

2024

# Stars4Media NEWS BEST PRACTICES HANDBOOK

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This handbook presents lessons learned from the Stars4Media NEWS programme, its best practices and transferable knowledge for the European news media sector.

# SUMMARY

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The "Stars4Media NEWS Best Practices Handbook" documents the outcomes and insights from the third edition of the Stars4Media programme (2022-2024) - named Stars4Media NEWS -, which focused on supporting cross-border collaboration and innovation in the European news media sector. Amidst growing challenges such as shrinking revenues, disinformation, and the digital transformation of journalism, the programme provided financial support, coaching, and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange to foster sustainable business and newsroom transformations.

The Stars4Media NEWS programme built on two previous successful editions, supporting 14 collaborative media projects from 31 companies in the initial phase – EXPLORE and 9 in the later stage, BOOST. Financial support amounted to €44,000 per company participating in both phases of the programme.

The projects aimed to test innovative ideas for business and/or newsroom transformation in the first phase, and to expand successful concepts in the second. In practice, the projects focused on new approaches, such as community-driven subscriptions, AI-powered journalism tools, or multilingual podcast production, often leading to sustainable revenue streams.



Three main best practices can be highlighted:

- First, a **solid framework** is essential to support such collaborative projects. This implies allocating sufficient resources and being flexible and transparent through regular communication.
- Second, **cross-border partnerships** flourished by leveraging complementary expertise, skills, and knowledge. Teams enhanced their project management, innovation, and intercultural collaboration skills, which are now transferable to future endeavours.
- Lastly, **tailored coaching**, both process - and transformation- oriented, was crucial to the project's success, with over 70% of participants acknowledging the added value of expert guidance.

Overall, Stars4Media NEWS successfully fostered a culture of experimentation, innovation, and collaboration in the participating media companies. Many of them plan to continue their partnerships beyond the programme, utilising the skills and networks developed. The handbook emphasises that EU support for media innovation, paired with external funding and ongoing cross-border collaboration, is crucial to European news media's long-term sustainability and development.

The Stars4Media NEWS programme has demonstrated the potential for cross-border collaboration to drive innovation and transformation in the media sector. By facilitating knowledge exchange and supporting business sustainability, it has laid the groundwork for a more resilient and future-ready European news ecosystem.

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# INTRODUCTION

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## **Context: innovation through collaboration and collaboration through innovation in media companies - 5 years of the Stars4Media Programme**

The European news media sector is facing a mountain of challenges today. Since the proliferation of digital platforms and social networking websites, traditional news media have struggled to adapt to a new, highly competitive, attention-driven market. Previous sources of revenue are gradually depleting, prompting news organisations to seek other financial resources and adopt new business models. Technological developments are creeping into newsrooms, and worries about the future of journalism are at an all-time high. Last but not least, democratic backsliding, a decline in trust in news, and rampant disinformation create a barrier between objective, reliable news and audiences, in an environment marred by conflict, tensions and uncertainty. Faced with all those challenges, collaboration and innovation is more important than ever.

The European Commission has addressed the news media crisis by channelling resources toward media freedom, pluralism and innovation. Among other actions, the Stars4Media Project was launched in 2019, responding to a “rising stars” call for pilot project proposals voted by the European Parliament in 2018. The main goal of the Stars4Media pilot programme was to facilitate cross-border cooperation between media professionals to accelerate individual careers and media innovation. Following the successful implementation of the Pilot edition, a Second Edition was launched in 2021, allowing for more cross-sector cooperation. While the First Pilot Edition welcomed 105 media professionals from 42 media organisations, the Second gathered 185 media professionals in 30 initiatives involving 76 media organisations across Europe. Nearly doubling the number of participants allowed the extension of Stars4Media community and its impact; however, this was also a clear sign of a lack of framework support for bottom-up innovation in the sector. Framework support refers to the resources, documentation, tools, and community assistance.

Reflecting this dire need for financing and guidance in the media, the programme's third edition, Stars4Media NEWS, launched in 2022 and was executed until 2024. This new phase is built on the experience and results of the programme's previous editions while providing media companies with new resources and valuable tools to engage in business and newsroom transformation. Co-funded by the Creative Europe programme, under the [Journalism Partnerships 2021 call](#), Stars4Media NEWS provided cascading funding, in-depth coaching, and peer-to-peer knowledge transfer to 14 collaborative media projects involving 31 companies in a first phase, and 20 companies in the second, and over 185 media professionals from 17 countries.

The programme was managed by a consortium of four partners: Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), the programme coordinator, Europe's MédiaLab (ex-Fondation Euractiv), the World Association of News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) and the European Journalism Centre (EJC).

This handbook presents lessons from the Stars4Media NEWS programme, its best practices and transferable knowledge for the European news media sector.

## Stars4Media From Pilot to Stars4Media NEWS

2019-2020

Pilot Edition

21 initiatives  
105 media professionals  
42 companies  
17 countries

2021-2022

Second Edition

30 initiatives  
185 media professionals  
76 companies  
22 countries

2022-2024

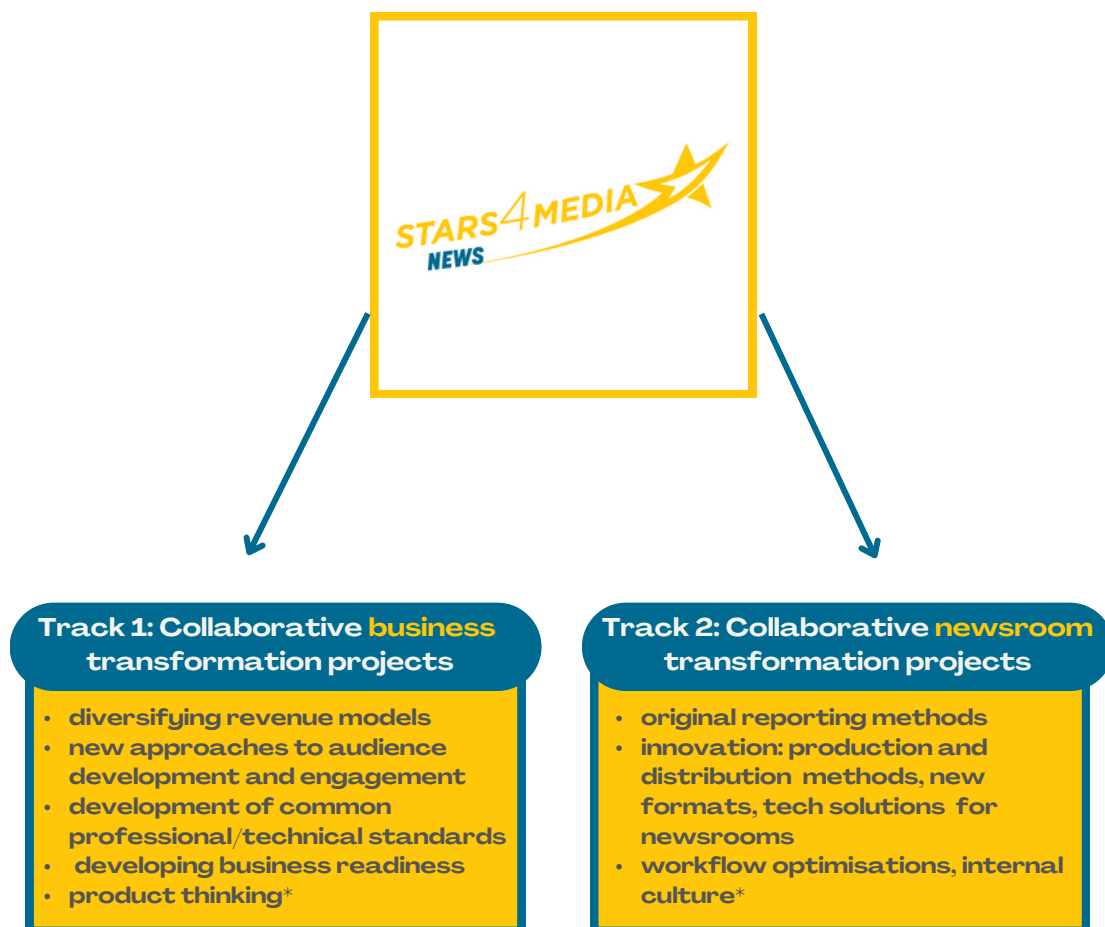
Third Edition

14 projects  
140 media professionals  
32 companies  
17 countries

## Stars4Media NEWS in a nutshell

Stars4Media NEWS offered increased financial support per participating company compared to the Pilot and Second editions. Specifically, the companies involved throughout the entire programme received grants of €44,000 to implement their cross-border projects. The programme enabled the implementation of the projects in two phases – EXPLORE, with a duration of 4 months, providing support for 14 projects, and BOOST, with a duration of 8 months and supporting nine projects.

