tech-savvy Lika Club relied mainly on its in-house knowledge, expertise and skills to conceptualise and design the mobile app. The project team of three people conducted in-depth analysis of existing audience data and brainstorming sessions on user needs prior to the development stage. Once the app's structure, features and graphic design were ready, Lika Club contracted with an external software developer to build a beta version.

Phase 2: Testing and soft launch

The Lika Club team was involved in meticulously testing of the beta version, after which it made multiple changes to improve functionality and usability. It conducted a soft public launch in the form of information sessions on media literacy in four towns in the Lika-Senj region and one in Zagreb. Lika Club distributed over 200 invitations to local institutions, civil society organisations, entrepreneurs, community activists, and influencers. More than 100 people attended the meetings.

During the sessions, participants could install and engage with the Lika app, enabling them to comprehensively explore its features, ask questions and provide valuable feedback. The events also provided an excellent opportunity to engage with readers face-to-face; discuss the region's information space, problems with news accuracy and topics of interest; and build a local network of contacts and promoters. Insights from the meetings helped Lika Club's team to further improve the app and its marketing plan.

Phase 3: Public launch and promotion

After the app was endorsed by initial users during the meetings and approved by Google Play and the Apple Store, Lika Club launched a comprehensive marketing campaign. It included cross-promotion of the app on other outlets of the Prilika Group, the parent publisher of Lika Club, one month of paid commercials (ten announcements daily), interviews on a popular local radio station, sponsored articles in strategically selected media, PR articles distributed to various media, and promotion on Google Ads, Facebook, Instagram, X, LinkedIn, and Viber.

Lika Club outsourced the paid promotion on Google Ads and social media to a Croatian digital marketing agency, which was responsible for creating engaging content, designing visuals, and targeting and planning campaigns to effectively reach the intended audiences. The agency also monitored and analysed the performance of the campaigns and adjusted them in a timely fashion to optimize engagement and maximise the app's visibility within the allocated budget.



RESULTS

- Lika Club developed a recognisable, user-friendly, local media app, which was **downloaded by almost 1,500 users** in the first month after its public launch (threefold more than the team's target).
- The app's marketing campaign generated over **10 million impressions** and **235,000 clicks**, thus increasing Lika Club's visibility and brand recognition.
- Audience research conducted as part of the app's development and insights from the media literacy meetings led to positive changes in Lika Club's editorial policy. Driven by reader interests, the outlet added new content categories such as forestry, energy, and agriculture. The editorial team increased the outlet's volume of interviews. These changes resulted in a new record of **136,000 monthly website visitors**.
- The app includes a new advertising option – monthly sponsorship of a branded thematic content category – thus creating an additional revenue stream for Lika Club.
- The Prilika Group signed a **cooperation agreement with a local radio station, Hrvatski Radio Otočac**. As a result, a 24/7 stream of the radio's programming was incorporated into the Lika App. In turn, the station is advertising the Lika App daily free-of-charge. Moreover, the two outlets are developing a single advertising package across multiple platforms.

IMPACT

Lika Club successfully developed and deployed the Lika-Senj region's first local news mobile app, first local news mobile app which allows readers to access quality, public interest, local information directly on their smartphones. The app has increased the accessibility, usability and visibility of Lika Club's content. The app has significant growth potential, as over 85 percent of Lika Club's readers access its website from mobile devices.

The app's development process, which included in-depth audience analysis and a soft launch in the form of face-to-face meetings with local communities, led to positive changes in editorial policy and content diversification. This process, along with its effective marketing campaign, resulted in an increase in the outlets' audience across all platforms as well as its level of audience engagement, trust, and brand recognition. Moreover, Lika Club expanded and strengthened its local networks.

By offering new advertising options and initiating cooperation with a local radio station, the app contributed to Lika Club's greater financial sustainability.

Finally, Lika Club's success has had a positive impact on Croatia's media sector. The app was noticed and extensively covered by national and local media. It is motivating and inspiring other local media to explore innovation, experimentation, and collaboration.

ZON

IMPROVING USER EXPERIENCE FOR THE YOUNG AND ELDERLY

Snapshot

Location: Hrastnik, Slovenia

LM4D grant: €23,150

Project duration: six months



Founded in 2014, the local news website ZON.si covers five municipalities in Slovenia's smallest and least developed region (less than 60,000 inhabitants, 30 percent of whom are elderly). While the website averaged 80,000 visitors a month, its main audience was middle-aged, from 35 to 65 years old. ZON was failing to reach and engage with a broader audience that included teenagers and seniors. With LM4D support, the ZON team planned to modernise the website, making it more interactive and user-friendly for elderly people, as well as to develop a mobile app to attract younger readers.

ZON fully redesigned, upgraded and relaunched the website. It now includes features for visually impaired users and a chatbot that allows readers to interact with its newsroom. Registered web users enjoy additional functionality, such as bookmarking their favourite articles and saving them to a dedicated folder. Modern backend functionality allows for the easy adjustment of

the website to editorial needs, including by adding new sections, tabs, and formats. Simultaneously, the ZON team developed a simple mobile app that enables users to select their preferred types of content, set notifications for new posts and bookmark articles.

To roll out its new products, ZON developed and implemented a comprehensive marketing strategy, which included distributing flyers, posters and stickers, conducting a social media campaign targeting young people, convening media literacy workshops for elderly people in retirement homes and presenting the new and improved ZON site at different public events. As a result, monthly audience doubled, reaching almost 170,000 web users; in addition, 52 readers registered on ZON.si and 12 people interacted with the editorial team via the chatbot in the first month of the website's launch. ZON's new app was built and tested but was still awaiting approval on Google Play and the App Store as of the end of the project

IMPACT INSIGHT

Zon's adoption of a more user-centric approach - enhanced through partnership with professional web designers and developers - was pivotal to the project's success. However, audience research indicate that while users noticed the website's new look, they did not necessarily grasp all of its advanced features. Hence, ZON's team focused its communication strategy on educating target audiences about how the new functionality would improve their user experience. This also led to increase in brand recognition and audience engagement both online and offline.

