



INNOVATING THE MEDIA SECTOR WITH
STARS4MEDIA



STARS4MEDIA HANDBOOK



Innovating the media sector through cross-border collaboration

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The context behind Stars4Media

European news media today face an unprecedented crisis. Since digital platforms have entered the media field as new gatekeepers, traditional news media have struggled to re-position themselves in a digital-first media landscape. Financial resources and trust have both kept declining ever since, with worrying trends at play.

The European Commission has addressed directly the crisis of the news media by starting to channel resources toward media innovation. Among other actions, the Stars4Media Pilot Project was launched in 2019, responding to a proposal voted by the European Parliament in 2018.

Stars4Media started as a pilot programme to facilitate cooperation between media professionals (“rising stars”) with the goal of accelerating media innovation and cross-border coverage in Europe. It aims at enhancing media innovation in different EU countries around specific cross-border initiatives, testing ideas and technologies and introducing new business models.

Stars4Media NEWS, building on the experience and results of previous editions of the programme (Stars4Media Pilot and Stars4Media Second Edition), is now providing media companies with useful tools to adapt to a dynamic environment and engage in business and newsroom transformation. The Stars4Media NEWS programme foresees cascading funding, in-depth coaching, and peer-to-peer knowledge transfer.

Stars4Media NEWS

What is it?

Stars4Media NEWS proposes a pan-European, two-phase, funding programme that supports European news media organisations. The programme is co-financed by the European Union (EU), through the Creative Europe scheme, and implemented by a consortium of four partners: Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), the project coordinator, Europe's MediaLab (Fondation EURACTIV), the World Association of News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) and the European Journalism Center (EJC).

How does it differ from Stars4Media Pilot and Second Edition?

Building on the experience and results of its previous editions (Stars4Media Pilot and Stars4Media Second Edition), Stars4Media NEWS foresees cascading funding, in-depth coaching, and peer-to-peer knowledge transfer.

Specifically, the Stars4Media NEWS programme provides financial support and in-depth coaching to collaborative projects under two tracks:

- Track 1: Collaborative business transformation projects

Track 1 will gather projects whose scope is the partial or total transformation of the company, with an impact on one or several departments and/or workflows.

- Track 2: Collaborative newsroom transformation projects

Track 2 will gather projects whose scope is the partial or total transformation of the newsroom, with an impact specifically on the functioning and organisation of the editorial and news content production activities.

Overall, support is foreseen for **14** and later **9 cross-border projects**, in two successive phases:

Phase 1 - EXPLORE is focused on the exploration of media innovation

- **Duration:** 4 months
- **Number of Projects selected:** 14
- **Grant amount:** in the EXPLORE phase, for a typical project of two partners (media companies based in two different countries): **€24,000** (€12,000 lump sum award for each participating media)

Phase 2 - BOOST is focused on the transformation of the newsroom and/or business

- **Duration:** 6 months
- **Number of Projects selected:** 9
- **Grant amount:** in the BOOST phase, for a typical project of two partners (media companies based in two different countries): **€64,000** (€32,000 lump sum award for each)

New aspects:

- Increased financial support per participating company;
- Not only EU member states;

- Stronger focus on business transformation (BOOST phase);
- Need-based, tailored coaching and continuous mentoring;
- Creation of a larger, sustainable community;
- Dissemination of best practices;

If...

- You are a medium (50-250 employees) to large (+200 employees) news media company;
- You have a proposal for a collaborative project under one of the two Tracks: 'business transformation' (Track 1) or 'newsroom transformation' (Track 2);
- You are willing to cooperate with a media organisation, based in one of the participating countries¹;
- You are ready for a sustainable transformation of your business or newsroom;

Then, the Stars4Media NEWS programme is **for YOU!**

Who is who?

