

POLICY BRIEF #62

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Collaborative knowledge exchange: a new paradigm for media innovation?

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Policy-makers and field analysts have usually focused on capturing media innovation by looking at actionable outcomes and concrete, measurable results (usually connected to digital technologies) with an immediate market potential. However, a growing body of research has shown that the capacity of a firm to innovate is not only tied to meeting certain measurable technological standards. It is also associated with internal organizational processes, inter-departmental coordination and the company's learning culture, all elements connected to non-linear, iterative processes, that reap the potential of knowledge exchange and cross-fertilization of competences. This policy brief presents findings from the Stars4Media project. The findings show how cross-disciplinary and cross-border collaborations centered around skill-growth and knowledge exchange have been perceived by European media companies as a long-lasting advantage point in their search for innovation, and it is to be further supported.

Main conclusions

Measuring innovation in the media sector requires moving beyond an outcome-oriented view, towards a process-oriented view of the innovation process.

Media companies benefit from cross-disciplinary and cross-border collaborative innovation projects not only for the concrete opportunities of testing out new products/methodologies/services, but particularly **for the knowledge exchange process and skill-growth taking place as a result of the partnership.**

Innovation in the media is not necessarily connected to meeting new technological standards: **media companies show vast interest towards editorial formats and content-related forms of innovation.**

Supporting schemes for media innovation might need to strengthen the focus on **enhancing business and sales competences of media professionals through tailored coaching schemes**, as media professionals involved in collaborative exchange seem to focus on editorial and tech growth.

Context and background

In the last three decades the European media sector has been striving to survive different challenges: global competition, the imperatives of digital transformation, the global financial crisis and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic. With audience behavior and revenues

sources shifting continuously, **a recurring response of the sector has been the quest for innovation.**

This response has been supported both by media companies' internal policies, as well as through the external support of institutional actors, for example with innovation schemes and programmes. **At the EU level, the Stars4Media programme is an example of a European media innovation support scheme.** Since 2019, Stars4Media has been coordinated by SMIT and it is currently running its third edition, [Stars4Media News](#).

Recently completed, the [Stars4Media Second Edition](#) was implemented between January 2021 and June 2022. While the concept of the programme hardly changed compared to the [First Edition](#), **more ambitious targets were set and achieved.** Stars4Media Second Edition has enabled a higher number of cross-border initiatives (short-term projects) between media outlets, and it has supported financially almost as double as the media professionals of the previous edition.

Project Highlights	1	2
	Stars4Media First Edition	Stars4Media Second Edition
Proposals for initiative received	41	101
Initiatives selected and supported	20	30
Media professionals supported	100	184
Media companies involved	42	75
EU countries represented	17	22

Fig. 1: Project highlights comparing Stars4Media First and Second Editions results

The main project goal is the **development of innovative products/methodologies and the cross-fertilization of skills and competencies have remained the core.** Typically, two media companies or a media company and a technology startup from two different European countries worked together for four months on a joint project. Aside from allowing companies to achieve some concrete proofs of concept, **Stars4Media makes a critical point when it comes to challenging the traditional outcome-oriented media innovation policy paradigm.**

Exploratory innovation: turning challenges into opportunities

[A recent survey by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism](#) has shown how media companies attribute a key role to innovation, for handling the multifaceted challenges the industry faces today. When it comes to identifying the **barriers to innovation**, the same report noted, next to a rather predictable shortage of financial resources, a **lack of skills in delivering and defining solutions in the EU media sector and a lack of organizational strategy.** Media

innovation programmes such as Stars4Media precisely tackle this need, by providing companies with a **safe space for experimentations, testing, learning opportunities and skills growth**.

As part of Stars4Media, different types of media companies were given time, guidance, and resources to experiment with explorative out-of-the-box ideas, sharing respective know-hows and competences. As field experts expect further uptake of subscription-based models, artificial intelligence continuing to make inroads in newsrooms, podcasting consolidating its position and social media platforms to remain important in the media context, there is clearly much need for exploratory experimentation and fine-tuning of internal processes and products already tested out.

There was a **wide variety of synergies in the initiatives co-financed by Stars4Media Second Edition**, which aimed to capitalize on positive trends like those aforementioned in the industry. These included, amongst others, initiatives exploring TikTok's potential as a tool for use in journalism, audience solutions for the podcast market, experimental local journalism products, and many relating to the use of artificial intelligence for media production and audience interaction.

Fix the skill shortage: collaborate intensely and work in cross-disciplinary settings

As mentioned above, two of the biggest obstacles to innovation are the lack of skills to deliver solutions and the poor alignment between departments and groups within media companies. Stars4Media addresses these challenges by **encouraging companies to work with partners with complementary skills and test out collaborative workflows**.

Out of the seventy-six media companies participating in Stars4Media Second Edition, nearly **half of the team leaders reported that thanks to the initiative, their team expanded their skill set or competencies greatly**.

Furthermore, almost half of the team leaders said that the skills that they have internalized as a result of this project will significantly **improve their ability to implement innovations in the future**. More interestingly, data was cross-tabulated to observe the association of different variables.

