



# Stars4Media NEWS ECOSYSTEM-WIDE IMPACT REPORT

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This report presents an overview of the results from the Stars4Media NEWS programme, its impact and policy recommendations for the European news media sector.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Context

The Stars4Media NEWS programme was built on the foundations laid down by the two previous editions of the programme - Stars4Media Pilot and Second Edition - to provide financial support, in-depth coaching and fostering knowledge and skills transfer between media professionals and encourage business and newsroom transformation. This collaborative programme aimed to have a transformative and lasting impact on Europe's media sector by fostering innovation and multidisciplinary, interorganisational and cross-border collaboration.

Stars4Media NEWS meant to go beyond what the previous editions achieved, focusing on ensuring the consolidation of the news ecosystem's innovation trajectory and responding to the needs of news media practitioners and organisations in Europe. Towards this end, Stars4Media set out to create an interactive community of organisations that would participate in the transformation and enable the dissemination of best practices and standards to the broader sector, contributing to a viable, resilient and competitive European news media.

The Stars4Media NEWS Call for Proposals was published in the spring of 2022, inviting media organisations from across the European Union (EU) and beyond to design and propose a collaborative project. A jury evaluated and scored the proposed projects based on the outlined eligibility and selection criteria.

The Stars4Media NEWS programme was split into two phases: EXPLORE and BOOST. The EXPLORE phase started in the autumn of 2023 and lasted four months, with 14 projects participating. A typical project involved a partnership of two media companies, although several projects involved three partners. Each participating company received €12,000 in funding. In February 2023, the jury reconvened to evaluate the progress made during EXPLORE and selected the projects that would continue on the next stage of the programme. Nine out of those 14 projects were chosen to continue in BOOST.

The BOOST phase began in October 2023 and lasted eight months until May 2024. During this phase, each participating company received a € 32,000 grant.

External experts provided tailored coaching to all projects throughout both programme phases.

The Stars4Media NEWS programme was implemented by Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Europe's MédiaLab, the World Association of News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) and the European Journalism Centre (EJC) and co-funded by the European Union.

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## 1.2 Goal of this report

This report analyses the results of the evaluation process carried out throughout Stars4Media NEWS. As the lead of the evaluation process, Vrije Universiteit Brussel has applied diverse methods for the observation, monitoring and evaluation of the two programme phases to assess the progress of the projects and the quality of the coaching. In this way, it will show that Stars4Media achieved, to the best of its ability, its goal of enabling knowledge sharing and developing innovative products and services that contribute to the transformation of media organisations.

This report aims to summarise and systematise the data and lessons collected throughout the quality control and evaluation of the EXPLORE and BOOST phases and provide policy recommendations for the European news media sector. In addition, it aims to offer comprehensive, structured knowledge and best practices regarding collaborative media business transformation and collaborative journalism projects.

## 1.3 Approach of the analysis

This report focuses on Stars4Media NEWS's evaluation process, looking into the progress of the supported projects, the growth of the involved companies, the deliverables and transformation achieved, and the lessons learned throughout the two programme phases.

An overview of the reporting documents is provided to offer insights into the assessment of the collaboration between the partners, the benefits of the expert coaching, the success of the projects and their impact on the organisation and the media environment, and future plans for participation in similar programmes.

Specifically, this report includes an analysis of the end-of-EXPLORE and end-of-BOOST evaluation surveys, the Impact Assessment forms completed at three strategic moments throughout the programme by representatives of the participating companies, the interviews with the BOOST project leads, the process coaches' logbooks, and the feedback received from the transformation coaches.

## 2. EXPLORE Evaluation

### 2.1 EXPLORE phase overview

Following the submission of 50 project proposals, 48 of which were eligible, a pitching session took place in front of a jury of media experts who evaluated the application forms and the pitches according to a set of clear criteria to decide on the projects that would enter the Stars4Media NEWS programme. After careful deliberation, 14 collaborative projects on newsroom and business transformation were selected for the first phase of the programme, EXPLORE.

The criteria for the selection focused on the size, diversity and sustainability of the participating companies, their action plan, as well as their impact and partnership potential. The EXPLORE phase lasted four months, during which the projects worked on media transformation and innovation. As the name implies, the main aim of the EXPLORE phase for the participating companies was to explore the directions they could take with their project, guided by the expertise of their coaches. Working collaboratively, they were able to improve and elaborate on their project plan while taking into consideration the various market and media dynamics in their environment. Coaching provided direction and assistance during this process, allowing projects to amend, adjust and fine-tune their plans to achieve the desired level of transformation.

### 2.2 Insights from the end-of-EXPLORE Evaluation Survey

At the end of the EXPLORE phase, an evaluation survey was distributed to the 31 project leaders of the participating companies. Its purpose was to evaluate the collaboration between the partners, the knowledge growth, and the benefits of the coaching provided during the first stage of Stars4Media NEWS.

#### 2.2.1. Cross-border collaboration

The cross-border collaboration aspect of the EXPLORE phase proved to be especially successful for the progress of the projects. The vast majority of respondents (74%) consider the complementary expertise they received as the biggest success factor of their collaboration, as it encourages knowledge exchange and learning growth (Figure 1). Outsourcing tasks to their partners and reducing the cost of operations were also important factors. Knowledge and skills sharing were the most important growth elements, with 93% of respondents agreeing that exchanging knowledge has been mutually beneficial for the partners.

What has been the strongest success factor of collaboration for your organization, in comparison to projects carried out autonomously?

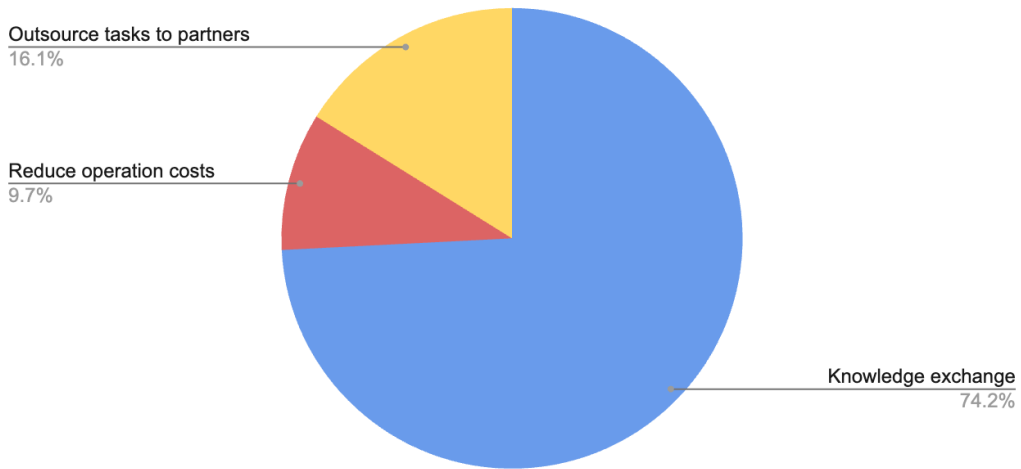


Figure 1 - Success factors of the collaboration

Talking about the difficulties of the collaboration, respondents indicated that a lack of time and/or budget to achieve all the project goals was the biggest challenge faced during EXPLORE (39%) (see below “3. target and expectations”). They explained how such issues caused additional difficulties, such as productivity issues, trust building, inefficiency in collaboration, expectation issues and over usage of resources. Difficulties on the partnership level, such as language barriers and coordination issues (16%), and the remote/exclusively online mode of cooperation and communication (16%), also hindered the collaboration in some cases.

What has been the strongest difficulty of collaboration for your organization, in comparison to autonomous projects?