In line with the specifications of the Creative Europe scheme, the programme expanded beyond the EU Member States. The programme's primary focus has been business and newsroom transformation, which constitute the tracks under which project proposals were presented. In addition, participating companies benefited from expert coaching that helped them streamline their approach, organise, and implement their transformation plans better. The coaching was tailored to each project's needs, ensuring access to valuable knowledge, experience and resources for success.



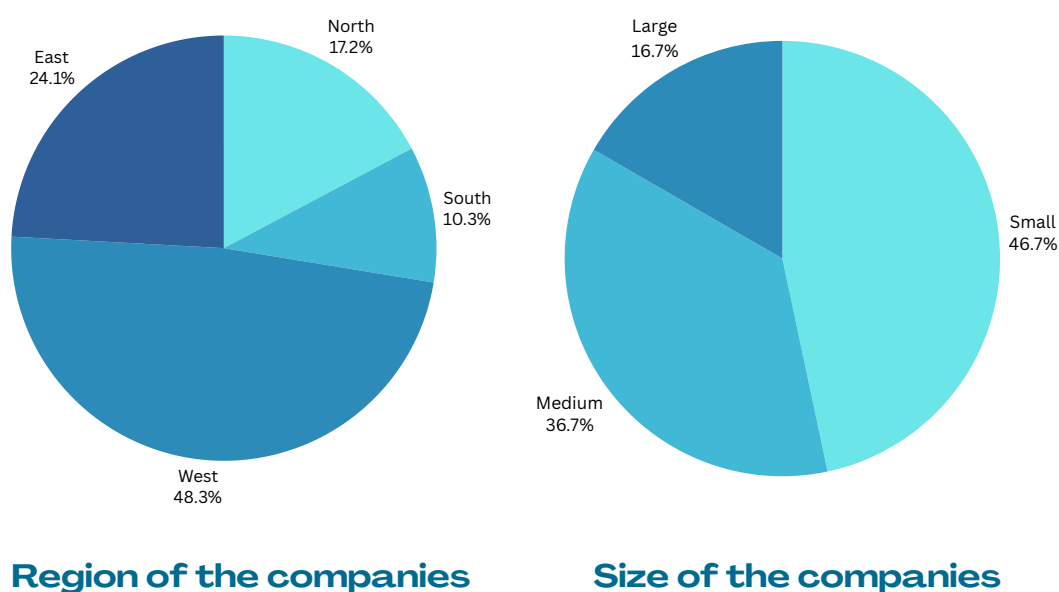
\*(among others)

The Call for Projects of Stars4Media NEWS programme received 50 project proposals, out of which two were ineligible due to the country in which the applicants were based. As a result, 48 project proposals were evaluated by an independent jury of media experts who selected 14 projects to test innovative ideas and approaches to business or newsroom transformation during the programme's first phase, EXPLORE. The projects were assessed on the quality of their proposal and its fit with the Stars4Media programme (plan of action, partnership and impact potential, and sustainability), as well as the characteristics of the applying companies (size, credibility, diversity).

The continuation of the Stars4Media NEWS programme was the BOOST phase, for which the jury selected 9 out of the 14 projects. This time, the selection criteria for the next phase centred - on top of the previous criteria - on the quality of the project's dissemination and transformation plan, the project's sustainability, and the support received by their top management. During the eight months of the BOOST phase, the partnering companies worked on advancing their tested ideas and achievements from the EXPLORE phase, enhancing their transformation plans and working towards increased sustainability of their projects.

Almost half of the companies came from Western Europe, although almost a fourth came from Eastern Europe.

**Figure 1:**  
**Geographical origin and size of Stars4Media NEWS beneficiaries**





# BEST PRACTICES

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**To assess the progress, challenges and experiences of the participating companies, an evaluation survey was deployed by the VUB throughout the two phases of the Stars4Media NEWS programme. Representatives of each company answered the surveys. Additionally, as part of the monitoring and assessment process, the companies completed an Impact Assessment survey, managed by EJC, to reflect on their impact and barriers in implementing business and newsroom transformations. Lastly, their experience was accompanied by Process Coaches, who regularly filled in standardised Log books, reflecting on the projects' progress. These tools help to index best practices and lessons learnt, as further presented.**

## **A collaboration solid framework**

The participating companies shared the relevance of a well-established collaboration framework, provided in this case by the Stars4Media NEWS programme. This implies allocating sufficient financial resources and time for project implementation, as well as being flexible and transparent through regular communication.

The Stars4Media NEWS programme was structured in two phases: EXPLORE and BOOST. This allowed the co-funded projects to test and explore innovative ideas in the first phase and advance them towards sustainable business and newsroom transformation in a flexible and lengthier period throughout the second phase.

As the name implies, the EXPLORE phase allowed the participating companies to explore the directions they could take with their project. Working collaboratively, they were able to improve and elaborate on their original project proposal while considering the various market and media dynamics, as well as the advice and guidance of specialised coaches. According to the participating companies, the EXPLORE phase allowed them to know their cross-border partner, determine common objectives, and build on each other's strengths (Source: End of EXPLORE Evaluation survey).

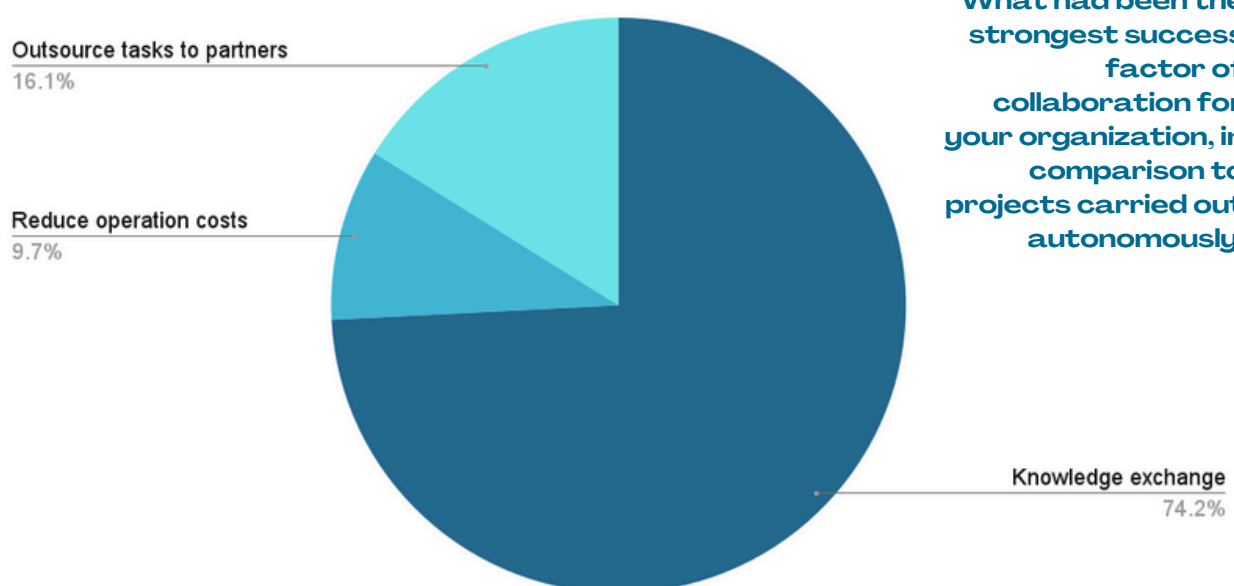
The main objective of the BOOST phase was implementing or widening the innovative ideas developed in the programme's first phase and/or working on complementary developments supporting the first achievements, e.g., training, technical developments, external communication, etc. The specialised coaching 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.

Having these two consecutive phases of implementation, with different durations, was appreciated by the participating companies. Additionally, the programme offered flexibility in the collaboration framework and the project management process inside the companies, which was considered a positive aspect by the companies (Source: Boost Evaluation Survey);

The continuous communication between the Stars4Media NEWS implementing consortium, coaches, and project representatives helped foster a trust-based relationship, clarify administrative aspects, and anticipate issues through transparency from all parties involved. On top of email exchanges, newsletters, Q&A sessions and ad hoc calls, the Stars4Media community was supported and nurtured by the consortium on LinkedIn. As a recommendation, some project representatives expressed their desire to establish informal communication channels between the programme's stakeholders (coordinator, partners, coaches and other participants), such as Slack or Teams, allowing the exchange to continue even after the programme's closure.