InfoGIFT

INCREASING USER ENGAGEMENT WITH LOCAL NEWS

Snapshot

Location: Miastko and Bytow, Poland

LM4D grant: €33,650

Project duration: six months



A family-run local company, Compass produces two news websites in [Miastko](#) and [Bytow](#) and a free monthly newspaper in northern Poland. The founder, who worked in the national media for more than a decade, returned to his hometown in 2017 to launch his own independent media enterprise, which combines modern technologies with traditional printing. While his media outlets enjoy great popularity in the region, the publisher observed that readers showed less interest in local news in comparison with national and international affairs. To raise reader awareness of and engagement with local issues, he came up with the idea of InfoGIFT – a loyalty programme via a mobile app that rewards users who closely follow local news on the websites.

The reward mechanism is quite simple: is quite simple: at the end of a local news article on the website, there is a question related to its content with three possible answers. Only one attempt to answer the question is allowed per user. If the answer is correct, the user is awarded a point.

To collect points, the user must download a mobile app, which also notifies the users when new content is published on the websites. Once a user reaches certain scores, the points can be exchanged for actual gifts, such as electronic gadgets or a bicycle.

However, developing the loyalty programme was a complex process; it required designing the programme's principles and rules, launching a [InfoGIFT](#) landing page, creating a prize fund, coming up with questions and integrating them into the news portals, developing a new app and registering it with Google Play and the Apple Store. By the end of the LM4D project period, InfoGIFT was ready for public launch, but the app was still awaiting verification on the digital distribution platforms – a process that took longer than developing the app itself.

IMPACT INSIGHT

While InfoGIFT has not yet been put to a test, it has already generated interest among Polish digital publishers and therefore has scalability potential. Once launched, an InfoGIFT license will be available free of charge via [Sieć Portali](#), a company providing content management system services to more than 120 local websites in Poland. The first batch of prizes was established with LM4D funding, but Compass has already secured partnerships with several local businesses that are ready to provide future prizes. InfoGIFT might not only increase reader engagement with local news but also strengthen the overall Polish local media landscape through cross-sectoral partnerships.

3.3.3 ENGAGING WITH AUDIENCES AND BUILDING COMMUNITIES

Audience engagement – both online and offline – is an essential part of media operations and key to the success of any media outlet. In addition to expanding the reach of and interaction with content, it informs media outlets about their readers' interests and needs, increases trust, boosts brand recognition, builds loyal audiences and communities, and strengthens business viability by generating greater revenue.

Today, no media can survive without meaningful audience engagement. For local media, interacting with readers is both natural, given their proximity to their audiences, and vital, as they are an integral part of local communities. Thus, it is not surprising that at least twenty of the 42 projects supported by the LM4D programme included one or more audience engagement activities with the objective of raising awareness about local issues, mobilising local civil society, promoting democratic elections and reducing news deserts. The planned and implemented formats of audience engagement and community building were quite diverse, involved deep levels of engagement and aimed at achieving long-term positive changes in communities or regions.

This section features three case studies highlighting successful audience engagement strategies: the first case reduced news deserts in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area by opening pop-up newsrooms in three marginalised neighbourhoods and involving local residents in content creation; the second, from Czechia, built stronger community ties through participatory journalism at the local level; the third, in Greece, used audience research to increase the engagement of a region's younger and older readers.

MENSAGEM DE LISBOA

REDUCING NEWS DESERTS IN THE LISBON METROPOLITAN AREA

Case study

Location: Lisbon, Portugal

LM4D grant: €40,000

Project duration: seven 7 months



CHALLENGE

Mensagem de Lisboa is a Lisbon-based community journalism project founded by independent journalists in 2021. It publishes multimedia content on urban, social and cultural issues, along with solution-oriented approaches and human-interest stories. As part of its mission to create safe spaces for broader public discussion, foster local communities and transform Lisbon into a better and more inclusive city, Mensagem partners with universities, municipalities, NGOs, businesses, media outlets, cultural and community groups, and organises public events. Mensagem’s website reaches 110,000 users monthly and its ‘Dear Neighbour’ weekly eNewsletter has over 14,000 subscribers.

Through community work, media monitoring and research, the Mensagem team identified a series of news deserts on Lisbon’s periphery. These neighbourhoods include a significant number of young people, minorities, and first-generation Portuguese residents. They rarely appear in the media except in crime reports,

and the residents of these neighbourhoods feel disconnected from the mainstream news, as they find it irrelevant to their lives. As a result, news avoidance has grown, and populism, racism and anger thrive there.

SOLUTION

Building on previous experience with a local community project, Mensagem planned to establish pop-up newsrooms in Lisbon’s three least-covered areas – Chelas, Amadora, and Mem Martins in Sintra. It would partner with local community groups, activists and influencers to identify topics of interest and co-create content with and about these neighbourhoods. Mensagem would publish the content on its site and social media pages to cultivate greater understanding, empathy, and positive change.



IMPLEMENTATION**Phase 1: Research and preparation**

Mensagem partnered with two researchers to map and analyse the targeted news deserts through quantitative and qualitative studies of their coverage in national, local, and community media over the last three years, with a focus on problem-oriented biases and negative social representation. The team identified local community groups in the neighborhoods to partner with and used the outlet's website, social media pages, and local social media groups to announce the pop-up newsrooms and issue open calls to those community members who might be interested in participating. Several weeks prior to launching the newsrooms, Mensagem's editors and journalists visited the local areas, met with and listened to community leaders and influencers, shared the news desert study's findings, and explained their mission. This process helped to establish initial contacts and build trust.

Phase 2: Pop-up newsrooms, content co-creation, and impact study

The Mensagem team then relocated to each of the neighbourhoods for a period of one to two weeks and worked in local partner spaces. Together with community members, the team identified themes and subjects for future stories, collaborated on developing formats that would engage the communities and generate local input, and defined communication and distribution strategies, including personal interactions. For the production of each story, Mensagem paired professional journalists with local community reporters, and provided training on basic journalism skills when needed.