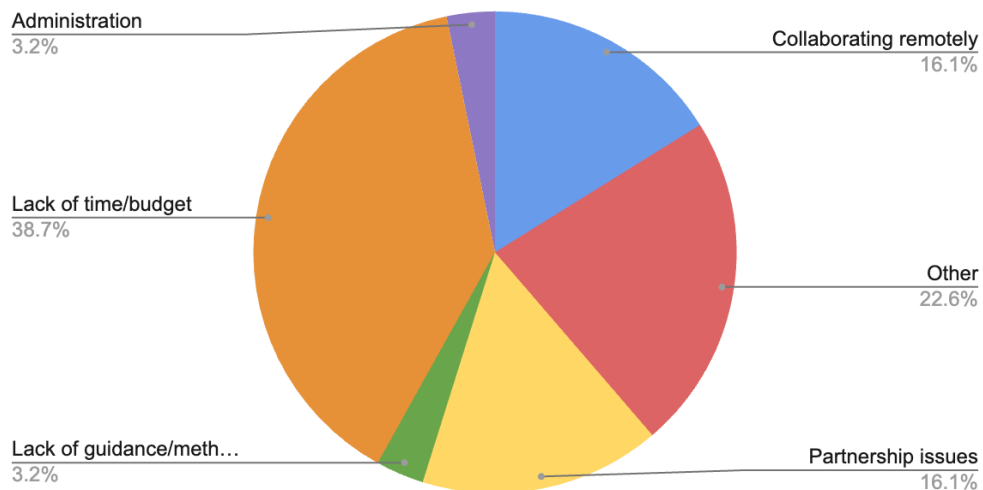


Figure 2 - Difficulties of the collaboration

When it comes to knowledge growth, more than 50% of the respondents indicated that the most significant improvement was the acquisition of new key methodological insights to

address transformation more systematically (Figure 3). For some companies, this process has led to internal growth and a rethinking of their internal cross-departmental collaboration. Moreover, 19% of respondents indicated that their knowledge growth comes in the form of new methodologies to make their work more efficient, and 19% selected the acquisition of specialised technical knowledge to improve their editorial products.

Which of the following sentences best represents the learning growth you experienced during S4M NEWS Explore phase?

- We acquired key methodological insights to address newsroom/business transformation more systematically.
- We learned new methodologies to make our work more efficient.
- We acquired additional technical and specialized knowledge to improve our editorial products.
- We learned to recognize and correct wrong patterns in our workflows.
- All of the points happened.

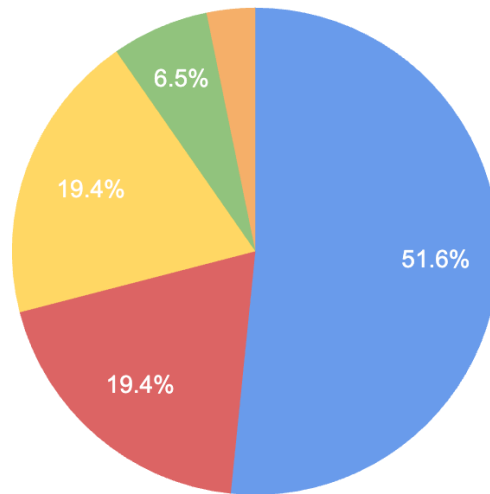


Figure 3 - Learning growth

### 2.2.2. Coaching process

With regard to the impact of the coaching process, 71% of the responding companies expressed that the inputs of their transformation coaches brought valuable insights from different perspectives into their work, contributing to significant results (Figure 4). 23% of the respondents indicated that without the input of the transformation coaches, they would not have achieved the expected goals of their project.

### Which sentence best represents your perception of transformation coaches' impact on your project results?

- The input of our transformation coach(es) has provided us with valuable insights from a different perspective, that has made our results more significant.
- Without the inputs of our transformation coach(es) we would hardly have achieved our expected goals.
- The results we achieved hardly reflect the inputs received from the transformation coach.
- None of the above.

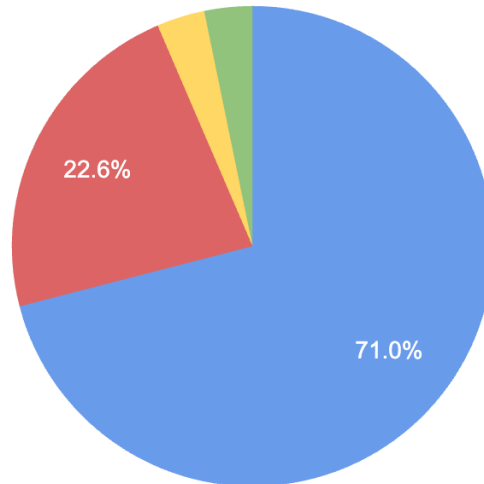


Figure 4 - Impact of the transformation coaches

When asked about the perceived benefits of the coaching, the responses show that for nearly half of the companies (45%), the coaches helped them challenge their initial approach to their project, and guided them to finding different strategies to achieve their goals (Figure 5). The coaches' contributions also made them aware of important methodologies or knowledge that was missing from their work (29%), helping them to acquire it. In comparison, 13% benefited from the vast network of connections their coaches had, linking them to people and organisations that were valuable for their goals.

### Which of the following sentences best represents your perception of the benefits of the coaching process?

- The coach(es) made us aware of important information/methodologies/knowledge that was missing in our work.
- The coach(es) challenged our approach and helped us find a better way to achieve our goal.
- The coach(es) helped us rationalize and streamline our internal operations and workflows.
- None of the above
- The coach(es) helped us connect with the relevant persons/organizations that are going to be key for our present/future goals.

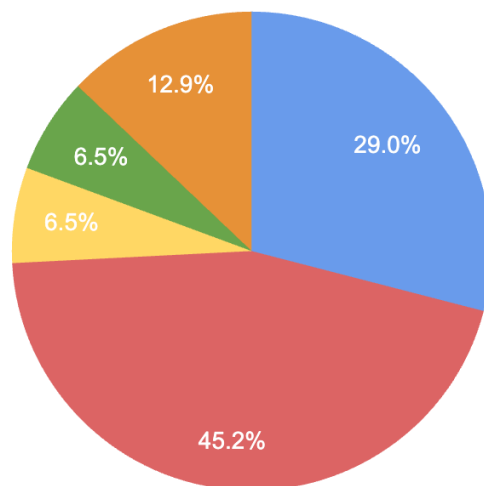


Figure 5 - Benefits of the coaching process



### 2.2.3. Target and expectations

Evaluating the targets and expectations met during the EXPLORE phase, 45% of the respondents indicated that a longer implementation time would have contributed to achieving a more significant impact on their organisation, as it would have allowed for a larger and deeper scope of activity (Figure 6). For 32% of the respondents, a higher budget would have also contributed to a bigger impact, giving them access to more project resources. Lastly, 23% indicated that working with more or different partners could have had a bigger/different impact on their transformation.

Which factor might have contributed to achieve a bigger and/or different impact (transformation) on your organization?

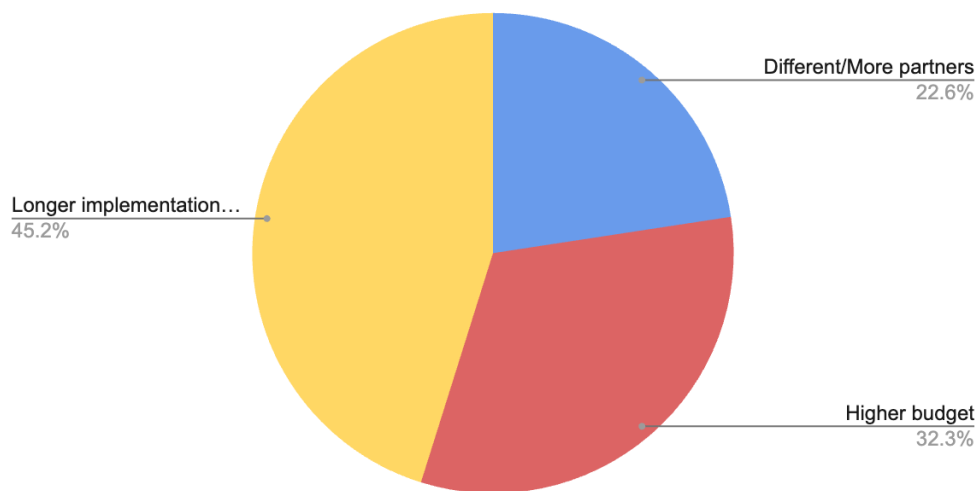


Figure 6 - Factors for bigger impact

Speaking about the future of their business or newsroom transformation, more than 60% of the respondents agreed that they would require external funding to continue their transformation process, even with the positive experience of S4M (Figure 7). More time and resources would be necessary to reach sustainability and meet the business needs. However, 32% expressed that they would be able to continue their business/newsroom transformation autonomously in the future, thanks to the improved work efficiency and strategic development they acquired during EXPLORE.