## Cross-border collaboration and complimentary experience

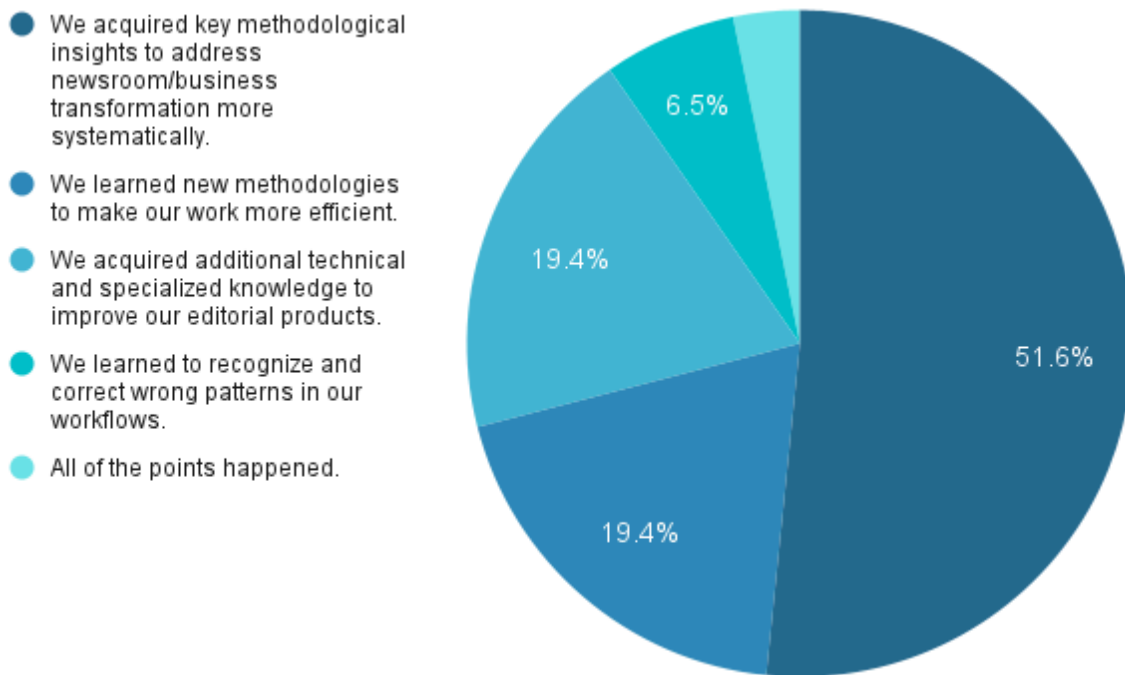
The most potent success factor for the collaboration of the partners was the **complementary experience**, which led to continuous knowledge, skills and expertise exchange and mutual learning. This factor was the most popular throughout both EXPLORE and BOOST phases. Additionally, the fact that partners could outsource to each other some tasks and reduce the costs of operations also contributed to the success (figure 2).



**Figure 2:**  
What had been the strongest success factor of collaboration for your organization, in comparison to projects carried out autonomously.

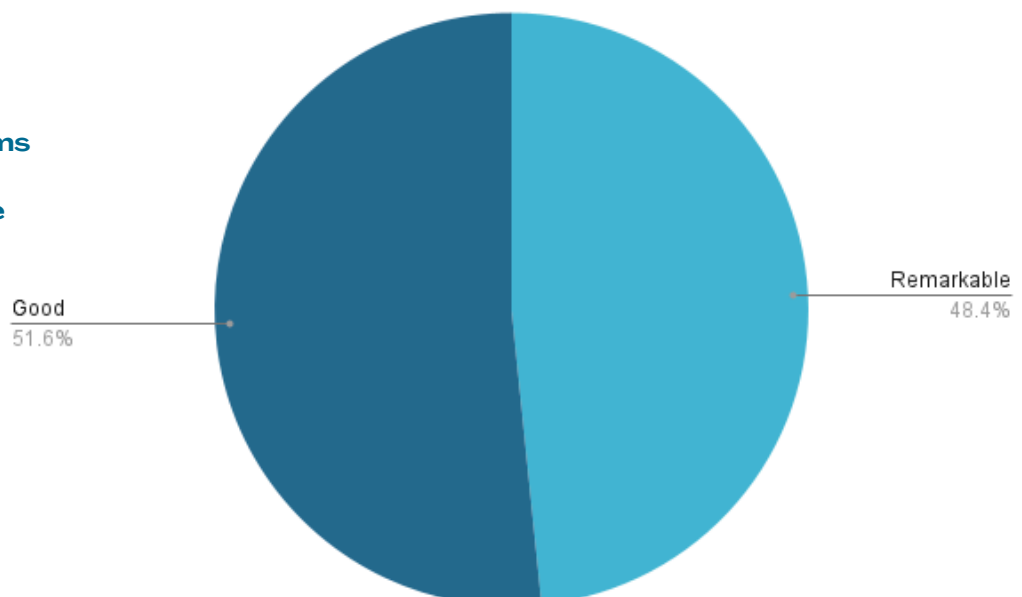
More broadly, a best practice facilitated by the Stars4Media NEWS programme is the cross-border collaboration itself. A remarkable (51,6%) and good (48,4%) knowledge growth is recorded by the EXPLORE participants (figure 3). They acknowledged the strength of international cooperation, highlighting new organisational skills, critical thinking and methodological insights, and change management knowledge.

**Figure 3:**  
Learning growth experienced during S4M NEWS Explore phase.

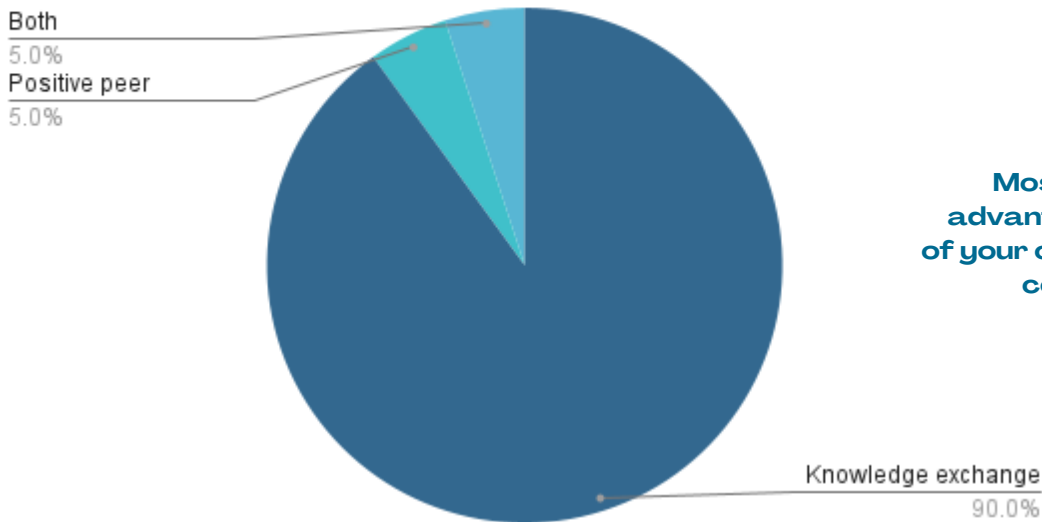


Of 31 respondents, 51.6% stated acquiring critical methodological insight to address newsroom and business transformation, 19.4% learnt new methodologies to make their work more efficient, and 19.4% acquired additional technical and specialised knowledge to improve their editorial products (figure 4).