Depending on the format and complexity of the story, as well as the level of motivation and involvement of the community reporters, the production period of one content piece varied from two weeks for a feature article to six weeks for a longform multimedia report. On the first and last day of the pop-up newsroom operation in each neighbourhood, the team asked local

partners to fill out a questionnaire on their expectations, needs, motivation, and experience with participating in the project. The team and partner researchers analysed the responses in order to plan similar interventions in the future and to produce an academic article on overcoming news deserts in the city.

Phase 3: Publication and distribution

Mensagem published all the content on its website and disseminated it via its social media pages. The project's local reporters were credited as co-authors, which fostered recognition and pride. The team crafted a social media strategy for the project that utilised enhanced storytelling methods to connect more directly with younger, local audiences. For example, it created and published portraits of locals, who did not feature in the main stories, and published them on Instagram. Mensagem also posted links to the project's content in local neighbourhood groups on Facebook. This strategy generated the most engagement and comments from the targeted

areas. Throughout the implementation period, the team regularly published social media updates to inform the public about the project's progress and activities, and sent PR articles to mass media as well as district councils to raise public awareness about the project and further popularise the constructive stories from the targeted neighbourhoods.

RESULTS

- **Mensagem produced and published 80 reports and social media pieces** from the three neighbourhoods. The content covered culture and arts, urban issues, the economy and entrepreneurship, sports, and feature stories. Several of the project's pieces made the Top 5 most read stories of the month on the outlet's website, generating over 50,000 pageviews.
- **26 young local reporters and influencers were directly involved in content creation, working with eight members of the Mensagem editorial team.** The project's preparation, field work, content creation, and postproduction totalled 150 workdays devoted to the local areas.
- **Mensagem's reach and visibility in the three neighbourhoods increased significantly.** The number of users on the outlet's website from the Sintra district grew from 1.40 percent to 28.3 percent.
- **The project's social media publications generated a higher than average engagement rate;** some Instagram and Facebook posts produced thousands of reactions and dozens of comments. User feedback was predominantly positive. The project caught the attention of Portuguese media and was spotlighted by international media groups such as [WAN-IFRA](#).

IMPACT

While it might be too early to assess long-term impact, The Mensagem project's comprehensive engagement with the neighbourhoods' local audiences contributed to closing the gap between underreported communities and media in the city. Community members declared that they felt they were heard, that the project helped them to better understand and appreciate journalism, and that it contributed to preserving their neighbourhoods' unique identities, promoting positive narratives, and fostering a sense of belonging and community among residents.

Mensagem identified a number of narratives that are not covered by mainstream media, and proved that collaborative community journalism serves as an effective media outreach tool. Mensagem now sees itself as a member of the targeted communities and plans to remain involved with the neighbourhoods. The outlet's team developed a blueprint with recommendations for better community-focused journalism and a pop-up newsroom pitchbook/fundraising tool on how to create cross-sectoral partnerships and sustain community-focused journalism. Mensagem has already begun implementing a similar project focusing on environmental issues in another Lisbon neighbourhood in partnership with a university and sponsored by a local municipality.

NAŠE BROUMOVSKO

BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITY TIES THROUGH PARTICIPATORY JOURNALISM

Snapshot

Location: Broumov, Czechia

LM4D grant: €30,000

Project duration: seven months



Established in 2013, the daily news website [Naše Broumovsko](#) (Our Broumov Region) is the only professional independent media outlet publishing in the remote, rural Broumov region, which is located along the Czech-Polish border. With an editorial team of two journalists and a part-time manager, Naše Broumovsko employs constructive journalism to produce systematic and quality local reporting for a community of 20,000 inhabitants. Due to its small size, the editorial team felt that the outlet's coverage was neither broad nor granular enough to adequately cover local events and issues. To address this challenge, the team decided to use LM4D support to recruit, train and utilise local citizen journalists to reach underrepresented groups, especially younger and older residents.

The team partnered with three media experts to develop and implement a 'Journalism Simulator' – a training program for aspiring citizen journalists. The partners designed two workshops for members of the general public who were interested in gaining a better

understanding of local journalism and basic journalistic skills. They planned two others, which concentrated on creating social media content and developing audio-video production, for younger participants.

Naše Broumovsko advertised the 'Journalism Simulator' on its website and social media pages. Its team met with interested students in local high schools. A local municipality newsletter also covered the project. More people applied to the program than expected; the team accepted 17 and 19 participants for each set of workshops respectively, instead of the initially planned ten to 15 people. The seminars were practice-oriented; the participants, supervised by professional trainers and the Naše Broumovsko journalists, not only covered a tailored curriculum but also completed a series of editorial assignments. As a result, the workshop participants produced at least ten content pieces that were published on the Naše Broumovsko website during the three-month programme.

IMPACT INSIGHT

The project boosted the capacity of both the aspiring citizen journalists and the parent media outlet. Naše Broumovsko now cooperates with five trained external collaborators on a regular basis. The programme helped the outlet to gain a greater understanding of the needs, expectations, and interests of its readers as well as to improve ties to the community. The editorial team now conducts monthly meetings with local contributors and activists. The audience of the Naše Broumovsko website doubled and almost 700 more users joined its Facebook page, which now has over 3,000 followers. All of the project's results exceeded the initial targets set by the team. Most importantly, the Broumov region's news desert has become greener.

XRONOS

INCREASING ENGAGEMENT THROUGH AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Snapshot

Location: Komotini, Greece

LM4D grant: €40,000

Project duration: seven months



Xronos is a family-run legacy news group established in 1964. It oversees a popular regional daily newspaper, radio station, and website in Greece's Rhodope region. A pioneer of digitalisation, Xronos was the first Greek regional outlet to launch a news website in 1999; in 2019, it won a Gold Regional Media Award as the country's best multiplatform social media. Despite its accomplishments, Xronos realised that it was failing to reach certain segments of the region's population. The outlet planned to use LM4D support to address this challenge by better understanding audiences' interests and increasing its reach and engagement with younger and older readers.