Which of the following sentences best represents your next steps in terms of business/newsroom transformation thus far?

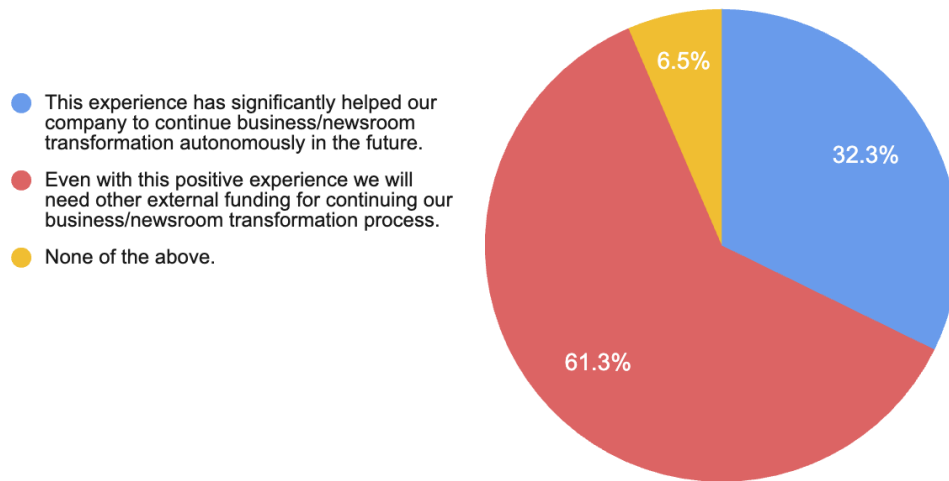


Figure 7 - Next steps for business/newsroom transformation

The most considerable improvements that the companies have seen in terms of business/newsroom transformation were internal coordination (32%), the acquisition of an improved methodological model (26%) and processes becoming more efficient (16%) within the companies (Figure 8). Last but not least, the incorporation and better use of (new) technologies (13%) contributed to the transformation.

What has been mostly improved, when it comes to business/newsroom transformation?

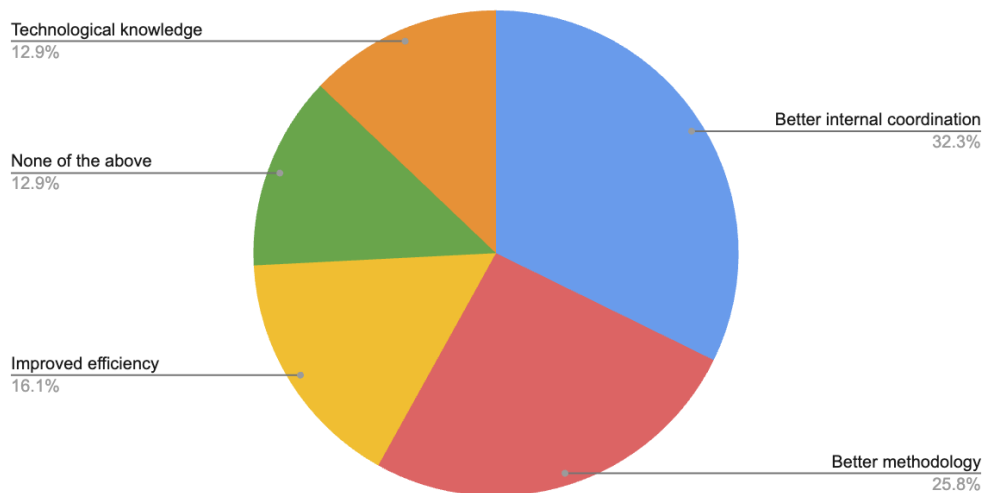


Figure 8 - Improvements due to the transformation process

## 3. BOOST Evaluation

### 3.1. BOOST Phase Overview

Following the EXPLORE phase, nine projects out of the previously implemented 14 continued their Stars4Media NEWS journey in the BOOST phase. The selection criteria for this phase centred—on top of the previous assessment criteria, which were re-evaluated—on the quality of the projects' dissemination and transformation plan, the project's sustainability, and the support received by top management. During the eight months of the BOOST phase, the partnering companies worked on finalising and implementing their action plans and achieving their desired transformation.

The BOOST phase's main objective was implementing the project plans after EXPLORE. Having experimented with different routes, processes, and tools to achieve their project plans, the selected projects had to begin applying the steps needed to achieve the desired business or newsroom innovation. The specialised coaching they received during this phase allowed them to refine their plans and augment their progress, utilising the diverse range of skills and know-how they provided as part of the collaboration.

### 3.2 Insights from the end-of-BOOST Evaluation Survey

As part of the reporting and evaluation process, the partners were requested to complete a survey at the end of the BOOST phase. The purpose of this survey was to assess the collaboration between the partners and the transformation achieved during the last phase of Stars4Media NEWS, as well as to gain deeper insights into the lessons learned and the future plans of the partners. A representative of each of the 20 participating companies answered the survey.

#### 3.2.1. Cross-border collaboration

Cross-border collaboration is one of the defining aspects of the Stars4Media programme. It brings together different working cultures and practices to achieve innovation and transformation in the media field. The respondents assessed the collaboration very positively, both in relation to the BOOST phase and to the overall programme.

Specifically, when asked about each partner's contribution to the project, 70% of respondents indicated that the contribution was equal from all sides (Figure 9), with 80% of respondents commenting that their collaboration was very smooth, without any major tensions (Figure 10).

### How has each partner contributed to the progress made during the BOOST phase?

- The contribution has been fairly equal from both partners.
- Each partner contributed equally, but most of the work did not entail co-creation.
- One partner contributed more than the other to create a shared result.

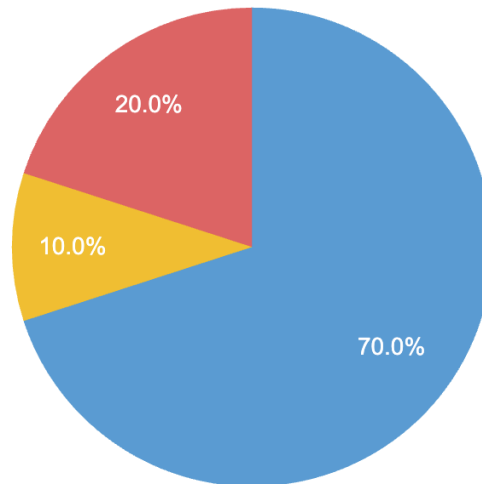


Figure 9 - Contribution of the partners

### How smooth were the relationships between the partners during the collaboration?

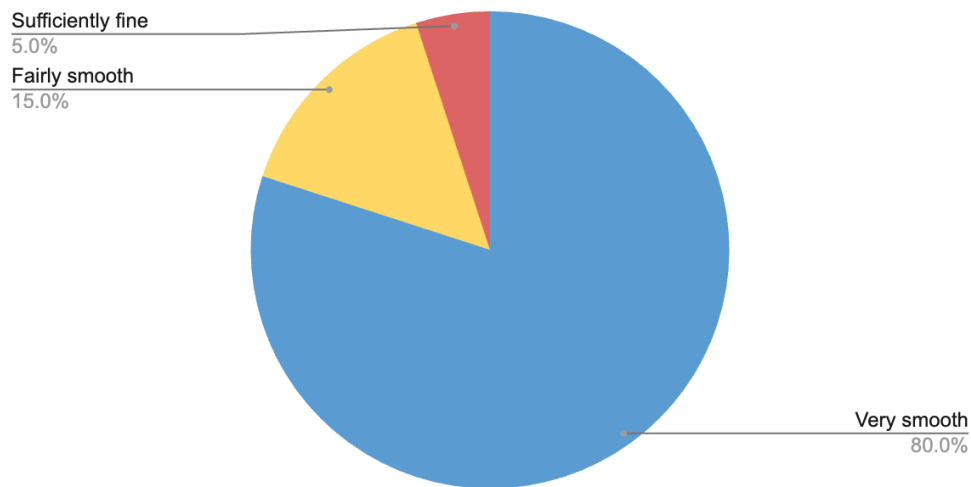


Figure 10 - Relationship between the partners

With regard to the benefits of the collaboration, nearly all participants (90%) agree that the biggest value stems from the continuous exchange of knowledge, expertise and skills during their cooperation (Figure 11). This is further supported by their evaluation of their organisation’s knowledge growth during the BOOST phase, with nearly all respondents selecting “Large” or “Significant” growth.