**Figure 4:**  
Perception in terms of knowledge growth during the collaboration.



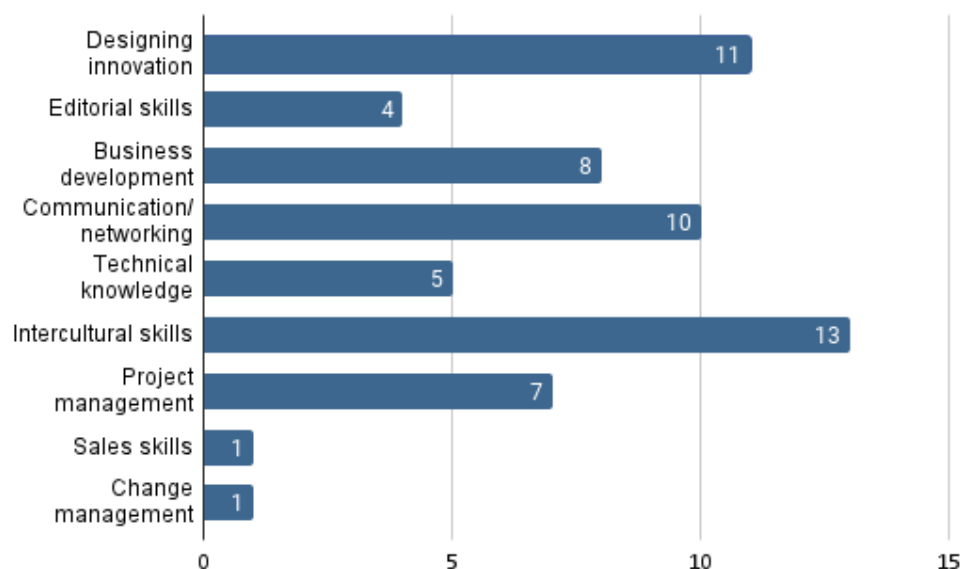
In the BOOST phase, the continuous exchange of knowledge, expertise and skills was the most significant benefit of the collaboration (90%). Also, most companies intend to continue collaborating beyond the Stars4Media funding (figure 5).



**Figure 5:**  
Most significant advantage/benefit of your cross-border collaboration.

Among the skills improved as a result of the collaboration, cooperation and intercultural skills take first place, followed by designing and implementing innovation and communication and networking skills (figure 6). When asked about the best practices that their organisations could adopt in the future, the respondents support these results. Overall, the representatives agree that the collaborative experience of Stars4Media has equipped their organisations with experiences and skills that they will carry on for their future projects. Project management and organisational skills, clear and open communication channels, flexibility, and improved cooperation between departments stand out as the practices the participants plan to embrace in the future.

**Figure 6:**  
Most significant skills strengthened as a result of the collaboration.



## Coaching

Another best practice reflected in the positive experience of the Stars4Media NEWS beneficiaries is tailored coaching.

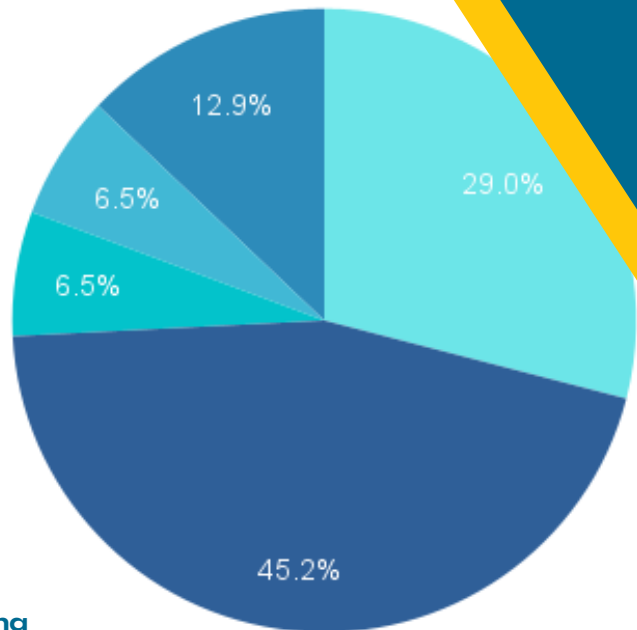
Two types of coaching were available to the participating companies:

1. Process coaching: This involved guidance, feedback, pre-evaluation, informal advice, programme communication and support troubleshooting in case of administrative or process issues provided by representatives of the Stars4Media consortium. Their main role was to ensure the process was understood and implemented correctly.
2. Transformation coaching: This was provided by experts from the media industry who made sure the project participants reached their business/newsroom transformation goals by providing personalised strategy and change management tools. A typical coaching experience implied regular weekly/bi-weekly meetings between the project teams and the coaches.

Overall, the coaching provided direction and assistance during the entire programme, allowing projects to amend, adjust and fine-tune their plans to achieve the desired level of transformation. The presence of Process coaches, their responsiveness and their proactive attitude towards checking in with the projects helped them fulfil the requirements of the programme and flexibly adjust their work plans when needed while staying on track towards the desired achievements. Additionally, the project participants acknowledged a considerable added value through the support of their transformation coaches, with 71% agreeing that the input of their transformation coach(es) provided valuable insights from a different perspective, which made their results more significant (Source: EXPLORE Impact Assessment Survey). Moreover, 22,6% acknowledged that they would have hardly achieved their goals, without the support of their transformation coach(es). Overall, the reactivity and availability of the coaches along the process ensured a smooth collaboration (Source: interviews realised with the companies' representatives during the BOOST phase).

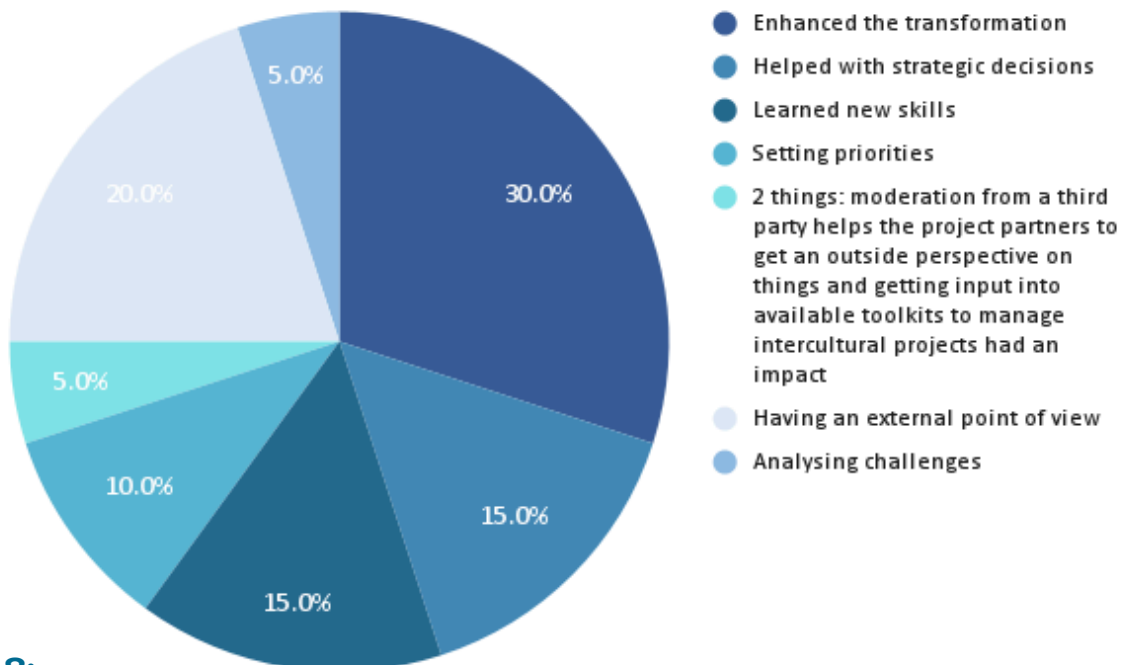
Throughout the EXPLORE phase, out of 31 company representatives, 45.2% felt the coaches challenged their approach and helped them find a better way to achieve their results, 29% believed the coaches made them aware of important information and methodologies, 12.9% said the coaches helped them connect with relevant persons/organisations (figure 7).

- The coach(es) made us aware of important information/methodologies/knowledge that was missing in
- 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
- None of the above
- The coach(es) helped us connect with the relevant persons/organizations that



**Figure 7:**  
Perception of the benefits of the coaching process.

In the BOOST phase, the coaches contributed to enhancing the transformation (30%), bringing in an external point of view (20%), facilitating the learning of new skills (15%) and providing help with strategic decisions (15%). (figure 8)



**Figure 8:**  
The added value of the coaching.

The solid relationship between the coaches and the projects is also reflected in the insights from the surveys run with the Transformation coaches at the end of the BOOST phase. Their answers reveal that many coaches would accompany the project partners beyond the Stars4Media funding.

# LESSONS LEARNED

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We would like to highlight two dimensions of the lessons learnt: lessons learnt by the supported projects and lessons learnt from the coaching process.

## **Lessons learnt by the supported projects**

The lessons learnt by the supported projects derive from the challenges they encountered.

