

POLICY BRIEF #42

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Fighting the media crisis through innovation exchanges: lessons from the Stars4Media Pilot Project.

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European news media today face an unprecedented crisis. It is, first of all, a crisis of identity: ever since digital platforms have entered the media field as new gatekeepers, traditional news media have struggled to re-position themselves in a digital-first media landscape. It is also an economic and societal crisis: financial resources and trust have both kept declining ever since, with worrying trends at play. Yet, the issues at stake are huge as news media are important players in our democracies. The European Commission has addressed the crisis of news media amongst others by starting to channel resources towards media innovation. In this regard, the Stars4Media pilot project was launched, responding to a proposal voted by the European Parliament in 2018. Stars4Media is the first European project for cross-border cooperation of media professionals focusing on innovation in the news media field and beyond. Since November 2019 imec-SMIT, VUB coordinates this pilot project. In what follows, highlights of the project will be presented, as well as a description of the adaptation of the project to the Coronavirus crisis. Finally, building upon the lessons learned from the implementation of the first pilot, a set of policy recommendations is presented.







Project Highlights	
	200+ members on the Stars4Media LinkedIn community
	41 eligible proposals received and evaluated
	21 successful proposals selected
	105 young media professionals awarded
	42 media outlets and 18 freelancers involved
	17 EU countries involved
	50/50 gender balance

Figure 1: Highlights of the Stars4Media Pilot Project

1. Answering the Media Crisis: the Stars4Media Pilot Project

The ambition of the Stars4Media pilot project **is to support the European news media sector overcoming a long-term and multifaceted crisis**. From the increasing pressure of social media and digital news platforms on the advertising revenues of traditional news media, to the steady decline of print revenues and broadcasting licensing fees and the challenges in strengthening the relationship with users online and offline: many dynamics are at play, making the crisis complex and dismissing simplistic ideas of silver bullets solutions. Stars4Media addresses the complexity of this crisis by providing a ground for experiments with bottom-up, cross-border and collaborative initiatives on an EU-scale. The mix of these three axes is key for supporting the generation of long-term solutions, rather than simply providing short-term aid.

Small teams of media professionals from cooperating media outlets based in at least two different European countries, were invited to submit proposals for initiatives. These were typically 3-months projects for kicking off an innovative idea across two main areas: **Trust in media** and **Data for media**. A total of 105 media professionals were involved in the virtual and physical collaborative exchanges. Typically, initiatives were formed by two media outlets, with a total of six media professionals with complementary media skills.

While journalists represent the main actors of the cooperation, many other media professionals have been involved to leverage the benefits of a multidisciplinary co-creative process. Initiatives include, for example, the cooperation of two teams of professionals for the production of a podcast that pioneers the involvement of the knowledgeable community of readers. In order to ensure the innovative component, journalists have co-created the production-side with sound-designers and marketing specialists.

In line with a variety of profiles involved in the pilot project, the eligible proposals encompassed a remarkable **diversity of topics**, ranging from popular issues like 'AI/Tech solutions for journalism' or 'fighting nationalism and populism narratives', to very niche ones, like 'digital overload/stress management in media'. In the last category, for instance, an initiative implemented by four freelancers was chosen: two mindfulness coaches, a journalist and a graphic designer who work together in creating a free online program designed to support journalists with knowledge and evidence-based practices to counter digital overload in a healthier way. In the area of 'AI/tech solutions for journalist', one exemplary initiative is a cooperation between a Finnish tech start-up and a Spanish news agency, to test an innovative tool designed to enable content creators to better manage the hidden information (embedded metadata) contained in visual contents.

The variety of topics, in turn, has resulted in a long list of diverse **results**, such as, among others, migration-related reportages, solution-journalism podcasts, research analysis on

editorial transparency, experiments in innovative business models, or AR solutions for journalism, just to mention a few.