### What is the most significant advantage/benefit of your cross-border collaboration?

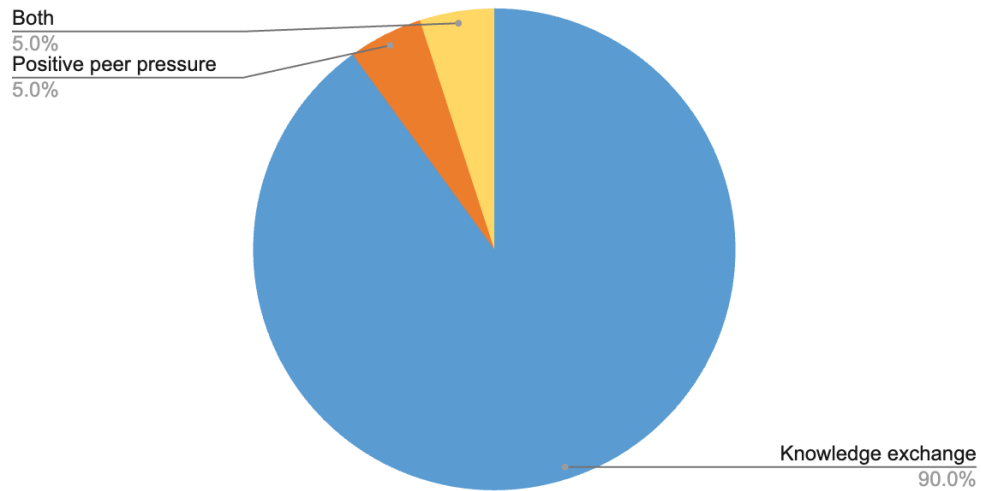


Figure 11 - Benefits of cross-border collaboration

The respondents indicated a wide variety of skills gained during the collaboration, with the most popular being cooperation and intercultural skills, designing and implementing innovation, and communication and networking skills (Figure 12). The respondents plan to apply the skills and knowledge gained to improve their work practices and prepare for future projects.

### What are the most significant skills that you have strengthened as a result of the collaboration?

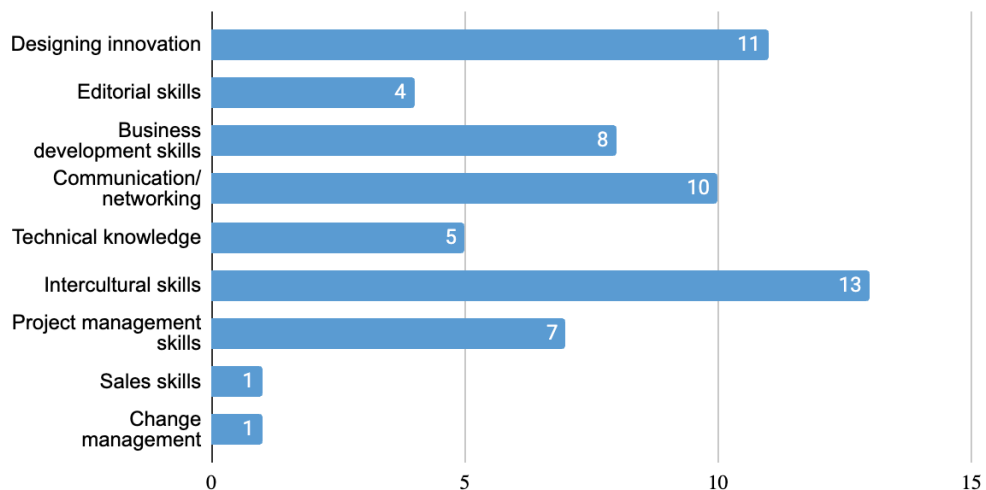


Figure 12 - Skills strengthened by the collaboration

### 3.2.2 Business and Newsroom transformation

On the topic of business and newsroom transformation, there is a wide variation of changes implemented. Still, the respondents generally give a positive indication of the transformation achieved by the end of the BOOST phase.

One of the biggest benefits of cross-border collaboration for the transformation is the expanded capacity to partner for future projects (30%), followed closely by the upgrade to the organisations' intercultural and networking skills (25%). Moreover, a fifth (21%) of respondents highlight that the expertise they benefited from, which is otherwise difficult to find in their country, contributed to the transformation (Figure 13).

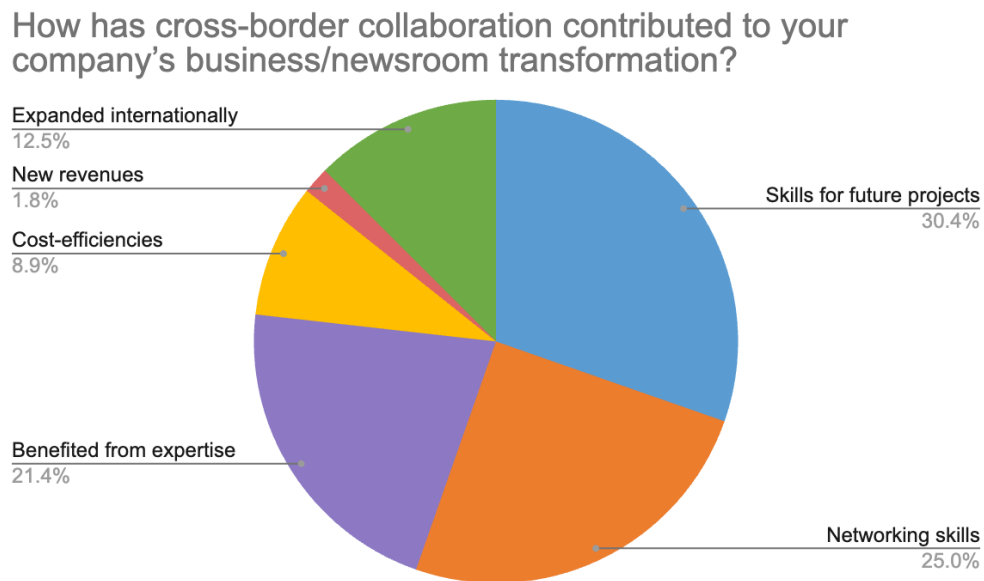


Figure 13 - Cross-border collaboration and business & newsroom transformation

The continuous knowledge exchange between partners and the possibility to dedicate time and resources to the project goals that would not have been otherwise allocated are considered the biggest factors for the success of the transformation (30% respectively). The aligned attitudes and expectations of the partners, and the insights gained from the coaching process, are also deemed as important factors (Figure 14).

Which factor contributed the most to achieving the transformation in your organisation?