Some challenges were identified at the organisational level as barriers to successful collaboration, as expressed by the respondents to the EXPLORE evaluation survey. According to most of them, the lack of time and/or budget to achieve the pre-set goals was a significant challenge (39% of respondents) (figure 8). For example, one of the participating companies faced timeframe-related challenges, as it was undergoing an internal restructuring, with the establishment of a new department, at the same time as implementing the Stars4Media project. Therefore, some team members had multiple overlapping tasks, which required adjustments to the original timeline and the rest of the objectives to achieve more realistic goals. On a concurrent topic, some projects considered that the four-month time span allocated to the EXPLORE phase was insufficient for accomplishing their goals and proving their potential (for further development of ideas in the BOOST phase). At the same time, the participants acknowledge that some of their original goals might have been too ambitious for the timeframe of the programme's first phase. Delays were sometimes recorded due to lengthier technical processes and unforeseen challenges in implementing new technical solutions.

Additionally, the partnership was not always easily implemented due to cultural and linguistic barriers, unaligned expectations, agenda mismatches and other intrinsic differences.

*“While trilingualism has generally been an asset and communications between team members in English has been effective, the development of written materials and documents (such as surveys, focus group guides, and listening/testing reports) across three different languages has at times been slightly cumbersome, often occurring through a two or three step translation process which has inevitably proven quite time-consuming.”*

- Stars4Media NEWS beneficiary

Operational difficulties occurred at the coordination level and alignment of priorities between partner companies. However, this was not signalled as an issue but acknowledged as a challenge that requires time and joint effort.

For several projects, having regular in-person meetings helped the teams not only to be more productive, but also get to know each other better and overcome miscommunications generated by online-only interactions.

*“Although we are used to remote meetings, the in-person contact allows for building trust and solving small but sometimes blocking issues. It allows focusing on the project without being disturbed by constant external stimuli.”*

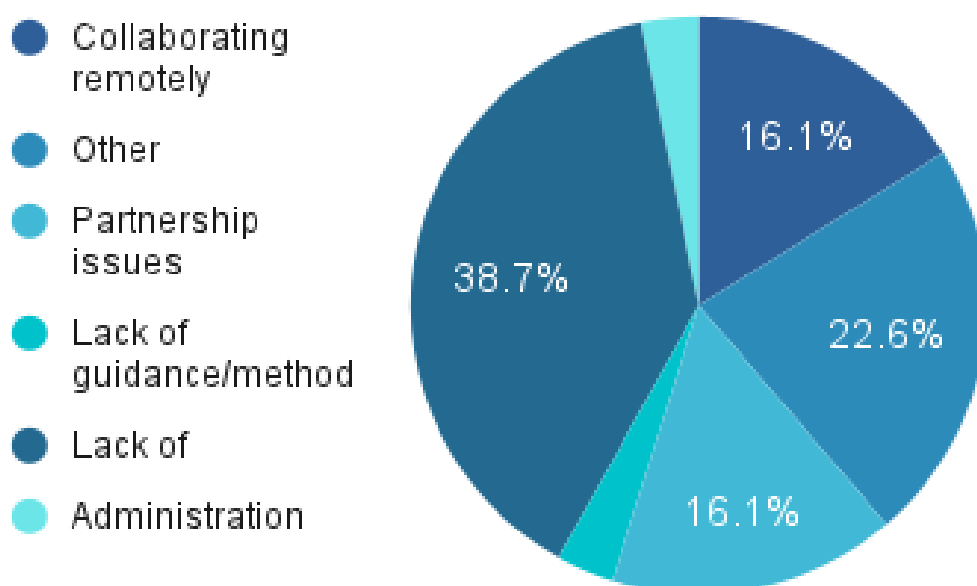
*-Stars4Media NEWS beneficiary*

Only a few of the participating companies collaborated previously in joint projects, and, for some of them, this resulted in a speedier alignment of expectations and improved mutual understanding. In the case of another project, however, it is stressed that:

*“even with a partner you have worked for a long time, you can run into differences in company culture, communication styles, etc. On top of that, having your own country's culture but not speaking the working language as your native language poses an additional challenge”.*

*-Stars4Media NEWS beneficiary*

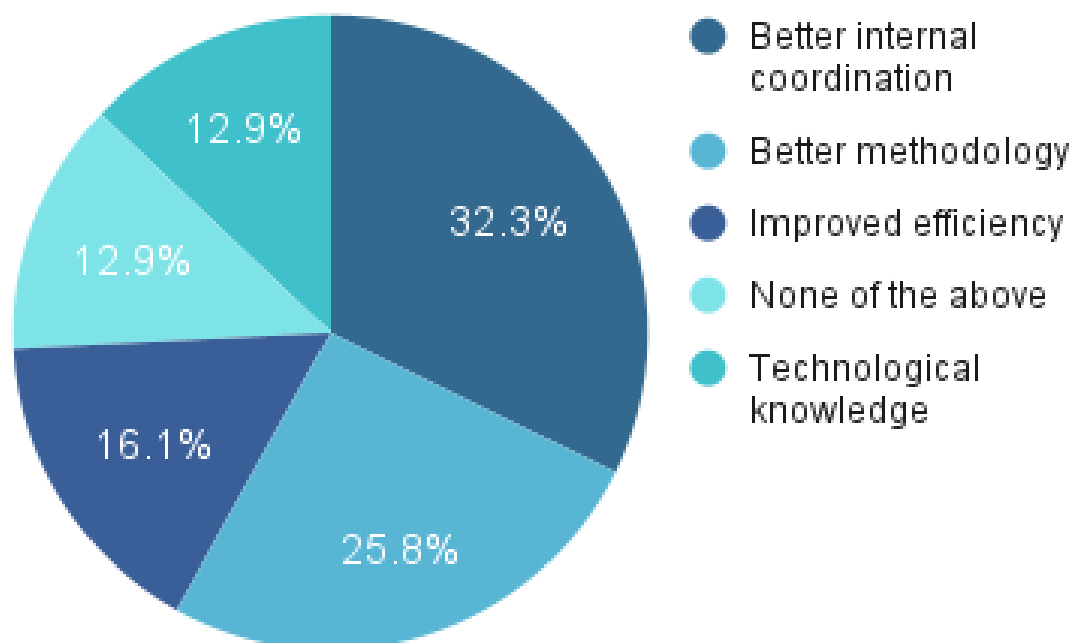
**Figure 9:**  
Strongest difficulty of collaboration for organization, in comparison to autonomous projects.





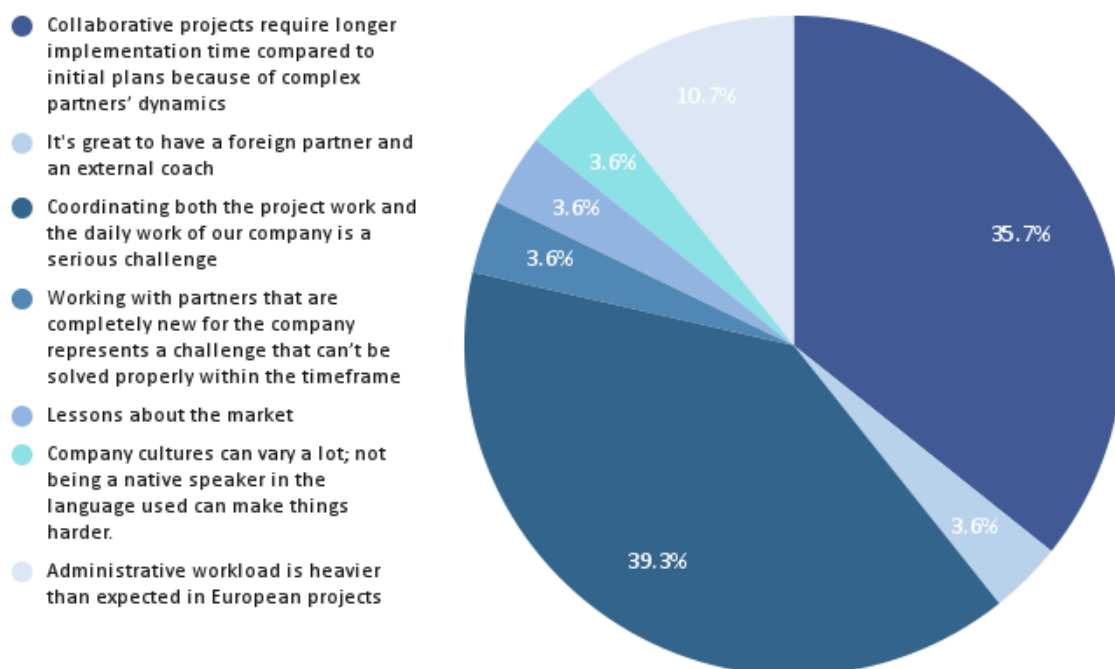
Regarding the impact of the EXPLORE phase at the company level, 32.3% of participants gained better knowledge on how to coordinate different expertise in their company, 25.8% said they acquired better methodology to achieve their goals, and 16.1% acknowledged their processes to be more efficient thanks to the coaching support (figure 10).