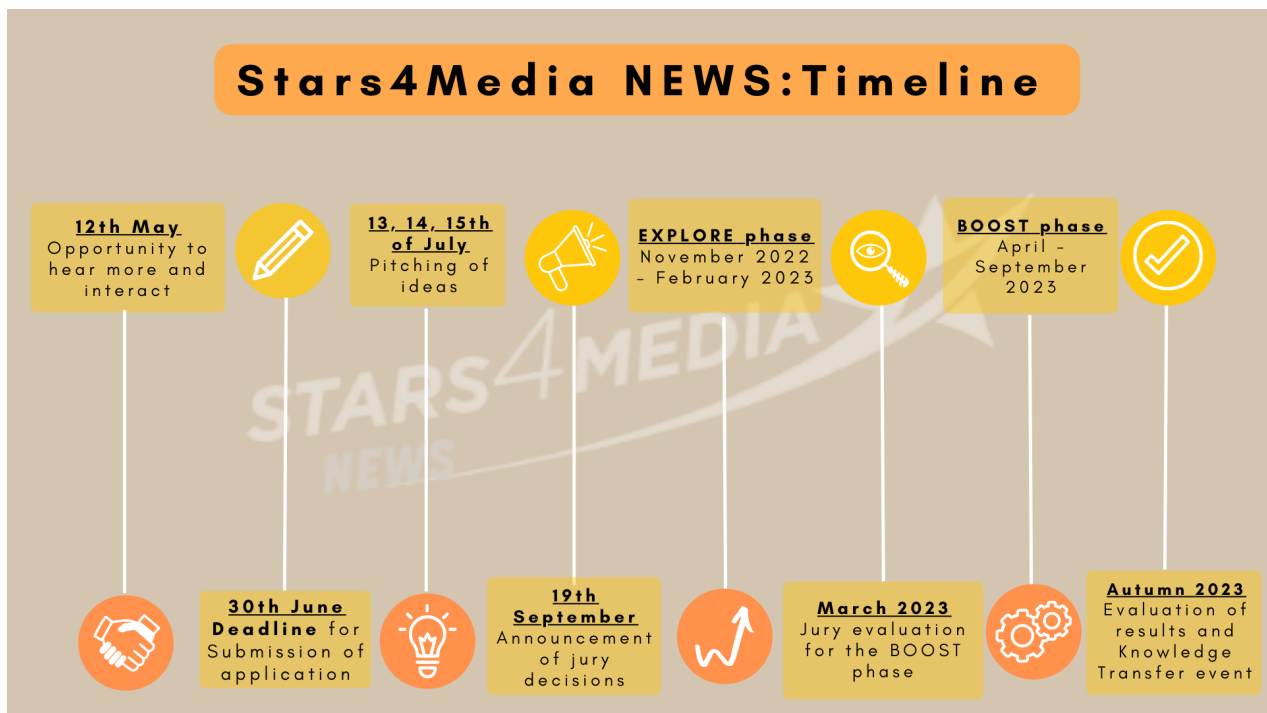
Before you delve into this handbook, let's clarify the roles you will interact with during the Stars4Media NEWS journey.

- **Jury:** media experts who will have the responsibility of evaluating all the proposals we receive and deciding on the projects that embark on the Stars4Media journey.
- **Process coaches:** these are representatives of the Stars4Media NEWS partners (VUB, Europe's MediaLab, EJC and WAN-IFRA) who will support you during the first phases of the programme. They will make sure you have an answer to your technical questions about the application process, and, later, if selected, help you understand and implement correctly the process, from the first self-assessment to the EXPLORE and BOOST phases.
- **Transformation coaches:** experts from the media industry who will provide coaching and mentoring to the selected projects. They will work with each project team to help you to reach your objectives and achieve business/newsroom transformation.

Each of these groups is composed of different experts, without any overlap of responsibilities, but in perfect coordination.

¹ Participating countries in the Creative Europe Programme: All EU member states; Iceland; Norway; Liechtenstein; Albania; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Montenegro; North Macedonia; Serbia; Georgia, and Ukraine.

What is expected of you?



Before the application

STEP 1: Self-assessment

Before starting the application process, we invite you to take a minute and assess whether your project fits within the scope of the Stars4Media NEWS programme.