Xronos contracted with a Greek market research agency, which designed and carried out a telephone survey in three municipalities in the Rhodope region. The survey sample included 959 men and women from two target age groups: those aged 17 to 24 and over 65 years old. The agency presented the results to the outlet's team, which immediately integrated them into

its editorial strategy. For example, the outlet launched three new regular sections for the newspaper and website on the topics of greatest interest as identified by the survey – health and wellbeing, local history, and entrepreneurship. Another survey finding, which was surprisingly encouraging, was that locals were willing to pay to access the local media outlet. Xronos incorporated this and other findings into a new business plan, which was also developed within the LM4D project.

In the month following the survey, Xronos distributed by post 10,000 copies of its newspaper (500 free copies per day) to elderly readers in Komotini, the regional capital, and nearby villages. The team organised three meetings with elderly readers and one with students to gather feedback on the outlet and its new content and exchange views on the value and challenges of local journalism. To enable its readers to share their own news and opinions, Xronos created and promoted a Facebook group 'The Xronos Community – Citizen Journalism.'

IMPACT INSIGHT

The audience survey helped the Xronos team to better understand the needs of its target audiences and how to improve its editorial policy to meet these needs. Readers became aware of the changes and their feedback proved to be positive. Through LM4D, the editorial team was able to connect with readers both in-person and online, as the project had inspired the team to create a new two-way communication channel. As a result, the number of subscribers to the newspaper increased and the number of visitors to the outlet's website doubled. Finally, the project produced several new business partnerships.

3.3.4 USING CROWDSOURCED INFORMATION AND AUTOMATING EDITORIAL WORK

Crowdsourcing, as a means of engaging with audiences and sourcing information from remote areas, is especially important for editorial teams of small media outlets. But embracing two-way communication channels requires treating personal data and safety concerns seriously, thinking through user experiences innovatively, and organising information flows properly. Crowdsourced information can also be overwhelming, especially when it arrives via multiple platforms and must be thoroughly verified. In short, crowdsourcing requires detailed planning, technological savvy, and effective management on the part of media outlets.

Several LM4D partners implemented various types of crowdsourcing initiatives. This section spotlights a WhatsApp chatbot for sharing and verifying news from Portugal, a web-based system for automating editorial workflow for reader-generated information from Hungary, and an interactive map for tracking community issues from Lithuania.

SUL INFORMAÇÃO

'GOT NEWS FOR US' CHATBOT

Case study

Location: Faro, Portugal

LM4D grant: €23,000

Project duration: six months



CHALLENGE

The online newspaper [Sul Informação](#) was founded by three journalists in 2011. Today, it is the most popular media outlet in the Algarve region, with a proprietary mobile app, an average of 40,000 website visitors a day, and 2,500 subscribers to its daily eNewsletter. The award-winning editorial team includes six full-time employees, making it the largest newsroom among regional publications in southern Portugal. However, this has proved insufficient to source information and provide proper coverage of all 16 municipalities in a region with half a million inhabitants, where other local media are scarce or non-existent and local audiences remain underserved.

SOLUTION

The project aimed at creating a two-way communication tool between the newsroom and the outlet's readers, especially those living in remote areas and municipalities with no local media. The tool, integrated with Sul Informação's website, will allow users to share their news and

guide them in providing additional information, which then will be verified by the outlet's journalists and, potentially, published by Sul Informação. Thus, the crowdsourcing solution will provide readers not only with direct and immediate access to professionally-produced local news and developments, but also draw on them to broaden and diversify local information presented in the newspaper.

IMPLEMENTATION

Phase 1: Planning and development

Initially, Sul Informação considered developing a proprietary chatbot. Following research, in-house discussions and consultations with software developers, however, the team opted to rely on WhatsApp technology instead. As Portugal's most popular messenger app, WhatsApp is easily accessible and usable for both readers and journalists; most already have it on their smartphones. WhatsApp provides both user verification and personal data protection, and allows the sharing photo, video, and audio.

Sul Informação contracted with the Portuguese software company DigitalGTPPro to build a WhatsApp-based chatbot. The editorial team worked closely with the developers in designing the tool's functionality. The team actively participated in developing and fine-tuning a Q&A map with automated questions and answers and sequences of chatbot interactions with users. An automated back-office system, linked with the mobile phones of the editorial staff, allows editors and journalists to track, organise, analyse, prioritise, and manage interactions with users in real time. Finally, the team developed a dashboard that included the statistics of all chatbot submissions.

Phase 2: Testing and public launch

Internal testing of the 'Got News for Us' chatbot, involving the editorial team, their families and friends, preceded the public launch. This process allowed the team to identify and fix bugs and improve the user journey and experience. Following the completion of testing, the team integrated the tool with the Sul Informação

website. After the first interaction, the user can save the chatbot to the contacts app on their mobile phone and interact with it directly via WhatsApp without returning to the website or installing anything on the phone.

Simultaneously with testing, the team prepared a marketing campaign, which accompanied the public launch of the chatbot on 29 February, 2024. It included articles and posts about the chatbot on Sul Informação’s website and social media pages, paid promotion in social media and emails sent by the editorial team to town councils, schools, and community organisations in the region’s municipalities. The Portuguese Press Association and a national news agency also disseminated information about the new tool.

Phase 3: Crowdsourcing and production

Sul Informação began receiving submissions from readers during the first week after the public launch. Submissions included valuable local tips, news or problems, which were verified by the outlet’s journalists, produced as content pieces,

and published on the website. Sul Informação also received user reports, including multimedia materials, from locations to which its reporters would otherwise not have had access. Users are notified about the outcomes of their submissions, which are categorised as ‘for publication,’ ‘for in-depth research,’ ‘refused,’ or ‘false information.’

While the chatbot concept proved successful, the team encountered a problem concerning users’ submission of irrelevant information or random questions. It elected to review and simplify some of the interactions, which resulted in a reduction of irrelevant messages.

The editorial team continues to actively use the ‘Got News for Us’ tool, which is now fully integrated into the editorial process.