**Figure 10:**  
What has been mostly improved, when it comes to business/newsroom transformation?



In the BOOST phase, over 39% of the participating companies described the coordination of their daily work and the work on the project as a serious challenge (figure 11). One beneficiary pointed to the unpredictable dynamic in the newsroom, due to unexpected events and changes, some activities were difficult to achieve according to the original project timeline. Many also agree that collaborative projects require longer implementation than initial plans because of complex partners' dynamics (36%). These findings align with those from the EXPLORE phase.

**Figure 11:**  
The main lessons learned from the BOOST phase.



In terms of barriers to achieving the desired transformation after the BOOST phase, 29% of beneficiaries indicate the lack of budget or time, lack of guidance (12%), lack of support from top management (12%) and the lack of funding for business/newsroom transformation (12%). 35% detailed other barriers, such as the complex dynamics between multiple stakeholders, which can lead to delays and require additional coordination, making it essential to allocate sufficient time for communication and consensus-building. When asked what their preferred length for an innovation project is, most opted for medium-term (4-8 months) (52%) and long-term (1-2 years) (28%). Only 12% favoured 2-3 months-long projects, and 8% favoured other options.

## Lessons learnt from the coaching process

At the end of the Stars4Media NEWS programme, the Transformation coaches offering guidance to the projects shared their feedback on the programme by filling in a structured survey. This section builds on their experience and insights.


According to the coaches' experience, to ensure the success of cross-border collaboration in media innovation, newsroom, or business transformation projects, several key prerequisites must be considered:

### ◦ **Collaboration prerequisites**

- **Team building:** Before starting the project, it is essential to engage in team-building activities to foster strong relationships among partners and establish a connection with the coach.
- **Establishing a common working language:** It's important to ensure that all partners share a common working language, literally, and as well as a common understanding of key terms, to facilitate communication and collaboration.
- **Setting clear communication channels:** Establish well-defined communication channels to streamline information sharing and decision-making.
- **Fostering openness and information sharing:** Establish an agreement on openness and a willingness to share information among all partners.
- **Building trust and confidentiality:** Cultivate a culture of trust and confidentiality, ensuring that all parties feel secure in sharing ideas and challenges.
- **Having regular meetings:** Schedule regular meetings, combining in-person and online sessions, with a preference for face-to-face interactions whenever possible.

### ◦ **Work prerequisites**

- **Clarifying challenges and objectives:** Partners should identify individual and shared challenges, understand each participant's motivations, and define clear objectives for the project.
- **Agreeing on a minimum viable product:** Define a minimum viable product (MVP) to gauge progress and determine acceptable deviations between planned and achieved deliverables.
- **Identifying the target audience:** For editorial projects, clearly identify the target audience early on.
- **Appointing a project facilitator:** Agree on a facilitator who will take the lead in guiding the project and coordinating efforts.
- **Allocating resources:** Ensure adequate human and financial resources are dedicated to the project for smooth execution.
- **Defining coaching roles:** Clearly understand the coach's role and ensure alignment between the coach(es) and the team on expectations and responsibilities.
- **Time management for coaching:** Allocate sufficient time for coaching activities to maximise their impact on the project's development.



Secondly, a series of recommendations for ensuring the sustainability of the projects was provided. Although some of them were very project-specific, we aimed to extrapolate some general suggestions for similar endeavours in business and newsroom sustainability, as follows:

- Setting long-term goals: Plan for the long term by considering from the outset how the project will continue after initial funding ends.
- Prioritising organisational growth: Focus on organisational development and team consolidation to strengthen the foundation of the business.
- Integrating business development: Make business development a central aspect of the company's core activities to support long-term growth.
- Diversifying revenue streams: Focus on securing multiple sources of income to create a sustainable business model with sufficient funding.
- Ethically leveraging Artificial Intelligence: Use AI ethically to enhance monetization, content production, and distribution, while maintaining transparency and accountability.
- Establishing clear partnerships: Implement a well-defined partnership strategy supported by formal legal agreements to ensure clarity and mutual commitment.
- Ensuring ongoing communication: Create channels for continuous communication to maintain momentum and address challenges as they arise.
- Promoting problem-solving autonomy: Help teams understand the core issues but encourage them to develop their own solutions rather than providing ready-made answers.
- Fostering collaborative synergies: The programme coordinator should actively facilitate connections between project participants, helping to foster synergies among companies that didn't initially collaborate. This can open up new partnerships and additional funding opportunities.

The experience and expertise of the coaches involved in the Stars4Media programme has been invaluable for the success of the projects. Looking towards the future, future cross-border collaborations could benefit from their recommendations, laying the groundwork for effective, sustainable and innovative project plans.

# TRANSFERABLE KNOWLEDGE

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## **Implications of Stars4Media for cross-border collaboration in the European media landscape**

The experience coordinating the Stars4Media NEWS programme makes us reflect on broader recommendations for cross-border collaboration in the European media landscape. Firstly, building a solid cooperation framework is essential for guiding cross-border collaborative projects and ensuring clarity in roles, expectations, and processes. The benefit of such a framework is that it facilitates the knowledge exchange between partners, which the participating projects state to be a strong result of their collaboration, enriching them with diverse skills, perspectives, and expertise. Additionally, keeping administrative tasks simple and efficient, as well as having less bureaucratic reporting towards the coordinator, allows the project to run smoothly and its team to focus more on actual tasks.

Secondly, based on the number and quality of project submissions to the Stars4Media NEWS call for projects, as well as the experience of the implemented projects, we notice a strong will to cooperate and exchange ideas. This is the basis of collaboration and has the potential to drive innovation. The key takeaways from such collaborations include improved internal coordination, the adoption of methodological toolkits, increased process efficiency, higher motivation levels, and a healthy pressure to achieve success.

Thirdly, coaching plays a significant role in helping these innovative ideas come to life and become sustainable. Through the coaches expertise, they can introduce new methodologies, provide strategic guidance, and offer organisational support, otherwise difficult to attain, to enhance business and newsroom operations.

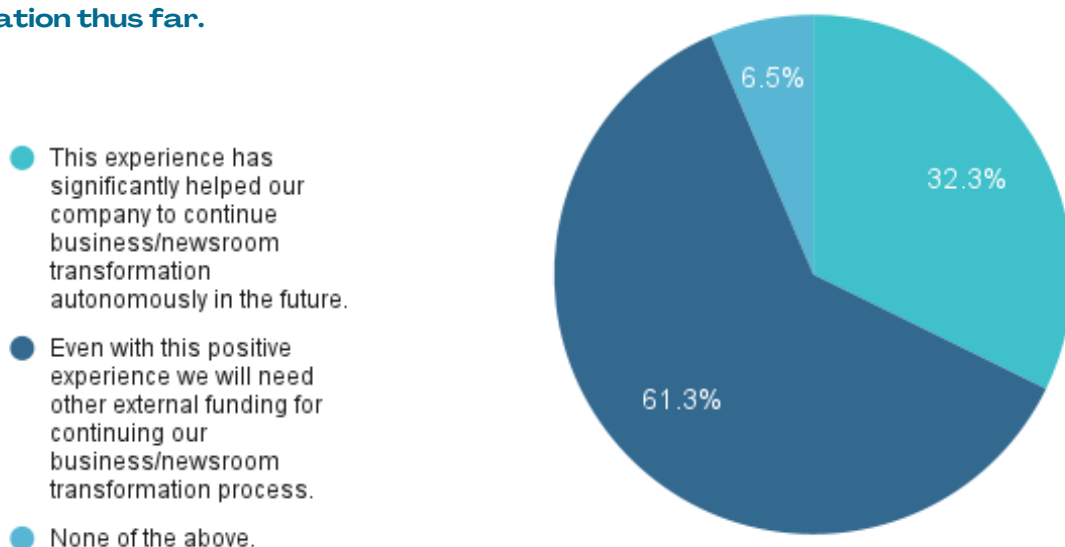
Lastly, the projects participating in Stars4Media NEWS prove that distance is not an issue for collaboration. When the right digital tools and communication practices are in place, teams can collaborate effectively regardless of location.

In what follows, we would like to elaborate more on some recommendations from the supported projects and the programme's results and importance.