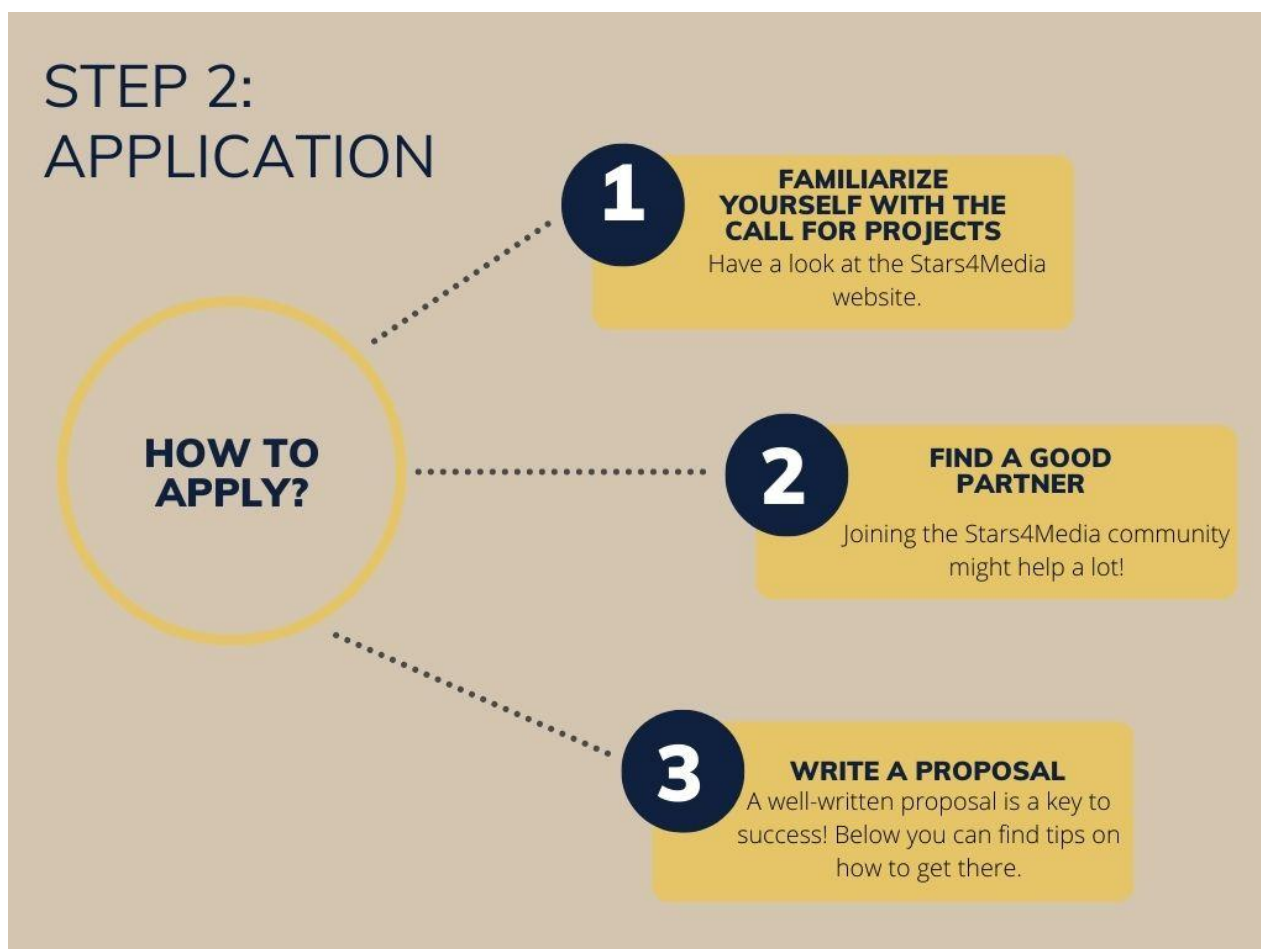
You can find [here](#) the link to the checklist.

Take this opportunity to evaluate if you are ready to commit, not only to the application phase, but to the 10-month-long transformative process your company will be going through.

Remember: not every project gets to BOOST! What makes YOUR idea stand out?