RESULTS

- Sul Informação conceptualised, designed, developed, tested, and deployed a WhatsApp-based chatbot for crowdsourcing and verifying local and hyperlocal information and communicating with its readers in real time.
- Inhabitants of the Algarve region, including from news desert areas with no local media or reporters in place, now have direct, 24-hour access to a professional newsroom and can share news, raise awareness about local issues and engage with professional journalists.
- In the first weeks after the launch of the chatbot, Sul Informação published over 20 exclusive news posts and articles based on tips, information, and multimedia materials submitted by its readers via the chatbot. One such story became one of the most-read articles of the week on the newspaper's website.
- The chatbot tool's crowdsourcing and automation of information flow made the outlet's editorial work more efficient and allowed it to expand coverage despite limited resources.
- The tool's dashboard provides the editorial team with more granular audience data.
- The tool's verification functionality helps to counter fake news and misinformation.
- In May 2024, Sul Informação received a 'Most Innovative Project' prize, including for its 'Got News for Us' chatbot, from the Portuguese Press Association.

IMPACT

Sul Informação's chatbot is already proving to be an effective tool in helping to overcome news deserts in Algarve region. It serves as a virtual door to the publication's newsroom for citizens from remote areas with limited or no media access. In the first months of the chatbot's operation, Sul Informação received submissions from all Algarve municipalities considered to be a news desert or at risk of becoming one. The submissions covered various topics – from the work of local government institutions to accidents, environmental issues, and cultural events.

Inspired by the success of the pilot version of the chatbot and its positive effect on editorial work, the team is already developing further automation of the tool via AI, which should enable the chatbot to summarise interactions with users, gather all submitted information, and prepare a draft story. 'Got News for Us' is proving to be a scalable technological solution, designed by and for local media, which can be employed by other newsrooms in Portugal and elsewhere.

NYUGAT

UPGRADING CROWDSOURCING AND EDITORIAL AUTOMATION

Snapshot

Location: Szombathely, Hungary

LM4D grant: €20,000

Project duration: seven months



Nyugat is Hungary's largest independent media outlet based outside of Budapest. Its website draws over 750,000 monthly visitors and remains the primary source of news in the Vas region. This is an exception in a country where most regional and local media outlets are controlled by the government. Over two decades of publishing, Nyugat has always actively engaged with its readers – both offline and online – including for content creation. Five years ago, it introduced 'I Report,' an encrypted module on its website that enables users to safely share their news and information with the outlet. With LM4D support, Nyugat's team planned to further develop the 'I Report' system, automate editorial workflow, and increase the number of its crowdsourced publications.

Nyugat has a proprietary content management system (CMS) that was developed and continues to be supported by a local tech company. This allows the outlet to experiment with and quickly add new digital features. The focus of the LM4D project was to improve the back end of the

'I Report' module. As a result, today all incoming submissions from the public received via the web-module are automatically processed and fed into a dedicated section of the CMS, where all members of the editorial team can view and access them. Editors can then assign the submissions to journalists, who can factcheck and edit them for publication directly in the system.

This automation is proving to be more efficient. It has reduced the editorial workload for the outlet's small team of six journalists, who no longer need to manually track and manage incoming reports from readers, cite greater work productivity and job satisfaction, and have noted increased reader-generated content. Today, Nyugat publishes approximately 100 crowdsourced stories per month.

IMPACT INSIGHT

'I Report' today better serves both the outlet's readers, who feel that their input is welcome and valued, and its editorial team, which is producing more diverse and quality content. Nyugat not only regularly publishes articles based on crowdsourced information, but often re-engages with its civic journalists and readers by inserting polls and other interactive formats inside posts (one example can be found [here](#)). Furthermore, the project's success has inspired the team to continue experimenting with automation: Nyugat's developers are now working on a solution with 'I Report' system comments and messages received via the outlet's Facebook's page, which is its main communication channel with readers.

PRASTI POPIERIAI

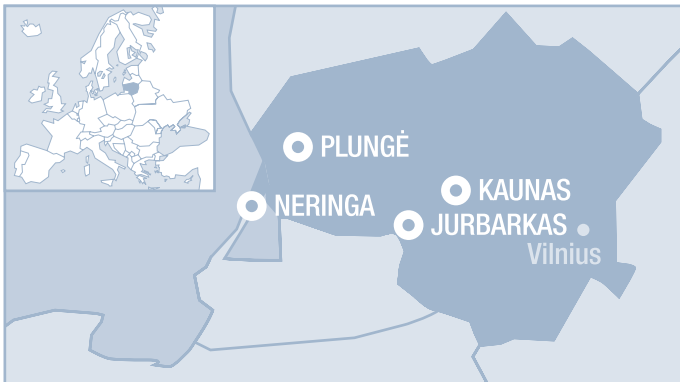
MAPPING LOCAL COMMUNITY ISSUES

Snapshot

Location: Kaunas, Plungė, Jurbarkas and Neringa, Lithuania

LM4D grant: €33,500

Project duration: seven months



An all-female team of three community publisher-journalists, who oversee news websites in different Lithuanian towns, decided to create a crowdsourcing map of local issues and challenges to draw the attention of public authorities and to mobilise communities. From their experience as journalists, the team realised that local problems often remain unattended to until they are publicised. The interactive map would provide a user-friendly tool not only to report issues but also to track progress on resolving them.

Once the concept of the crowdsourcing project was finalised, the publisher-journalists contracted with a Lithuanian IT developer to build a website with an embedded interactive map. The team also partnered with a local digital marketing agency to develop and implement a comprehensive communication and marketing plan for the online tool. While the map was being

developed and tested, the publisher-journalists organised a series of community and high school meetings in their respective home towns to raise awareness about the project and train budding civic journalists to report local issues via the map.

The team launched the [Prasti Popieriai](#) ('Bad Papers' in Lithuanian) website with a Google Map widget in early May 2024. It generated a dozen public submissions in the first months after its launch. In the site's Updates section, the team publishes progress reports on the identified issues, including photos and documentation received from the responsible public authorities. Several mapped issues were categorised as 'solved' by the end of project's implementation.

IMPACT INSIGHT

The map's slogan declares 'Let's solve problems together.' Even in its immediate post-launch stage, it was clear that the project was meeting its objective and resonated well with local communities. The publisher-journalists clearly boosted their impact at the local level by increasing their use of digital technologies, tapping into user behaviour, and utilising digital marketing. To follow up on the project's successes, the team has launched a crowdfunding campaign and is planning to expand the project to other towns and villages in Lithuania.

