

context®



CASE

CONTEXT.RO

“**Deeper Understanding:
Targeting Journalism
with Outreach, Testing**”

STUDY

IN SHORT

Context carried out a multiphase digital-engagement project designed to expand its newsletter audience, strengthen its base of paid supporters, and experiment with new ways of interacting with its community. The team conducted four coordinated campaigns which allowed the newsroom to gather insights from readers and experiment.

ABOUT THE NEWS OUTLET

Context is a Romanian investigative newsroom founded in 2022. Working as a team of multinational investigative journalists, they investigate cross-border organized crime, corruption, and other types of injustice and document the impact on society. Their focus is to expose the relationship between money and power, illegal operations affecting the public interest, and crimes against humanity.



PROJECT OBJECTIVES

Context aimed to better understand its audience and strengthen community engagement. The project focused on growing the newsletter, increasing recurring donations, and testing different ways to connect with readers.



IMPLEMENTED SOLUTIONS

Context ran four coordinated engagement campaigns focused on tax redirection, newsletter growth, subscriber-only content, and events. The team used rapid testing methods such as A/B testing visuals, copy, and email subject lines. Surveys and interviews were conducted to gather direct audience feedback.

WHY THIS PROJECT?

The team wanted to work on community engagement. They wanted to experiment with several initiatives: encouraging audiences to redirect 3.5% of their income tax, attracting new donors and subscribers, trying a small crowdfunding push, and learning more about the audience through surveys and live interviews. This was a chance for the team to understand what motivates people to support their journalism, to develop a more stable base of recurring donors, and to finally build internal knowledge around audience research, which they hadn't done before this project.

HOW DID APPLYING DESIGN THINKING PRINCIPLES HELP?

Design thinking became embedded in the newsroom's workflow. The most valuable component was rapid testing: A/B testing visuals and copy before running ads; testing email subject lines on the first 50 recipients before sending newsletters to the full list; testing multiple variants of posts, formats, and reminders; and iterating in small steps instead of committing to long, inflexible plans.

This approach allowed Context to identify what usually resonates, reduce wasted ad spending, and shift from instinct-based decisions to data-informed ones. Design thinking also helped the team adjust to audience behavior. They started posting less often but in a more strategic way and they reframed subscriber-exclusive content to align more clearly with the newsroom's journalistic mission in order to make it more exciting. Design thinking helped Context stay flexible, act on data, and adjust in real-time, rather than committing to a static campaign path.

DID CONTEXT'S APPROACH CHANGE ENGAGEMENT WITH ITS AUDIENCE IN ANY WAY?

Yes, the project deepened Context's interaction with its readers and donors. The audience survey drew 68 responses and led to 12 follow-up interviews, offering rich insights into how people perceive the outlet and why they trust it. Several participants appreciated being contacted directly and said they valued the newsroom's factual, measured tone. The team also experimented with donor-only benefits, including a due-diligence workshop that was well received. Throughout the campaign period, and especially during the election season, the newsroom noticed increased activity across platforms, additional engagement with their investigations and a steady rise in both subscribers and paid supporters, although they cannot be completely sure of which exact factor contributed to this.

WHAT CHALLENGES DID CONTEXT ENCOUNTER AND HOW DID IT ADDRESS THEM?

The most significant obstacle was timing. The tax-redirectation campaign was launched late in the fiscal cycle, when many people had already made their choices, which limited its impact. Technical issues also interfered with conversions, particularly when the donation banner malfunctioned on mobile devices. On social media, Meta's political-content restrictions reduced the effectiveness of targeted advertising, forcing the team to adjust their messaging in ways that diluted reach. Audience fatigue started showing up when reminders for a newsletter event became too frequent, so interest declined despite the quality of the content. Live online events also drew very small audiences, in part because they competed directly with election programming and widespread political coverage. In retrospect, the team thinks they launched too many small initiatives at once. Concentrating on one or two larger, more focused campaigns would probably have produced clearer insights and more sustained engagement.

HOW WAS CONTEXT'S PROJECT RECEIVED BY ITS AUDIENCE?