STEP 2: Application phase

Well done! Now that you are ready to commit, it's up to the jury to have a say on your project. Here are some tips for the application.



How to read the Call for projects?

The Call for Projects is published on the [Stars4Media website](#) at the beginning of the application period.

1) Priorities: Stars4Media is a co-funding programme aiming broadly at fostering innovation in media. To respond to the Call for Projects, you should come up with an idea that could generate innovation in the newsroom or business models, through a cross-border cooperation, while enhancing the competencies and skills of the team members involved.

2) Deadline: You have time until the **30th of June 2022** to submit your application.

3) Two tracks: Your collaborative project should fall under one of the two Tracks: '**business transformation**' (Track 1) or '**newsroom transformation**' (Track 2)

4) Each project should have the potential to participate in and complete the full 'BOOST' phase. However, keep in mind that of all the projects that made it to the EXPLORE phase, only 9 will be selected to continue to BOOST.

5) Pay attention to the [selection criteria](#) that our jury will be focusing on when evaluating your project.

How to find a partner?

Stars4Media supports collaboration between teams of media professionals with complementary skills, from a minimum of two different media outlets, based in different EU countries, working together on a joint project.

Ideally, you could work on a new project with a partner that you/your media organisation has already worked with in the past, leveraging existing connections and previous successful experience.

Finding a new partner can be a lengthy process. We encourage reaching out to the media outlets and/or professionals of your interest at an early stage, to touch base with a potential partner.

Additionally, to facilitate the process, we suggest:

- Joining the [Stars4Media community](#), which gathers a pool of professionals interested in the programme.
- Submitting your application individually: if your proposal is promising, the Stars4Media team will try to guide you towards a partner either before or after the jury selection. Do your best to elaborate on the profile/skills/expertise of your ideal partner when filling in the application form. We'll take it from there.

What makes a good partner?

A good partner will:

- Bring complementarity of skills to the team, provide creative and innovative ideas and relevant track records;
- Prove trustworthiness and commitment to (i) international professional journalistic standards and codes of ethics and (ii) applicable national rules concerning, in particular, impartiality and accuracy;
- Be fully committed to collaborating throughout the duration of the project.

How to write a good proposal?

The Proposals should be:

- Presented by two media organisations², based in two different participating countries;³
- Written in English;
- Represented by **the 'project leader'** of the lead project partner, who will make sure to share any relevant communication from Stars4Media with their team and their partners' team;

² Exceptionally, projects with three or four partners can be considered, when the role of each partner is relevant and clearly explained.

³ Participating countries in the Creative Europe Programme: All EU member states; Iceland; Norway; Liechtenstein; Albania; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Montenegro; North Macedonia; Serbia; Georgia, and Ukraine.

- Ideally, made by ‘already paired’ project teams. Alternatively, the applicant should clearly demonstrate in the application a strategy to bring another eligible partner into the project by the start of the EXPLORE phase.



DO’s and DON’T’s

DO thoroughly describe the transformation process you want to undergo and how you plan on doing it

DON’T propose an idea that doesn’t fall under one of the two tracks

2.2 What are the specific needs/challenges/issues you want to address/solve with this project and who are you targeting?
(300 words max)

Thanks to the technical expertise of our partner XYZ, we will introduce a new approach to furtherly expand our audience by creating engaging online courses that will be available on existing learning platforms (Skillshare, Coursera). In this way, we will not only diversify our revenues, but we will have the opportunity to allow people from different socio-economical backgrounds to learn about the digital transformation of the media sector and, with a specific focus on the gender gap in the media, we want to reach more women and stimulate their interest in predominantly male-dominated sectors.

2.2 What are the specific needs/challenges/issues you want to address/solve with this project and who are you targeting?
(300 words max)

We are planning on educating different groups of about digital transformation as well as encourage more girls to enter into the STEM workforce.