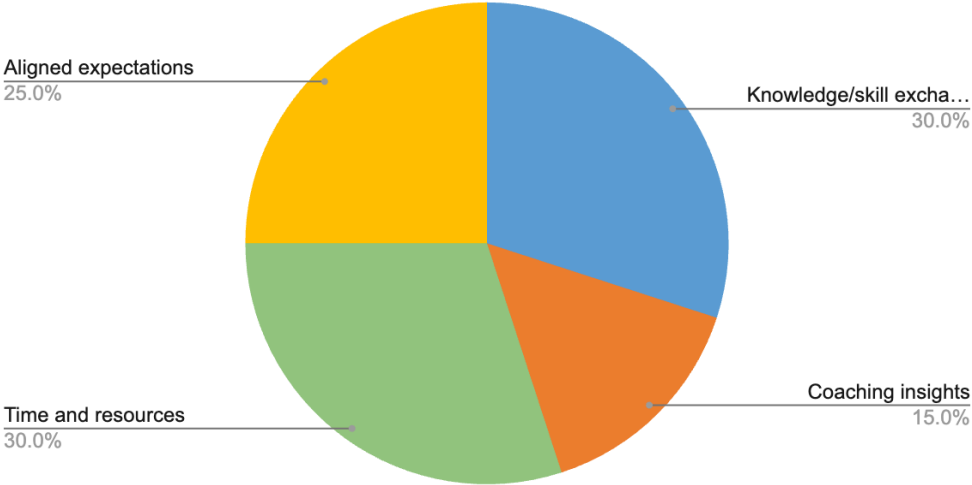


Figure 14 - Factors for transformation

Regarding the economic sustainability of their company, nearly half of respondents (40%) agree that the project results have strengthened their existing revenue streams (Figure 15). In addition, the new product or service they have introduced has helped them create cost-efficiency in their organisation (17%), while 14% indicated that they have become stronger in project acquisition.

How will the results of the project contribute to the economic sustainability of your company? Select all that apply.

- We will develop a new revenue stream in the future. We add new value for our customers.
- We have strengthened existing revenue streams.
- We have developed new revenue streams.
- We have created cost-efficiency thanks to the new product/service.
- We have become stronger in project acquisition.
- We have developed a new business model for our company.
- We managed to attract new investors.
- We have strengthened the value of our pro...
- Full implementation not yet ready

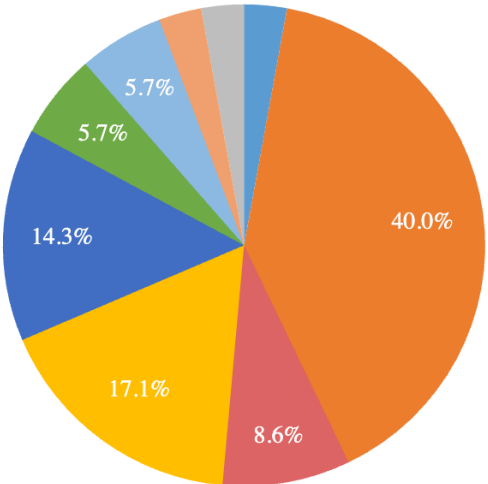


Figure 15 - Economic sustainability

However, some obstacles remain in the way of achieving the desired transformation. Those hindrances come mainly in the form of budget and time restrictions (44%), but also from the

lack of specific funding opportunities for innovation (17%). Even so, 28% of respondents indicated no obstacles in their way (Figure 16).

### What obstacles remain in the way of achieving the desired transformation?

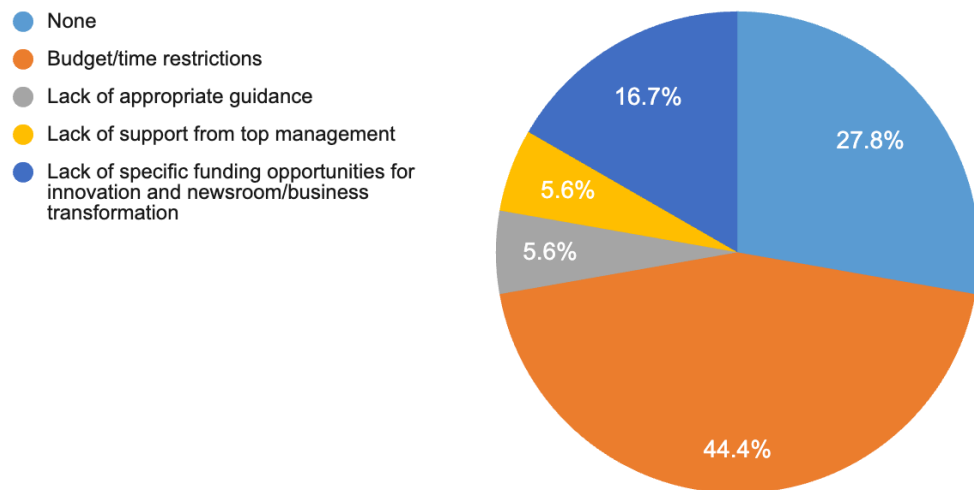


Figure 16 - Obstacles for the transformation

### 3.2.3 Best practices and lessons learned

Aside from the skills and knowledge, the BOOST phase provided the organisations with valuable lessons with regard to their participation in cross-border collaborative programmes like Stars4Media NEWS. When asked about the best practices they gathered, many participants indicated the benefits of being adequately prepared for the work needed, having open and reliable communication channels to eliminate hindrances from their project work. Some plan to adopt the methods they introduced during their collaboration into their daily operations. The collaboration experience has equipped them with the organisational skills needed to execute their projects.

With regard to project management, many respondents (39%) indicated that coordinating the project work and the daily work of their company proved to be a serious challenge, even with the available resources. Furthermore, a significant portion (36%) agree that collaborative projects require longer implementation time compared to the initial plans because of the complex dynamics of the partners, who often have conflicting schedules, encounter language barriers, etc., suggesting that flexibility is key to achieve a project's goals (Figure 17).



## What are the main lessons learned from the BOOST phase?

- Collaborative projects require longer implementation time compared to initial plans.
- It's great to have a foreign partner and an external coach.
- Coordinating both the project work and the daily work of our company is a serious challenge.
- Working with new partners represents a challenge that can't be solved properly within the timeframe of the project.
- Lessons about the market.
- Company cultures can vary a lot; language barriers.
- Administrative workload is heavier than expected in European projects.

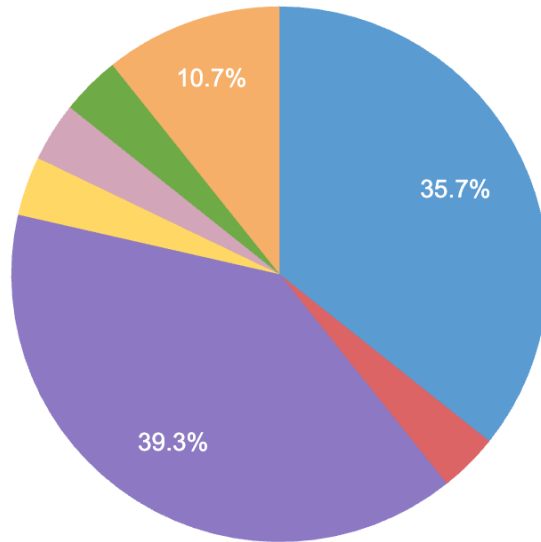


Figure 17 - Lessons Learned

As shown earlier, the coaching process was deemed an essential asset for the projects. The respondents found many values to the coaching, with the most significant being the enhancement of the transformation (30%), the provision of an external point of view in their work (20%), the new skills acquired (15%), and finally the assistance with taking strategic decisions for the organisations (15%) (Figure 18).