3.3.5 EXPANDING LOCAL AND REGIONAL ACCESS TO CONTENT

Today, multichannel content distribution is not only an integral part but also the most dynamic aspect of the editorial process. New platforms and technologies are constantly emerging, algorithms are rapidly evolving, and user behaviour and habits are quickly changing. To remain relevant and reach target audiences more effectively, media outlets must constantly experiment with and adjust their content distribution strategies, while also being constrained by limited human resources and budgets.

Content distribution diversification was a key focus for many LM4D partners. Some experimented with new formats and others developed and implemented multiplatform distribution strategies or launched new channels of direct content delivery to readers. But the main objective of all of these activities was to expand regional and local access to quality public interest content.

This chapter features a Romanian media outlet's novel approach to repackaging and distributing its investigative journalism pieces that resulted in an increase in audience reach, a Slovak network of investigative journalists which launched an eNewsletter that grew rapidly and generated reader donations, and a Romanian local newspaper which made its content more consumable by transforming print articles into audio news with an AI tool.

CONTEXT.RO

REACHING, INFORMING, AND AFFECTING NEW READERS

Case study

Location: Bucharest, Romania

LM4D grant: €28,050

Project duration: seven months



CHALLENGE

[Context.ro](https://context.ro) is an online media start-up founded by experienced Romanian journalists in 2022; it specialises in investigative journalism that spotlights fraud, corruption and organised crime. The outlet has achieved strong and regular growth, reaching 200,000 readers via its website and social media pages. However, its visibility was mostly prominent in Romania's most developed cities – Bucharest and Cluj – but not in the country's poorer regions. Context.ro planned to expand its outreach, boost public awareness, and foster transparency and civic engagement in Romania's regions of Moldavia, southern Muntenia, and Oltenia of Romania. These regions have the country's highest rates of corruption and crime, greatest human and child trafficking, worst living conditions, and lowest access to healthcare and education. While these regions are the focus of most of Context.ro's investigations, the resulting content had hardly reached local audiences there.

SOLUTION

Context.ro planned to strengthen its reach and positive impact in these media deserts by revising its content distribution strategy, repackaging its text-heavy investigative reports into formats more suitable for social media and regional audiences, improving editorial workflow, developing and implementing a sustainable content marketing plan, and launching an eNewsletter.

IMPLEMENTATION

Phase 1: Analysis and strategic rethinking

The team began by taking a critical look at the outlet's existing content distribution approach. A 'look in the mirror' exercise and analysis of audience data identified several issues that made Context.ro's content less appealing to local users: its social media posts were text-heavy, included boring pictures, and accompanied by PDFs of official documents that were often unreadable not only on smartphones but also on larger screens.

Since Context.ro consists of investigative and data journalists with limited graphic design and social media skills, the editorial team decided to contract with a professional digital marketing agency to develop a new visual style and content distribution strategy, conduct trainings for the staff, and help to integrate the new strategy into editorial processes. The team prioritised identifying a contractor that shares Context.ro's values, understands journalism, and supports flexible work hours, including on the weekends. Following a careful selection process, Context.ro chose Romania's WebGrow agency.

Phase 2: Developing a new content distribution strategy

The editorial team worked with WebGrow to develop a consistent, recognisable visual style and refocus the outlet's multiplatform distribution strategy. The new approach identifies content of greatest interest and value to the broader public, repackages it (reword-reformat-reinterpret), and



reposts it over time for greater reach. WebGrow also designed templates for posts and multimedia materials and created a marketing plan, including paid promotion in social media.

Based on cost and needs analysis, usability and learning curve criteria, WebGrow suggested tools which the editorial team could use to simplify the new strategy's implementation and seamlessly integrate it into editorial processes; these tools included Google Workspace for planning and workflow management and Canva for creating visuals.

Together with WebGrow specialists, the Context.ro editorial team also developed the concept, structure and design, and selected a distribution platform for its new content product – an eNewsletter.

Phase 3: Training and implementation

WebGrow conducted biweekly training sessions for Context.ro's editorial team on how to use these tools and on content packaging, distribution, marketing, and data analytics in

social media. The planning and workflow tools were fully integrated into the editorial process. With the new strategy, most social media content is now planned one month in advance.

The team launched a new weekly eNewsletter. It began publishing at least one post per day on Facebook and Instagram, using the new templates and appealing visuals. The team started systematically analysing reach, engagement and traffic, and comparing them to planned performance indicators; this data is now used to fine-tune the outlet's content distribution plans.

WebGrow launched a targeted paid promotion campaign on social media with a modest budget that would not hinder Context.ro's organic growth. The editorial team printed a mini-newspaper to promote Context.ro's website, which was distributed to passengers at the railway station where trains travel to and from the three target regions, to drivers of cars bearing those regions' license plates, and at universities and pubs favored by students from those regions.

RESULTS

- Launched in November 2023, the new eNewsletter generated over **2,300 subscribers** in the first four months.
- The new content distribution strategy resulted in a **96 percent increase in visitors to the Context.ro website**; on **Facebook, the outlet's reach skyrocketed to almost 820,000 in February 2024** (compared to 16,000 in August 2023); **on Instagram, Context.ro increased its reach to 115,000** from under 400 at the project's beginning.
- **Context.ro significantly increased its outreach, interactions, and visibility in all three targeted geographical areas.** In Giurgiu county in southern Muntenia, readership grew by over 1,300 percent; in Botosani county in the Moldavia region, by almost 400 percent; and in Suceava county in Bukovina and Western Moldavia, by 300 percent. However, in two counties with an older population and which are controlled by powerful, corrupt politicians and special interest groups, Context.ro failed to increase its readership despite consistent coverage and targeting efforts. The team is now reviewing its content distribution approach in these specific locations.

IMPACT

By partnering with a professional digital marketing agency, developing and implementing a coherent multiplatform content distribution strategy and marketing plan, improving the skills of editorial staff, and integrating effective workflow and content planning and management tools into the editorial process, Context.ro significantly increased its reach and impact on its Romanian audience in general and in the three targeted regions in particular.