Overall, the project was met with openness and enthusiasm. Many readers expressed appreciation for being asked for their input and said they valued Context's focus on facts rather than opinion. The interviews revealed a diversity of preferences — some people wanted more live events, others preferred none; some wanted videos, others preferred long-form reading — but no strong pattern emerged. What did stand out was that readers consistently described Context as a trusted source, which is why they return and why they choose to support the newsroom financially. Donors responded positively to exclusive workshops, and a viral Instagram carousel on extremist groups, which reached more than half a million users, reaffirmed how journalism-driven visuals can significantly expand visibility.

WHAT INSIGHTS OR LESSONS DID CONTEXT GAIN FROM THIS PROJECT?

The team learned that depth matters more than volume. Running many smaller initiatives generated useful data, but also diluted energy and impact; future projects will focus on fewer, more thoroughly executed campaigns. The experience reinforced the value of continuous testing across newsletters, social media, and events, and showed that timing and pacing are crucial elements of audience engagement. It also demonstrated that exclusive offerings are most effective when directly connected to the newsroom's mission, and that audience research is indispensable for understanding both what people want and how they consume journalism. One of the most important outcomes was organizational: the project led to the hiring of a new full-time community engagement specialist, strengthening the newsroom in the long term.

WHAT DOES CONTEXT PLAN ON DOING NEXT?

Context is planning to build on this momentum with a more consistent and sustainable engagement strategy. The newsletter will remain central to community-building, supported by thoughtful reminders and periodic campaigns. The team will continue reusing the most successful visuals and copy, and major campaigns will be prepared well in advance to avoid the timing issues they encountered. The newsroom is also expanding its donor-focused offerings and launching new fundraising efforts to support its investigative-journalism training program.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD CONTEXT GIVE TO OTHER JOURNALISTS OR ORGANISATIONS CONSIDERING A SIMILAR PATH?

Context suggests that it is crucial to test early, test often, and remain adaptable. Engagement campaigns should begin at the right moment in the yearly cycle, and organizations should avoid overwhelming their communities with repetitive reminders. Building trust requires clarity, transparency, and a direct connection to the newsroom's editorial mission. Rather than attempting many parallel initiatives, focusing on one or two well-developed campaigns can create stronger results. Above all, listening to audiences through surveys or interviews provides important insights that can't be replaced by internal brainstorming. When it comes to growing sustainably, they should deepen trust and improve targeting with high-quality journalism, transparency, and smart pacing.

WHAT DOES CONTEXT PLAN ON DOING NEXT?

Context is currently waiting to hear back on a few other grant applications. The team expects answers soon, and if they secure the funding, they will be able to develop a longer-term plan for video production. If not, they will look for other ways to keep the work going without additional financial support. Either way, they are confident that video will remain part of their future. The long-term goal is to bring on a dedicated video editor or establish a consistent partnership with an external collaborator.

They hope the videos will reach people who do not usually engage with their written content — especially those who have been disinformed — and offer a clearer, more truthful perspective on the issues the newsroom covers. The team focuses on hard-hitting investigative journalism, aiming to tell the factual truth without trying to persuade readers on an emotional level. They know this approach means slower growth, but they prefer it that way. Their priority is to share the facts uncovered by their investigations and report what emerges.

“This is a very important message for us to get out that we are telling the factual truth, we are investigating, and what comes out we write about it,” Fangli said.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD CONTEXT GIVE TO OTHER JOURNALISTS OR ORGANISATIONS CONSIDERING A SIMILAR PATH?

Context advises other journalists to use more video and audio as well. “I believe that for any newsroom, one of the main objectives is to reach as many people as they can with their message,” Fangli said. “And people are reading less and less and they are consuming more and more video and audio content.”

The team recognized that focusing on these formats is important, but moving into video is not simple — especially without prior experience. Some newsrooms already have extensive video production experience, so for them it’s easy to jump in, get the cameras, and start creating. For others, it takes more effort to gain the skills and equipment needed to make it happen.