- First, not all companies collaborated in the same way. In some cases, there has been regular interaction between the companies, with continuous co-creation and exchange (high-intensity collaboration). In other cases, the companies have worked separately and have compiled their respective work packages into a final result at the end, with less regular interaction (low-intensity collaboration). **The results of the survey showed that there was a correlation between expansion of skills and high degree of collaboration intensity**.
- Second, in a similar way, the participants who reported that **cross-disciplinary collaboration was key to most of the activities carried out (as opposed to few or some activities), have also reported the highest degree of skill-expansion**.
- Quite surprisingly, however, whether the initiatives were initially conceptualized by only managers, or by only operational units, or by these two actors in synergy, did not have an impact on the learning trajectories of the media professionals involved. Most importantly, the **vast majority of the participants said that cross-disciplinary collaboration has strengthened their ability to implement future innovations**.
- Lastly, there were varied responses to **how this would practically translate into the strategies that they will explore in the future**. Many companies reported financial benefits resulting from their innovation (circa 32% in terms of new revenues and circa 10% in terms of cost-efficiencies) and almost a quarter said that they expected skill-based advancements, putting this into practice by increasing funding for R&D (circa 15%) or creating innovation collaborative labs (circa 9%).

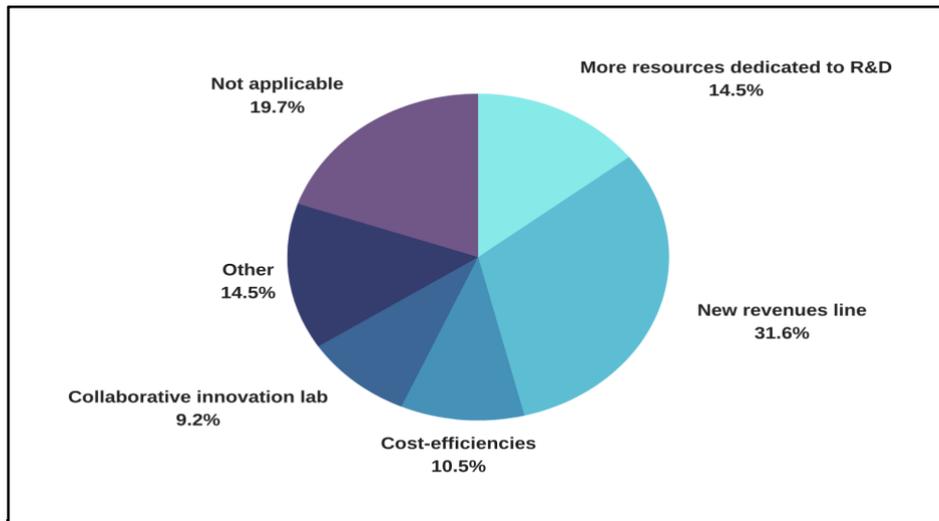


Fig.2: how media companies that have participated in Stars4Media Second Edition plan to further use their strengthened capacity to develop innovation

With the facilitation of cross-border collaborations being at the heart of the Stars4Media project, it is perhaps unsurprising that **more than half of the participants (56%) reported that the main benefit resulting from their participation in Stars4Media was that it strengthened their ability to partner in future international projects.** While participants reported equally strong skill growth in project management, editorial and technological competencies, only a small number said that their business or sales skills had improved as a result of their participation in Stars4Media.

The survey also shows how **editorial innovation, and the creation of new services were the most achieved types of innovation, less was done in terms of tech innovation and revenues creation, and very little was achieved in terms of external/internal restructuring of the companies themselves,** making the case for a much needed support for newsroom transformation. Looking specifically at this last result, the third edition of Stars4Media - titled [Stars4Media NEWS](#) - comes quite timely, with its focus on business and newsroom transformation.

Conclusions and recommendations: how to maximize innovation while collaborating?

On top of the survey to the 76 team leaders, **a round of qualitative interviews with 20 team leaders was also performed between February and April 2022.** The combination of quantitative (survey-based) and qualitative (interview-based) insights allows to gather a set of lessons learned to build upon for the continuation of the Stars4Media project and for informing industry leaders, policy-makers and academics.

Takeaways

Media organizations should focus on cross-disciplinarity when innovating in partnership: Mixing profiles from different relevant groups (editorial people, technologists, businesspeople) **maximizes chances of knowledge exchange**, leading to a strengthened capacity to conceptualize and implement innovations.

The intensity with which collaborations take place seems to be key for enhancing skill-growth: workflows entailing constant exchanges, regular checkups and meetings contribute to provide the practitioners involved with lasting skills and competences.

A simple and clear support scheme - **a framework** - (with clear timeline and reporting rules, bound by a sufficient timeframe and timely financial allocation) **can act as an accelerator of innovation for a media organization**: it forces the responsible persons to think and dedicate time, deliver, leveraging on peer-pressure and performance expectations

Shared organizational goals/visions are a key factor of success during the implementation: organizations that have aligned their objectives and agreed on shared goals/visions during previous collaborations seem keener to continue their partnership after the funding phase, as opposed to those who worked together for the first time during Stars4Media

Collaborating cross-border supports an organization's capacity to continue doing so in the future.

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The academic research conducted on collaborative innovation practices is based on the ongoing experience of the Stars4Media project, which is implemented by imec-SMIT-VUB since 2019.

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imec-SMIT hosts approx. 45 researchers that study business, user and policy aspects of mediated communication. The program has a track record in fundamental and applied national projects. Prof. Dr. Ike.Picone heads the News Uses, Strategies and Engagements Unit. Point of contact for research collaborations is Simon.Delaere@vub.be (Research Valorisation Manager)