DO explain why and how your project is sustainable on the long term

DON'T propose an idea with no clear potential in mind

2.4 What is the potential impact of your project?
Think in terms of business sustainability; revenues; innovation in the newsroom; societal impact; amongst other things.
(300 words max)

As we will be learning how to create online content for the platform, the skills acquired thanks to the partner and the coaches will allow us to use this format also for other projects. We plan on diversifying our revenues by selling our finished products to third parties and through advertisement revenues. Moreover, we think that the societal impact of our project will be particularly relevant as it will allow people to gain a specific understanding of the media sector, and, eventually, stand out in the job market.

2.4 What is the potential impact of your project?
Think in terms of business sustainability; revenues; innovation in the newsroom; societal impact; amongst other things.
(300 words max)

It will allow for a new product offering and also bring about new skill set to our teams.

STEP 3: Pitching and Evaluation

Once you submitted your project proposal, you will be invited to present your idea to the jury.

On the **13th, 14th or 15th of July 2022**, you will have the opportunity to pitch your project, in an online session. Each applicant will be allocated a 10-minute slot to present the project, followed by a round of questions from evaluators. Video, audio support and presentations are more than welcome to help the jury envision your idea and, perhaps, choose your project over many others. Being invited to a pitching session does not guarantee your participation in the programme. Rather, it gives the opportunity to convince the judges of the value of your project. While not mandatory, it is strongly encouraged to attend the respective session. Both the submitted project proposal and the pitch will be considered in the jury's evaluation.

STEP 4: Selection criteria and announcement of results

Don't worry if you don't hear from us during the whole summer! The jury is evaluating all the proposals we have received and assessing the 14 that most fit with Stars4Media NEWS selection criteria. During the assessment period, the jury might reach out to candidates for clarifications on their proposals.

To enter the **EXPLORE** phase, our jury will pay attention to the following aspects:

1. Size & sustainability of media organisation (including size, readership, and brand credibility for the largest of the partners)
2. Plan of action (including clear and achievable goals, the need, and use for both funding & coaching)
3. Partnership potential (quality of cooperation and approach)
4. Impact potential (innovation; business models; productivity; resilience etc.)
5. Sustainability (the ability of the innovation envisaged to bear its costs over time)
6. Diversity: relevant balances and inclusion (languages, gender, countries, multidisciplinary of professionals involved, and journalism/media products)

All applicants will be informed about the selection results via email. The winners will be communicated on our [website](#), [LinkedIn Community](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) on **September 19th**.

After the application

If your proposal did not pass the selection...

Don't take this answer as a step back. Keep working on your idea!

You will receive a detailed report with the jury's feedback, to improve your proposal for future funding opportunities.

We strongly encourage you to continue being part of our [LinkedIn Community](#) where you can find potential future partners that share your vision and get support from media professionals who are experiencing the same situation.

If your proposal passed the selection...

Congratulations! You are one of the 14 projects that passed the first selection process.

Now, it's time to roll up your sleeves and collaborate with your partner(s) to make your idea a reality.

STEP 5: EXPLORE

The first phase focuses on the exploration of media innovation.

You have 4 months to implement the idea you presented in your proposal, for which you and your partner will receive **€24,000** (€12,000 lump sum award for each participating media).

During these months, you can count on the support of our Process and Transformation Coaches to develop your project.

To kick off your project, you will be invited to a workshop, around mid-October 2022, to meet the coaches, get advice for successful implementation and familiarise yourself with the light admin process that you will have to follow. Also, get ready for ad-hoc check-ins with coaches that will allow you and your partner to dive deeper into specific components of your project and set the basis for successful cooperation.

Don't forget to stay mindful: you will be invited to **self-assess** your work, guided by an Impact Framework. This will help you (and the coaches) understand the challenges you are experiencing, and the opportunities you can still grasp.

To enter the next phase, it is vital that you and your team understand where to focus your priorities to allow a successful business/newsroom transformation.

STEP 6: Second selection

Time flies when you are working for what you believe in!

It's **March 2023**, and we gather our jury once again to evaluate the proposals that made it through the first phase.

To enter the **BOOST** phase, they will be focusing on:

7. Reassessment of Criteria 1-6 (project assessment at the end of Phase 1)
8. Sustainability of the project (anchoring in the organisation, for example, fit with the media's overall strategy)
9. Transformation plan quality (objectives, milestones, teams, change management approach)
10. Support by top management
11. Dissemination plan to the wider media sector

STEP 7: BOOST

Congratulations, you are one of the 9 projects making it to the second and final phase of the Stars4Media NEWS programme!