## Recommendations from the supported projects

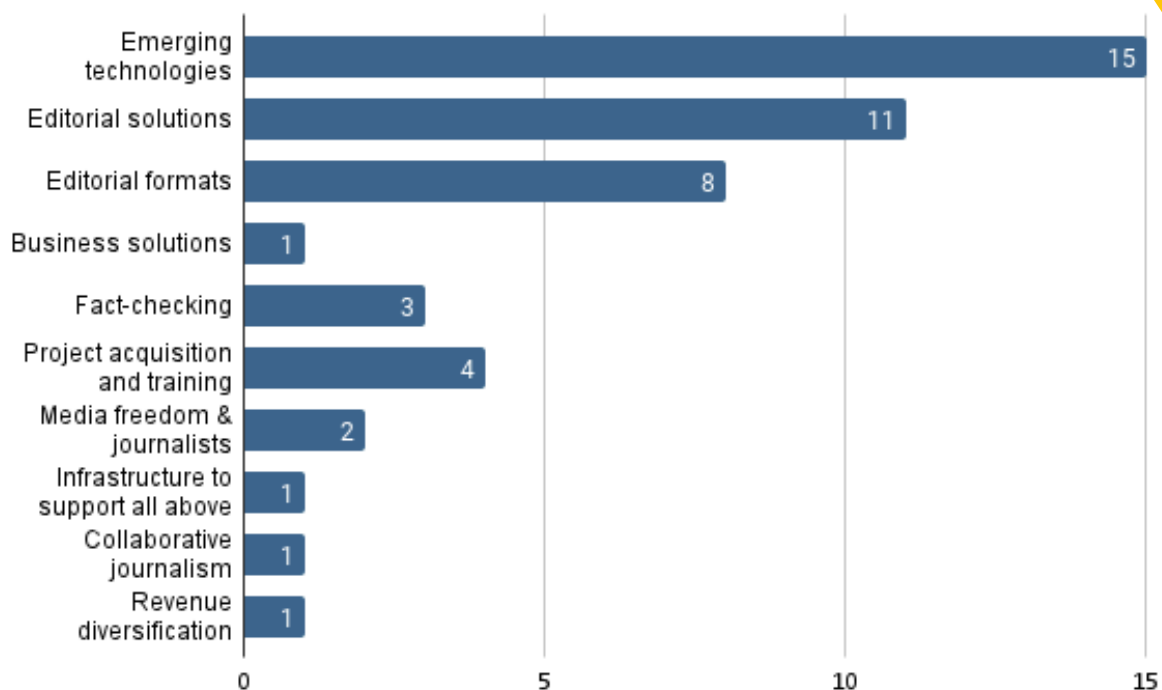
At the end of the EXPLORE phase, the vast majority of the participating companies (61.3%) agreed that, despite the positive experience of Stars4Media collaboration, they will need additional external funding to continue their business/newsroom transformation process (Figure 12). Several projects acknowledged that, although they will be looking for more funding, they could have never started the transformation process without the support of Stars4Media NEWS. In a similar vein, other answers to the survey reflect that the funding provided by the programme facilitated the start of projects that were long in the making but couldn't be initiated due to budgetary constraints, offering a framework to finally implement them, with further potential for development.

**Figure 12:**  
Sentence that represents participants next steps in terms of business/newsroom transformation thus far.



At the end of the BOOST phase, emerging technologies, such as AI tools and systems, appear to be a central priority for a third of the companies with regard to their future projects (figure 13). New editorial solutions (investigative/data journalism) and new editorial formats (podcasts, newsletters) are also of particular interest.

**Figure 13:**  
Topics priority for organization's future projects.



The funding sources they will orient towards are, in order of their preference, private funding, national and/or regional grant schemes and public non-profit foundations. EU funding comes as a fourth option, followed by philanthropic foundations. One beneficiary detailed the choice by arguing that applying for grants from private funding, such as Google's Digital News Initiative, was simpler and less bureaucratic than accessing EU funding. Even so, some indicate that EU-funded calls for projects fit better with the objectives of their organisations, and that EU funding increases trust and lowers risks between partners. None of the companies expressed interest in financing from political foundations. Some other companies, with the status of private for-profit organisations, are generally excluded from funding coming from philanthropic and non-profit foundations, which, for the great majority, tend only to offer financial support for non-profit organisations. This was quite a straightforward decision for all, based on the unbiased principle of independent media. The source of funding might also depend on the objective or content of the project. As one participant suggests, funding schemes for journalism are usually financed by non-profit organisations, while national or regional authorities are more likely to fund technology/innovation projects.

The coaches involved in the programme also advocate for more funding, more coaching hours, less paperwork and consolidating a network of programme alumni.

## The relevance of the programme

Stars4Media NEWS successfully demonstrated the importance of this EU-funded programme in strengthening the European media sector, encouraging EU policymakers to collaborate with media stakeholders to foster innovation.

Most projects supported by Stars4Media NEWS intend to continue collaborating, harnessing the gained knowledge and skills. The programme both enhanced past cross-border partnerships and helped establish new ones. Moreover, a transfer of knowledge and expertise naturally occurred between companies of different sizes, supplying them with competences that augment their operations and enhance their output. The participating companies gained various practical skills, from data journalism to management skills, due to their exchange and valuable coaching.

Most importantly, the participating companies experimented with innovation processes, implementing original solutions for the newsroom and business transformation, combining different levels of expertise among media professionals with complementary skill sets. By reaping the benefits of this experience, a culture of experimentation and creativity can be encouraged and nurtured, leading to further diverse and innovative products and services that enhance the media sector.

Lastly, this programme has established a trusted and collaborative community of media experts and professionals that expands beyond the direct beneficiaries of the Stars4Media NEWS programme.





# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The programme is co-financed by the European Union, from the Journalism Partnership scheme under 'Creative Europe', and implemented by a consortium of four partners:

- Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), the project coordinator,
- Europe MédiaLab (ex-Fondation Euractiv),
- World Association of News Publishers (WAN-IFRA)
- European Journalism Centre (EJC).

Two dissemination partners are: European Federation of Journalists and Euractiv.

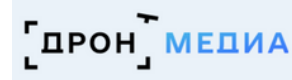
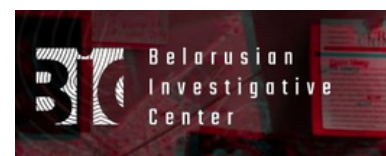
The list of coaches providing their expertise and guidance to the participants includes: Noora Alanne - Charlotte Eimer - Pierre Baisle - Paul Van Kampen - Rafa Hohn - Lyndsey Jones - Charlotte Eimer - Sander Stallinga - Maïke Olij - Martin Beck - Marco Nurra Ruggiu - Dan Luca - Patrick Körting - Federica Cherubini - Vadim Makarenko - Jean Paul Schupp - Erik Weytjens.

Their contributions and expertise have been integral to the success of the programme.

# ANNEX

## Stars4Media NEWS beneficiaries

This Annex presents the 14 projects supported by Stars4Media NEWS, including the nine that were advanced during the programme's second phase, BOOST. These later benefited from a second round of funding and increased coaching to expand their initial achievements towards a more sustainable business and/or newsroom transformation. Here is their logo:



- **Providing access to fact-checked images/videos for professionals and citizens**

**Faktisk.io (NO), France Télévisions (FR)**

This fact-checking project aimed to build a plug-in search engine that allows users to access fact-checkers' visual data storage. This tool, which can be integrated into the websites and processes of media, would have facilitated the verification of videos and images by fact-checkers, media and citizens, avoiding the duplication of fact-checkers work, enabling media to compensate for the lack of a visual investigation department and citizens to participate in the fight against disinformation. In the EXPLORE phase, the teams conducted an in-depth study on the interest and feasibility of a professionally verified image search engine and defined the steps for a proof of concept and to bring the solution to scale.

- **Regional Business Practices: Sharing the best of Western Balkans**

**Business Info Group (RS), MINA (ME), Udruzenje za promociju evropskih standarda i unapredjenje poslovnog ambijenta (BiH)**

This project aimed to create a collaboration network/platform, enabling the participating companies to present business news and advertorial content to their communities. Additionally, another goal was to create a meeting point for like-minded media dealing with similar topics but not connected on a systemic level. This allowed them to harness another revenue stream through the standardisation of reporting practices and a singular code of ethics and by familiarising themselves with new potential clients. The project resulted in a joint marketing offer, procedures for sharing content and direct lines of communication between the partners. Moreover, a premium advertorial offer was jointly created for potential advertisers in the Western Balkan region.