## What is the added value of the coaching?

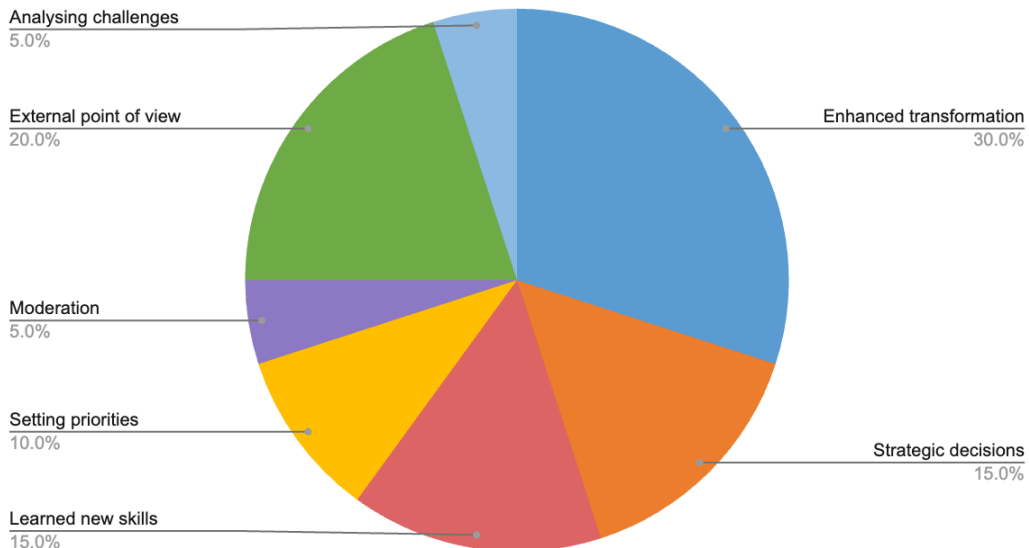


Figure 18 - Added value of coaching

### 3.2.4 Looking ahead

Looking into the future, the survey results suggest that the BOOST organisations would be open to participating again in a cross-border collaborative programme. Their positive assessment of their collaboration during Stars4Media NEWS and the stated benefits and improvements further supported the argument.

With regard to the topic of their future projects, many respondents express a clear interest in emerging technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) driven tools and systems (32%). Editorial solutions (such as data journalism) and new editorial formats (podcasts, newsletters) also rank high in the priorities for the respondents' future endeavours (23% and 17%, respectively) (Figure 19).

#### What topics are a priority for your organization's future projects?

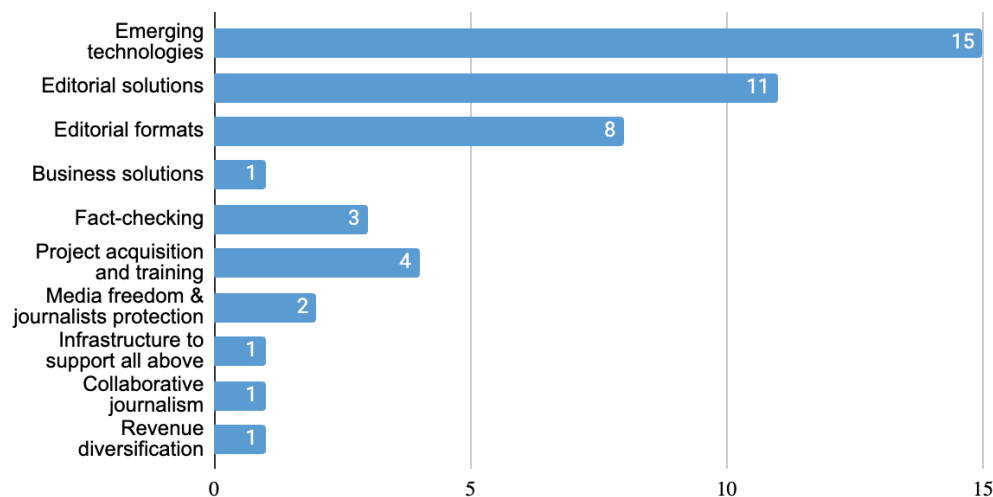


Figure 19 - Priorities for future projects

As for the format and duration of the collaboration, most respondents would prefer a cross-border collaboration with similar organisations to tackle common challenges (50%), followed closely by a cross-border collaboration with complementary organisations to mix expertise (40%) (Figure 20). There is very little interest in collaborating with organisations within the respondents' own country, which could suggest that the intercultural and networking experience, besides the cross-border benefits, now has a higher value for the organisations. This result could be interpreted as the outcome of an already-existing connection of the participating companies to the European or international environment because of previous collaborations. It could also be argued that this preference is due to the reduced competition that results from a cross-border collaboration compared to a domestic one. 60% of respondents would prefer a length of 4 to 8 months for the implementation period of their next innovation project, and only 25% would aim for something on the longer term (1-2 years).

### What is your preferred structure of collaboration for future projects?

- Cross-border collaboration with complementary organizations to mix expertise.
- Cross-border collaboration with similar organizations to tackle common challenges
- Collaboration with similar organizations in our country to tackle common challenges
- Collaboration with complementary organizations in our country to mix expertise

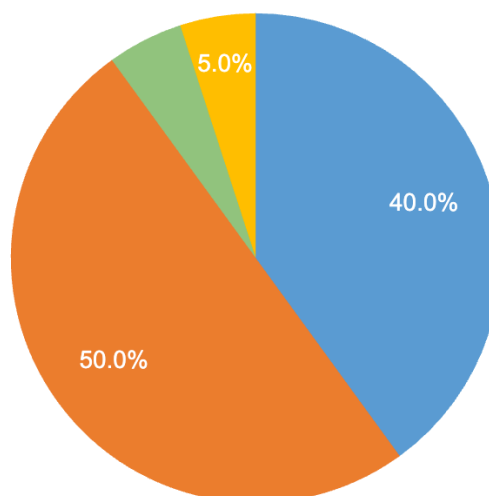


Figure 20 - Preferred collaboration structure

When it comes to funding, previous projects carried out by the participants relied equally on EU funding and private funding (27%), with a smaller percentage coming from national or regional grant schemes (19%) or public non-profit foundations (17%) (Figure 21). For future projects, respondents estimate that the most likely source of funding will be private funding (30%), followed by funding from public non-profit foundations (22.5%) and the European Union (20%) (Figure 22).

### What were the main sources of funding for your previous funded projects?

- National and/or regional grant schemes
- Private funding (private companies)
- Public non-profit foundations
- Philanthropic foundations
- EU funding

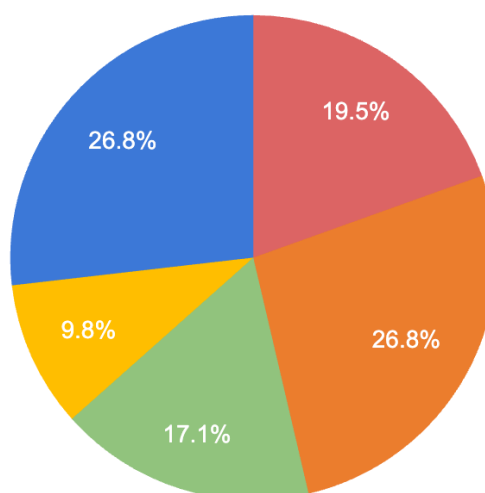


Figure 21 - Funding sources for previous projects

## What will be the main sources of funding for your projects in the future?

- Private funding (private companies)
- Public non-profit foundations
- Philanthropic foundations
- EU funding
- National and/or regional grant schemes

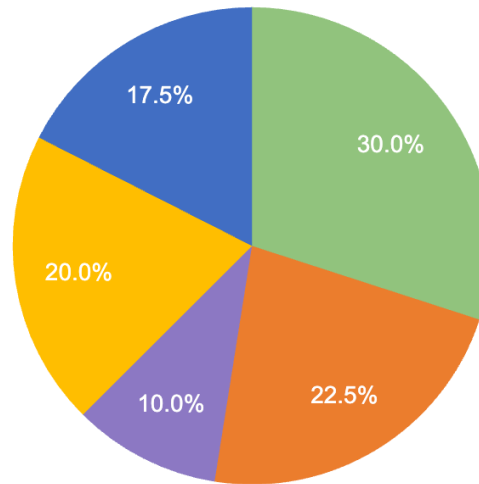


Figure 22 - Funding sources for future projects

Overall, survey findings indicate a positive evaluation of the BOOST phase. The collaboration between the partners benefited all of them thanks to the continuous exchange of skills and know-how. The knowledge growth that they have experienced has significantly expanded their capacity to cooperate, network and implement innovation in their organisations.