Moreover, Context.ro's investigative reports on corruption and misconduct in the targeted regions were picked up by national media outlets and several led to a number of policy changes, resignations of public officials, and official legal investigations.

In response to the outlet's greater presence, closer connection, and increased trust in local communities characterised as media deserts, Context.ro now regularly receives tips and information from readers from the targeted regions about instances of injustice, fraud, corruption, and human trafficking.

INVESTIGATIVE CENTRE OF JAN KUCIAK (ICJK)

POPULARISING INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM VIA AN ENEWSLETTER

Snapshot

Location: Bratislava, Slovakia

LM4D grant: €31,000

Project duration: seven months



The [Investigative Centre of Jan Kuciak \(ICJK\)](#) is a nonprofit organisation established in 2018 following the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. The ICJK has been involved in conducting most of the significant national and international investigations of organised crime, foreign influence, corruption, and disinformation in Slovakia. It also serves as a coordination hub for investigative journalists from 11 Slovak media outlets. With LM4D support, the ICJK sought to widen its reach in the country's regions by expanding its network of investigative reporters to central and eastern Slovakia, publishing a series of regional investigative reports, and launching an eNewsletter.

The ICJK selected four reporters – three from popular online media and one from a public broadcaster – whose work covered the targeted regions. ICJK conducted online training sessions in investigative journalism for them and advised on follow-up stories. While the reporters were working on their regional investigations, ICJK's

editors individually mentored them. The trainees produced four investigative reports, which were published on the ICJK website and resulted in the programme reaching a broader audience and multiplying the effect of the investigations.

In January 2024, the ICJK launched its eNewsletter on [Ecomail](#), an email marketing platform. The ICJK produces three versions: a weekly edition that highlights newly-published investigations, a monthly edition that includes op-eds from the ICJK's editor-in-chief, and occasional editions targeting the country's regions. The e-Newsletter proved a success; it gained 3,600 subscribers in its first five months and became an effective tool for generating reader donations.

IMPACT INSIGHT

The project was an effective first step in boosting the potential of investigative journalism in Slovakia's regions. The four participating journalists continue to coordinate their investigative work with the ICJK, and other regional journalists have expressed interest in joining the network in the near future. Partnering with popular independent media outlets to distribute regional investigations has helped the network to reach a broader public, including in the targeted regions. The monthly eNewsletter, with its editor op-eds and embedded donation button, seems to resonate especially well with readers, resulting in a high open rate (above 50 percent) and a steady stream of reader support.

MONITORUL DE BOTOSANI

EXPANDING LOCAL NEWS CONSUMPTION WITH AN AI TOOL

Snapshot

Location: Botosani, Romania

LM4D grant: €30,166

Project duration: seven months



Published since 1995, [Monitorul de Botosani](#) is one of Romania's oldest local daily newspapers and the only print outlet in the country's Botosani county. But this legacy independent paper has also been a leader in digital transformation; its website draws over 20,000 daily users and its Facebook page has 45,000 followers. One year ago, Monitorul launched a mobile news app that now has over 2,000 users. To address a growing demand for easily accessible, multiformat news and information, the outlet's editorial team planned to convert its articles into more dynamic audio content by utilising text-to-speech AI and integrating this into its website and mobile app.

After experimenting with several AI-based solutions, Monitorul opted to use a paid version of ChatGPT, which offered an optimal combination of price and quality of voiceover in the Romanian language. This option featured an automated text-to-speech function that converts news posts into audio content with one click; its voices are dynamic and sound natural. Because

some of the outlet's longer text formats are not immediately suitable for a 'radio-style' audio, the team decided to introduce an editing module that allows it, when necessary, to adapt texts manually before converting them to sound.

The team published the audio news clips in a dedicated section on its [website](#) and mobile app. Users of the app enjoyed additional functionality, such as choosing a male or female voice, selecting a playback speed, and utilising voice commands, which are especially convenient while driving.

To promote the new audio format, Monitorul launched a targeted advertising campaign on social media. It also produced 2,000 flyers with QR codes that directed users to the app on Google Play and the App Store. The team inserted the flyers into issues of its newspaper and distributed them to passengers of a partner bus company, which proved an effective promotion strategy.

IMPACT INSIGHT

The initial results proved promising, although the audio news format was more popular on the app than on the website. Monitorul continues to test different audio lengths and formats. The team plans to launch a daily five-minute audio digest that will be generated automatically from selected news posts. The new audio content also offers additional monetisation opportunities. Advertisers have expressed their interest in placing audio ads, and the Monitorul team has begun developing a technical solution for this.

4. Key learnings and recommendations



- Local media have a deep understanding of what needs to happen on the ground. They understand local needs, and are attuned to the specific challenges and opportunities in their contexts.
- Local media are well positioned to implement effective demand-driven solutions as they have the networks to affect change and tangible impact.
- Local and community media can focus on deep engagement and niche services rather than scale.
- Exploring and testing new revenues is possible in a short time but making them sustainable requires a longer commitment.
- Building audience trust – especially among new target audience segments or previously underserved groups – is a long-term investment.
- The LM4D programme finds that local media know how to make a lot from a little. They are particularly well placed as catalysts for innovation, often willing to take risks and experiment in ways mainstream media find more difficult.
- Flexibility within grant programming is needed to experiment and allow for local media practitioners to ‘fail fast, learn fast’ and adapt based on their learnings.

FOR FUNDERS

- Funding support to local media needs to be sustained, scaled up, and applied to other regions as part of long-term and strategic interventions.
- Grants for key product or service developments for news media can unlock further cycles of innovation and growth.
- Recognise the role local media play as a crucial component of healthy media ecosystems, offering unique, mission-driven products that are able to meet the needs of underserved communities.

FOR MEDIA DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMING

- Support knowledge exchange as a key component in programming, since this offers cost-effective and long-lasting methodologies for knowledge sharing across multiple languages and regions.
- Build bridges as part of programme design by developing local multi-stakeholder networks with context-relevant experience.
- Scope and support shared service centres that meet the needs of local media in different regions.
- Support the creation of journalism-related unions, councils, associations and coalitions, as they all form key avenues for coordinated responses.
- Flexibility within grant programming is needed to experiment and adapt based on learnings.
- Work to improve, and communicate to donors, the impact measurement of local media on local information environments, making the connection between the role of local media in reaching broader development goals.