- **Increasing the sustainability of investigative journalism in Eastern Europe through obtaining the crowdfunding skills**

**Belarusian Investigative Center – BIC (CZ), Crime and Corruption Reporting Network – KRIK (RS)**

This partnership aimed to explore the power of crowdfunding for journalistic investigation by exchanging knowledge and experience between KRIK, an organisation with a vast experience in the area and crowdfunding as a main source of income, and BIC, who just started considering it after its grant-based funding diminished. In the EXPLORE phase, the companies held strategic training sessions in which different crowdfunding models were discussed, a strategy was elaborated, and promotional materials were created. Eventually, BIC launched the newly developed crowdfunding campaign, reorganised its website accordingly and launched a related promotional campaign. On the other hand, the KRIK team, with support from BIC, received training regarding the production and promotion of video debunks to discover and expose false media content.

- **Real-time news coverage planning.**

#### **Suomen Tietotoimisto - STT (FI) and Sourcefabric z. u. (CZ)**

In order to meet publishers' demand for a transparent news planning process, STT, Finland's largest news agency, collaborated with Sourcefabric to support the real-time planning of its news coverage and enhance newsroom workflows. The collaboration focused on three dimensions. First, developing an open-source news portal that would allow news agencies - first of all, STT - and other news providers to deliver news to their clients and update them continuously throughout the day about what news was created, their format and covered events. Second, managing change in STT's newsroom to get the team fully on board with real-time planning. Third, advancing Sourcefabric's editorial system "Superdesk" to improve it and make it available to other news agencies as an open-source tool.

- **Data Management System for Newsrooms.**

#### **EI Confidencial (ES), Voxeurop (FR) and Datasketch (ES).**

Data Management System for Newsrooms developed and implemented a Data Management System (DMS) that enables efficient data management and visualisation within the existing content management systems of newsrooms. The requirements and potential of the DMS were defined in the EXPLORE phase, while in BOOST, the companies sought to refine and test the system, empowering journalists to produce high-quality, data-driven stories by providing them with user-friendly tools for data management and visualisation, personalised for European newsrooms, on Datasketch's platform. As a result, journalists in the newsroom can perform their data management without the need for specialised assistance while generating high-quality data journalism content. Moreover, the tool can potentially optimise the processes of small and medium-sized media outlets.

- **Dron Media: building Russian-language explanatory journalism network The Fix Media Foundation (NL) and Ukrayinska Pravda (UA).**

The main goal of this project was to create a working system that would enable Dron Media and Ukrayinska Pravda (UP) to benefit from cost-sharing and expertise-sharing while producing and distributing explanatory journalism content. Specific milestones included: launching the new version of the website and incorporating new updates (including those that enable greater audience understanding/analytics and retention - e.g. survey questions about professional background); production of flagship content projects (four widely popular podcast shows for UP and new content verticals for Dron Media); scaling video production and podcast production capabilities of UP and iterative innovation with new technologies (e.g. AI) in content production and internal operations. The project produced multiple series of explanatory journalism content, achieving a sizable growth of its audience.

- **European Cities Journalism Accelerator/Urban Journalism Network Tagesspiegel (DE), Arena for Journalism in Europe (NL) and Deník Referendum (CZ).**

European Cities Journalism Accelerator aimed to advance European journalism through five key initiatives: conducting targeted investigations on housing issues, enhancing technological infrastructure, sharing knowledge on subscriber generation, expanding the network to additional European capitals, and developing regular, data-driven reporting on shared urban problems. In total, 23 articles were published during the BOOST phase, and 5 more were published during the project break between the EXPLORE and BOOST phases of these shared investigations. Also, the team has technically developed the graphics management system Euroviz, used by all the partners in the network to publish interactive data visualisations in their language and style. Lastly, the collaboration resulted in creating [the Urban Journalism Network](#), which develops high-quality international journalistic investigations with a local focus, spanning across multiple participating countries.

- **Boosting Community Engagement Models for European Fact-Checkers Maldita (ES) and Facta (IT)**

This project aimed to pioneer a cross-border community engagement model for fact-checking organisations, revolutionising their reach and impact while ensuring sustainability. Leveraging Maldita.es' successful community approach, the project adapted and tested it within the Italian context, aiming to double Facta.news' audience engagement and transform Maldita.es' model into a scalable product for broader dissemination. By fostering collaboration, implementing tailored community activities, developing new technological features and documenting best practices, the project amplified Facta.news' detection efforts and enhanced Maldita.es' revenue streams. Ultimately, by establishing professional standards for community engagement, the initiative laid the groundwork for a more united and proactive European audience in combating disinformation.

- **Community-based subscriptions for readers who cut expenses POLITYKA (PL) and Delfi UAB (LT)**

This project proposed introducing innovative community-based subscriptions to address the challenge of acquiring and retaining digital subscribers. In light of economic challenges and inspired by crowd-funding models, it aimed to attract cost-conscious customers while fostering engagement and loyalty. By allowing groups to split subscription costs and offering discounts for renewals collectively, the aim was to expand their readership beyond traditional audiences, strategically reaching new demographics through existing social circles. Specifically, POLITYKA has developed and implemented group subscriptions and created an offer for companies and other institutions. Delfi conducted market research, based on which they elaborated a development plan and introduced a Family Account offer.

- **Infopoint Agency: supporting Eastern European independent media**

#### **InfoPoint Agency (LT) and The Kyiv Independent (UA)**

The Tellers Agency aimed to bolster independent media in Ukraine, Belarus, and other Eastern European countries by connecting them with commercial partners domestically and internationally. In cooperation with The Kyiv Independent, the Tellers Agency leveraged the region's IT talent pool and appealing demographics to attract global advertisers. Some particular milestones of the project are the rebranding and relaunch of [The Tellers Agency website](#), the launch of a communication strategy to attract potential customers, the diversification of the commercial strategy by introducing offline educational and business events and the expansion of the team. This initiative marked a groundbreaking collaboration, uniting Eastern European countries in media advertising and representing them on international commercial platforms for the first time.

- **RePod**

#### **Europod (BE) and Acast (SE)**

RePod is a project that aimed at developing the podcast market at the European level and overcoming the language barriers that hinder its development through a collaboration between- and the further development of- the business models of Europod (former Bulle Media), a European podcast production agency and Acast, an international leader in the business of podcast hosting and monetisation. The core idea was to produce a remake of existing podcasts in another language and promote it in another country/market. One podcast was chosen for the maximisation impact of its remake: "The Santiago Boys" from Evgeny Morozov, produced by Chora Media, the leading podcast producer in Italy, was reproduced in French. Europod produced the remake of 18 podcast episodes and promoted it thanks to Acast. A contract was signed with Chora Media for further collaboration, and several [more RePod podcasts](#) were launched. More broadly, the collaboration set new industry standards, offering a market example and guidelines for podcast translation and production across Europe.

- **APOLLOS**

#### **Mediahuis (BE) and BotTalk (DE)**

The project aimed to use cutting-edge text-to-speech technology to deliver journalistic content in audio format, enhancing digital subscriptions. Initial phases focused on scalable methods for converting readers into digital subscribers through audio content, exploring the potential of a common text-to-speech platform. Overcoming challenges such as supporting diverse languages and dialects, the project sought to meet the evolving needs of digital readers, including the growing demand for local and regional news. Amongst the project results are a successful Proof-of-Concept, which delivers the KPIs for rolling out across the Mediahuis group, onboarding of De Standaard to integrate the BotTalk Player Netherland and development of SDK app for all Mediahuis Newspapers.

- **Data without borders**

**Agora s.a. / Gazeta Wyborcza (PL) and Rossel & Cie SA / Le Soir (BE)**

This multidisciplinary, cross-border Polish-Belgian team worked to strengthen the quality of data-driven journalism in both newsrooms by sharing knowledge, expertise and technology. They collaborated on developing innovative editorial methodology in data journalism and data analysis to improve the performance of their data journalism sections, strengthen the online audience-related revenue and encourage journalistic collaboration. During the EXPLORE phase, the partners enhanced their cooperation to find the best solution for sharing content, improved their data integration in their daily journalistic work, and strengthened their use of advanced tech tools. Additionally, Agora assisted Le Soir in building their data department.

- **Upgrading slow journalism solutions: Distilled Membership: a mobile app for independent media.**

**Are We Europe (NL), Jnomics Media (UA)**

Are We Europe planned to launch its first mobile app by transforming its in-depth content into mobile-friendly digests to cater to the busy lives of the modern audience. One of the ultimate goals of this project was to set an example for developing subscription, community journalism and membership models for other independent journalists and media outlets. In the EXPLORE phase, along with Jnomics, they achieved several milestones towards this goal. The companies realised a design sprint and an experiment set-up with multiple ongoing experiments, deployed user research and surveys to understand the needs of their audience, advanced with conceptual design, wireframes and concept sketches, and performed a competitor analysis.

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

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