The main factors that contributed to the achieved business and newsroom transformation are the knowledge exchange, the allocation of the necessary resources and funding, and the expertise acquired as a result of the coaching process. Concerning future projects, emerging technologies take priority, with a heavy preference for the cross-border aspect of the collaboration, underlining its benefits for achieving transformative innovation.

## 3.3 Interview Analysis of BOOST project leaders

### 3.3.1 Benefits of the collaboration

One of the main benefits of the cooperation discussed in the semi-structured interviews has been, once again, the exchange of knowledge and expertise between the partners. During their meetings and interactions, the beneficiaries were able to share with each other and receive insights and know-how that would have otherwise been difficult to attain. This exchange of experiences, skills and information gave them a better sense of direction with their projects, allowing them to know what to focus on and avoid, and encouraged experimentation in their work. Especially in the case when companies know each other or have worked together in the past, as is the case with Polityka & Delfi and STT & Sourcefabric, these exchanges become more candid and open, allowing for a better understanding of each other's working cultures and practices, as well as a better view into their strategies and plans for the future. This highlights that a solid ground for trust and mutual understanding helps reduce the competitive dimension that can occur in a

collaborative project. This has helped them develop an efficient working model that contributed to the progress of their products and services.

Gaining access to their partner's network, and thus widening their reach and audience, is another significant benefit of the collaboration. For example, in the case of Europod and the Tellers Agency, who have a smaller size than their partners Acast and Kyiv Independent, respectively, the collaboration allows them to realise their project goals faster and/or with more success and have more visibility than they could have if working independently.

### 3.3.2. Obstacles to the collaboration

Collaboration of any kind, and particularly cross-border, requires balance and synergies to achieve its goals. For the majority of the interviewees, differences in language, work culture and practices were an initial obstacle to their cooperation. When there is a difference in company sizes, the smaller companies had an often disproportionate task of coordination and project management. The limited time allocated to coaching and meetings was also restricting in terms of collaboration. In the case of larger networks, like with Urban Journalism Network, finding synergies within them was not always easy.

The technical nature of some of the projects was another obstacle to cooperation, creating a learning curve for the non-IT-heavy partners before they could fully understand and learn to use the product or service of their collaboration.

Lastly, certain external conditions made the cooperation more difficult. Ukrainian companies, for example, found it hard to plan under the uncertain circumstances in their country, and unfavourable market and living conditions due to the war hindered the implementation of their projects. We must stress the Ukraine-based companies' (Ukrainska Pravda, Kyiv Independent, The Tellers Agency) exceptional commitment to fulfilling their project responsibilities and achieving the set goals. Despite the lack of physical security, electricity shortcuts, constant stress and uncertainty, they implemented their activities with only minor adjustments, were present at the coaching sessions and fully engaged in collaboration.

### 3.3.3. Added value of funding

All of the company representatives who were interviewed agreed that the Stars4Media NEWS grant was vital for developing and implementing their project. The funding they received was paramount for the project teams' financial stability, for improving and finalising their plans, and for executing all milestones within the set timeframe. Despite the relatively small amount of funding, the companies were able to utilise it efficiently in the implementation of their project, effectively allocating the resources as needed.

Thanks to the grant, the beneficiaries could plan bigger and scale up their operations. The funding's 'safety' allowed them to focus on their project and indulge in more experimentation, reducing the risk of trying out new experiences. It also gave them the opportunity to deepen their connection with their partners and dedicate more time and resources to their collaboration.

Most agree that they would have involved themselves in the project without the funding, but the project would have been scaled down, and results would have been delayed.

### 3.3.4. Benefits of coaching for digital transformation

The coaching process contributed greatly to the digital transformation of the companies. By receiving guidance and advice tailored to their needs, the respondents were able to gain a different perspective on how to achieve the digital transformation and how to overcome any obstacles that stood in their way.

Through regular collaboration with their respective coaches, they have gained a better understanding of the media market environment, which has helped them refine their (long-term) strategy and adjust their approach to new information. Working together with their partner was, in addition, a driving factor in them adopting a more efficient working model. They did so by digitising workflows in the newsroom, facilitating planning, and implementing new tools.

For some, the experience of Stars4Media NEWS collaboration has sparked a more considerable interest in digital transformation and has prompted them to adopt a more positive approach, embracing experimentation and innovation.

### 3.3.5. Future plans

For the majority of respondents, and as reflected in the end-of-BOOST Evaluation Survey, AI and AI-based tools are the biggest topics of interest. Specifically, the implementation of AI in the newsroom, the automation of some journalistic processes and the reduction of production costs.

## 4. Insights from the Impact Assessment

The Impact Assessment form was designed to measure the impact of the projects on the individual companies, supporting the reporting process. The form was completed three times during the programme: the start of the EXPLORE phase, the end of the EXPLORE phase, and the end of the BOOST phase. This allowed the participants to set initial expectations upon the start of project activities, reflect on them and indicate the results throughout the duration of the programme.

The analysis reflects on five aspects of the impact assessment: international cooperation, efficiency & effectiveness, product mindset, cross-silo cooperation, and revenue models. The findings of the impact assessment forms align with the results of the other evaluation documents across the two phases, reinforcing the insights gained.

## 4.1. International Cooperation

At the start of the activities, the participants expected the projects to result in a moderate to high level of international cooperation, thanks to the cross-border aspect of the programme. The expectations were met as the projects progressed, with many participants reporting positive outcomes from the collaboration. By the end of the BOOST phase, the cooperation level received its highest rating, with most participants agreeing that the teams worked seamlessly to enhance their projects. This cooperation was likely key to the transformation that the companies experienced due to the diverse perspectives, knowledge sharing, and capacity building.

## 4.2. Efficiency & Effectiveness

Expectations were moderate at the beginning of the EXPLORE phase, with the greatest focus on using existing resources better and improving processes. The participants noted tangible results as the collaboration continued, such as new facilitated workflows, faster content delivery and reduced reliance on manual processes. By the end of the BOOST phase, efficiency and effectiveness continued to improve, thanks to implementing new tools and practices that allowed the companies to operate more efficiently, leaving a lasting positive impact on productivity.

## 4.3. Product Mindset

At the beginning of the impact assessment process, some companies were already aware of the value of a customer-centric approach, so there was moderate optimism. However, since the projects were still in their early stages, so was the idea of them as “products” with defined audiences and revenue models. However, as the collaboration continued, the product mindset became more prevalent in the projects’ strategic planning, focusing on customer feedback, user experience and delivering measurable outcomes. By the end of the programme, nearly all participants indicated that they had adopted a product mindset. Many organisations restructured their operations to understand their customers better, leading to better engagement and alignment with market needs.

## 4.4 Cross-silo Cooperation

Most companies expected moderate to high levels of cross-silo cooperation, meaning the breaking down of barriers between departments and the closer collaboration between different teams. By the end of the EXPLORE phase, cross-silo cooperation became more established, with participants experiencing faster decision-making and more innovative solutions to challenges. The cooperation between departments of the organisation remained strong throughout the BOOST phase, too, likely contributing to the success of the projects.

## 4.5. Revenue models

At the start of the programme, the participants expected to explore new or enhance already existing revenue models during their collaboration. By the second assessment, as new models began being implemented, some organisations saw promising results from activities such as digital advertising or subscription packages. At the end of the BOOST phase, companies experienced different degrees of success in acquiring and implementing new revenue models.

# 5. Lessons learned from the transformation and process coaches

## 5.1 Process coaches logbooks

The consortium members acted as the process coaches, monitoring the progress of the project to which they were appointed, and providing administrative support as needed.

The process coaches' logbooks were meant to supplement the monitoring of the projects' progress during the EXPLORE and BOOST phases. As a supporting instrument, another main objective was to document the collaboration between the partners and their coaches, identify any issues or tensions in the cooperation process, and evaluate the partners' growth. The logbooks were filled in at the beginning of every month, covering the meetings that had occurred the previous month. The information provided by the process coach included the collaborative activities that the partners were involved in, their transformation trajectory, the knowledge growth during the BOOST phase, the presence of conflicts and, if applicable, how they are addressed, and the role of the transformation coach.