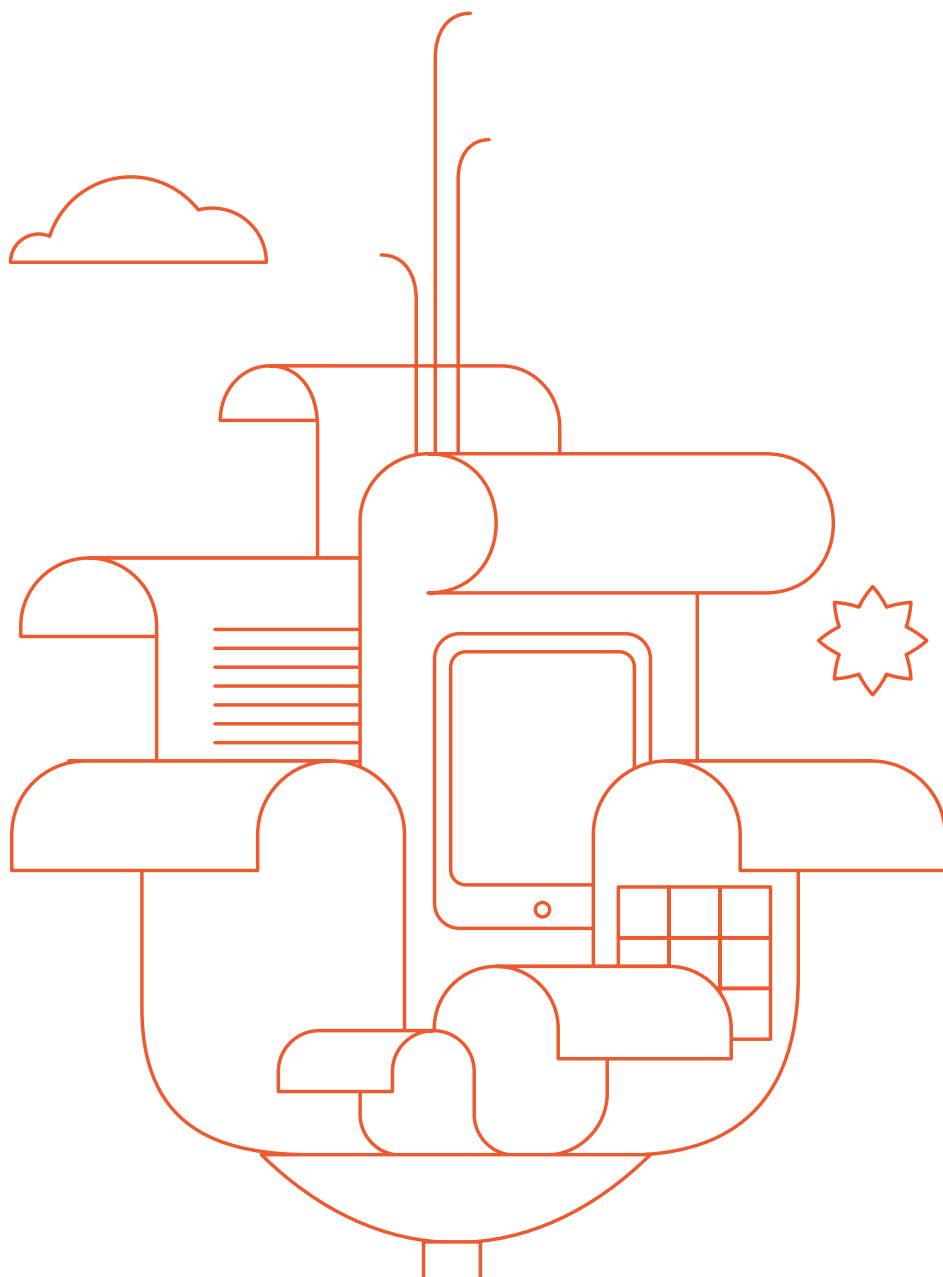
FOR POLICY MAKERS

- Work with media development intermediaries to coordinate empirical findings and lessons learnt so that policy and regulatory changes are informed by local experiences.

FOR MEDIA PRACTITIONERS

- Continue to review ways to measure impact and articulate this to key stakeholders.
- Set and track intermediate targets to learn fast and pivot a project at its early stage.
- Seek out partnerships with local digital marketing specialists and software developers who fully understand the local market in cost-efficient ways.

5. CONCLUSION



Independent local media matters now more than ever to counter the spread of misinformation and disinformation, to ensure participation in local electoral processes, and to create the necessary engagement and participation in local civic life. The journalism sector's trade press paints a bleak picture of Europe's local media business models, amid the stranglehold of big technology platforms. New or existing initiatives in media are struggling to survive. Casualties are many; winners are few. Yet the LM4D programme has proven that there are ways to fight back. Pockets of activity can lead to changes. News deserts can be fertilized by launching new media outlets and products, expanding reach to underserved and marginalised audiences, and increasing citizen participation in democratic processes at the local and community level.

LM4D provided space for experimentation and innovations in content diversification and distribution, automation of editorial processes, and user engagement. Local media also developed new marketing and revenue strategies,

thus building resilience. Through its capacity-building and networking activities, grantees of similar size from 17 EU member states also had a safe space for exchanging experiences and best practices, discussing problems and relevant solutions. This network has the potential to grow and become a platform for joint advocacy efforts, revitalising the local media landscape in Europe.

International Media Support remains committed to its focus on local media in the EU and beyond. Over the next two years, we will continue to work on enhancing plural media landscapes in Europe, scaling up funding and capacity-building support to independent media. Our LM4D impact framework, thematic guides and tools are all available in open source format, so they can be used in other programmes and regions. Coordinating our efforts with other media development organisations, IMS will use the findings and lessons learnt from the LM4D news deserts programme to further contribute to strengthening local media as a crucial component of vibrant media ecosystems.