During the six months of this phase, you will receive **€64,000** (€32,000 lump sum award for each).

Your project will be assigned a Transformation coach who will help you strengthen your ideas and implement your project with a detailed and tailored strategy. For that purpose, the coach will visit each project team every month, providing specific feedback, support, and advice for a successful implementation.

Once again, you will be invited to think about the progress and impact of your project, set your objective, indicate potential risks, and reflect on your cooperation.

How to face challenges related to cooperation during the project?

There are several challenges that any applicant might face throughout the whole process of Stars4Media. These range from **overarching challenges** that may ask applicants' attention from day 1 to the end, to **occasional challenges** that applicants may encounter in the day-to-day implementation of a complex project that involves numerous professionals across different countries.

- **Cultural challenges:** these are overarching challenges, and they surely require continuous efforts from all professionals involved.

One of the reasons why Stars4Media was launched is the lack of cross-border cooperation between European media organisations. This might be the result of a lack of time and resources within news media for international projects, technical difficulties, but also of obvious cultural barriers. It is naturally easier to engage in complex projects with like-minded professionals with similar backgrounds, approaches, workflows, expectations, languages etc.

The **comfort zone** of working only within a national dimension might ensure media professionals' efficient development of workflows but, at the same time, can prevent them from **acquiring skills and competencies that only an international exchange can provide**.

Working with different cultures can be challenging, but it will also open the process of producing new content, technologies, or services to different points of view, making **the results richer and possibly more valuable reach-wise**.

- **Linguistic challenges:** another overarching challenge. A typical Stars4Media project might require applicants to invest their time while also carrying out their *business as usual*.

This means that time is a constraint, and obviously, communication between teams from different countries should not be slowed down by linguistic issues. Applicants need to be sure their linguistic skills will allow them to smoothly work with the other teams and communicate efficiently with the Stars4Media team (including in the selection and evaluation phases). The Stars4Media team is multilingual, and language courses can be covered by the provided project funding.

- **Administrative challenges:** The administration should be just a task and not a challenge. However, some part of your time in a Stars4Media project will be dedicated to administration.

From our side, we will keep it light. Nevertheless, we kindly ask for your cooperation and responsiveness to tackle promptly the legal and administrative aspects of the programme.

The Stars4Media team will guide you through every step. Below, you can find some tips to overcome eventual obstacles in the administrative process:

- Read carefully all the emails from the management team: emails are overwhelming, we know, but the better you read our emails, the less you will receive.

- Respect deadlines: Stars4Media is a complex machine, where many partners and different organisations are involved. To support you and allow you to receive the grant on time and proceed with your work, we kindly ask you to respect the deadlines.

- Think of a person in the team that can keep track of the admin procedure and be our contact point. This will allow you to be on top of your admin, and it will allow us easy communication with

you. This person will also have the responsibility to forward all our messages to all the partners involved in your project so that everyone can keep track of all the updated information.

- **Unexpected challenges:** what we learned from Stars4Media, so far, is that **flexibility** is key to the success of a project. This applies to the whole programme, as well as to any single project. For instance, COVID-19 outbreak was a massive, unexpected challenge for everyone. Nevertheless, thanks to the commitment and resilience of the Stars4Media team and the participants, the limitations created by the crisis did not jeopardize the creative potential of the programme. Moreover, we further have noticed how important, during such a programme, is the ability to plan out one's work properly and realistically. This is relevant both for the programme consortium and for individual projects. Considering reachable goals and managing time in order to overcome any surprises is necessary for outstanding success. From the design of an innovation programme to the implementation of a single specific initiative, having a flexible mindset is key for delivering the expected results while cooperating with partners in other EU countries, with time restraints and challenging goals.

Useful Links

- [Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- [Selection criteria](#)
- [Tips for a successful submission](#)
- [List of Jury members](#)
- [Administrative details](#)