The contributions of the process coaches in their logbooks allowed the consortium to stay on top of the partners' activities and ensure that the BOOST phase progressed smoothly. Potential tensions could be quickly identified and effectively followed up, helping mitigate any collaboration issues. By documenting the knowledge growth and cooperation between the partners, process coaches maintained an accurate idea of the status of each project's implementation plan.



## 5.2 Transformation coaches feedback

### 5.2.1. Overview

The team of the transformation coaches consisted of experts from the media and business sectors, within the network of the consortium. Experts in their respective fields with experience and knowledge on the issues addressed by the projects, they were tasked with coaching the participants on how to achieve their desired transformation. They guided and oversaw the execution and implementation of the project plans, shared insights and expertise, coordinated tasks and provided feedback throughout the duration of the Stars4Media NEWS programme.

Towards the end of the BOOST phase, the transformation coaches were requested to provide feedback on the projects they oversaw by completing a survey report. The report consisted of 11 open-ended questions and invited the transformation coaches to share input on their contributions to the Stars4Media NEWS projects, insights on the collaboration process and progress of the projects, the sustainability of the cooperation between partners and their project, the lessons the coaching process taught them, and the challenges they faced. Lastly, the coaches were encouraged to share recommendations with the consortium to improve programmes like Stars4Media NEWS.

Overall, the feedback of the transformation coaches indicated that the projects achieved their initial objectives, with the exception of some minor delays and deviations from the original plans.

The support that the transformation coaches provided during the BOOST phase via their scheduled online calls and meetings with the partners came in a wide variety of forms. From helping them identify customer needs and strengthening the market presence, to improving the collaboration capacity and applying new methodologies for their daily work practices, the coaches guided their steps towards the newsroom and business transformation.

The collaboration between partners is ranked positively by almost all coaches, and many predict that cooperation could continue in the future. The role of the coaches in providing expertise and guidance can contribute to the sustainability of the projects after the end of the programme. The knowledge exchange during the BOOST phase is confirmed to have been beneficial for all partners involved, facilitating the growth and development of new competences that are invaluable for future projects.

### 5.2.2. Rewards & wins

The majority of coaches consider the success of the projects' transformation as their biggest reward from the process, expressing that they were happy to see their project's results and the companies' evolution as they grow and improve. Another significant benefit is being able to help with the strategic planning of the partners and becoming part of their network. Lastly, the interpersonal relationships gained through the experience, either in their interactions with their projects or with the other expert coaches, are considered a significant reward.

### 5.2.3. Challenges

When it comes to the challenges faced during Stars4Media NEWS and how they were tackled, coaches gave a variety of responses. Though there were no major problems encountered during their work with the projects, minor issues arose occasionally. In some cases, expectations were misaligned, with teams focusing more on the short-term and less on the long-term, as hoped for by the coach. Managing minor tensions between partners that emerged throughout the collaboration, as well as keeping all partners equally involved in the project work, posed some difficulties at times.

### 5.2.4. Advice for the future

The transformation coaches were invited to provide feedback and recommendations to the consortium for future endeavours. In addition to some suggestions to facilitate logistical and administrative tasks, the coaches recommended that, in future programmes, there be more funding for fewer projects, more time allocated to coaches, and more flexibility in the division and provision of resources.

In terms of project work, the coaches advise dedicating more time to identifying issues and goals before diving straight into the solutions. This way, the organisations are equipped with the skills and methodologies to address problems autonomously. Having a clear idea of the desired goal is also important; coaches and participants can use the correct tools and implement the proper practices to achieve that end.

Last but not least, they are favourable to creating an (alumni) network, connecting coaches and organisations to provide more opportunities for team-building, networking and collaboration. This could indicate that the already established digital community (found on [LinkedIn](#)) could continue to be used as a place to engage and interact with project participants after the end of the programme.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The success of the projects, as reported by the participating organisations and the coaches that oversaw them, provides an indication of the positive impact that the elements of the Stars4Media NEWS programme can have on the innovation and transformation trajectory of media organisations in Europe.

Firstly, the funding allowed them to allocate time and human and technical resources to develop and implement their projects and for their team to focus on project activities and deliverables. The financial support was paramount in materialising these projects and scaling up their operations, resulting in more significant results than expected within the Stars4Media NEWS timeframe.

The beneficiaries who participated in Stars4Media NEWS consist of news organisations, media companies and tech companies of various sizes from all across Europe, creating a diverse community with a mutual interest in innovation and generating new products and services for the media sector. The collaboration process helped the organisations to enhance their daily operations, develop new business models and bolster their capacities. The variety in sizes, backgrounds, and expertise contributed to the production of transformative new tools that can reach a wider audience across the European continent, making their products and services available to more people thanks to the international aspect of their cooperation.

The experience of the Stars4Media NEWS programme has worked well for small- and medium-sized companies (<50 employees and <250 employees respectively), showing their interest in developing, producing and integrating innovative products and services, upgrading their business models and enhancing their newsroom operations. Thanks to the resources offered through the programme, they could tap into emerging technologies, under-exploited markets and under-represented topics and build their project at a scale they would not have achieved without them.

Secondly, the cross-border aspect of the collaboration has played an important role in encouraging knowledge growth, capacity building and networking skills. Bringing together organisations of different sizes from different countries resulted in building interpersonal relations and exchanging practices on top of knowledge and skills. Even for organisations that have cooperated on other projects in the past, this experience has deepened their relationship with their partners and enhanced their intercultural and networking skills. Beyond the results of the projects for revenue, visibility and innovation, Stars4Media NEWS led to the exchange of valuable knowledge, skills and know-how, reinforcing the organisation's "armoury" of competencies. The strong relationship of trust and openness cultivated - and encouraged by the coaches - throughout the programme has contributed to the exchange of advice and guidance beyond the scope of Stars4Media NEWS.

Cross-border collaboration programmes like Stars4Media can help media organisations expand their capacity to handle (international) projects by improving their project management skills. This helps with capacity-building and networking, enhancing the continuity of the project and the collaboration and creating more opportunities for future partnerships.

Additionally, the innovation and transformation achieved by the participating companies result in a more diverse media environment, where innovation is fostered and cultivated by exchanging knowledge and expertise between the main actors of the sector, the ones who shape it with their daily activities. On top of creating new revenue streams, these new products and services play a vital role in disseminating news and informing audiences, supporting the democratic institutions of our society. From data management tools and real-time planning systems, to AI-powered audio translations and fact-checking chatbots, the outputs of the projects enrich the European media environment and market with new ideas. In a time of heightened tensions, where the news environment is marred by a lack of trust and rampant misinformation, a strong and healthy media sector is paramount for democratic societies, and cross-border collaboration can facilitate the production, dissemination and sustainability of quality media content.

Policy-makers should consider the programme's findings and results as they take on the challenge of maintaining the health and competitiveness of the European media sector. Broadly, this co-funding scheme allows media organisations to focus on the innovation project by allocating sufficient funding and resources. It also relieves them of a big part of the administrative burden, allowing them to focus on project planning and implementation. As third-party beneficiaries, the projects had the benefit of the consortium taking care of the liaison and administration with the EU Co-Funding Agency, as the grants for the funding of the projects' operations were provided as prizes. As a result, the participants were required to deal with a minimal amount of paperwork during the programme.

However, the findings of the evaluation process suggest that project coordination still proved to be a challenge at times, especially when taking into account the differing schedules of the partnering companies. Though much of the administrative stress was alleviated by the consortium's work, this scale of cooperation still requires the dedication of sufficient time and attention to the necessary work.

Based on the interest expressed in emerging technologies, such as AI-powered tools and systems, it becomes evident that the involved organisations are open to new technologies and are keen on integrating them into their daily operations in a productive, creative way. Programmes that support the innovative use of such technologies should be promoted, ensuring their implementation is aligned with the principles and values of the European Union.

# LET'S KEEP WORKING TOGETHER FOR A HEALTHIER MEDIA SECTOR

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