2. Stars4Media facing the Coronavirus Crisis

At the very beginning of the project implementation, the call for proposals published by Stars4Media was disrupted by the unfolding consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. The approach of Stars4Media was altered insofar that it responded simultaneously to the problems of the long-term crisis (lack of innovative solutions), and of the current health crisis (lack of physical mobility). The project did **not sacrifice the aspect of cross-border cooperation, but instead strengthened its virtual component.**

To respond to the Covid-19 crisis, the two original areas, Trust in media and Data for media, were joined by the third area with a focus on the **Coronavirus**. The goal was to attract initiatives dealing with the issue how the media sector could adapt to the global pandemic. The decision to include an additional 'Coronavirus area' was well-received: 4 out of 21 Stars4Media initiatives (accounting for 20% of the whole budget for beneficiaries) focused on contributing to a **deeper understanding of the ongoing crisis and creating innovative solutions** for helping the media sector dealing with the most pressing consequences.

3. The way forward: 'Rising stars' pilot continuation, Stars4Media Second Edition?

In the past, initiatives to support projects for the media industry have rarely focused on stimulating cross-border collaboration for the emergence of innovative and sustainable practices. In light of the structural crisis, **a bold and comprehensive action of the EU institutions aimed primarily at innovation could help the sector to revive from the crisis with long-term solutions.** In our view, the EU could build upon the modest yet tangible success of the Stars4Media pilot project and assure its continuation into a **permanent European Media Innovation Action** centred around media professionals' exchanges.

The continuation of Stars4Media might be integrated into the larger **NEWS Grant Programme to support news media and quality journalism** suggested by some 40 MEPS in April 2020: [EU leaders must stand up to protect the news media sector.](#)

4. Lessons learned and policy recommendations: how to create an environment accelerating sustainable media innovation




Lessons learned and Policy Recommendations	
	A pool of media experts could be involved to coach applicants during the pre-selection phase
	The cross-border partnerships started with Stars4Media are expected to continue, in most cases
	Future grants and projects are seen by the beneficiaries as the most likely opportunities of monetization, after Stars4Media
	Most initiatives focus on editorial innovation, little space is given to technological and marketing innovation
	Cross-border virtual collaboration is not an obstacle, even for partners cooperating for the first time
	Ensure the right amount of financial contribution to the media professionals willing to cooperate

Figure 2: Stars4Media lessons learned and policy recommendations

1) A pool of media experts could be involved to coach applicants during the pre-selection phase

During the selection process, the 41 eligible proposals have been evaluated by a jury, across seven criteria (see Figure 3). Each proposal received scores (1 to 5) for each of the seven criteria. A score analysis showed that financial sustainability and innovation were overall rather weak aspects of the proposals received. A **stronger involvement of media experts acting as coaches** during the pre-selection process, could have helped applicants to submit proposals with stronger sustainability and innovation dimensions.

GROUPS OF INITIATIVES	CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION						
	Needs	Approach	Benefits	Cooperation	Sustainability	Business Innovation	Media Partnership
ALL	3.9	3.3	3.4	2.6	2.7	2.8	2.6
ACCEPTED	4.2	3.8	3.9	3.2	3.2	3.3	3.6
REJECTED	3.2	2.1	2.6	1.5	1.4	1.7	0.9

Figure 3: Score analysis of the 41 eligible applications evaluated by the jury across 7 criteria

2) The cross-border partnerships started with Stars4Media are expected to continue, in most cases

A final evaluation survey addressing the 56 team leaders of the 21 selected initiatives, found that 80% of cross-border partnership is set to continue after Stars4Media. The continuation of the partnership has been identified by the team leaders as the strongest benefit of the programme. This indicates that **the aspect of cross-border cooperation is perceived as a benefit, even by partners that had never cooperated before their participation in Stars4Media.**

3) Future grants and projects are seen by the beneficiaries as the most likely opportunities of monetization, after Stars4Media

The same survey found that 68% of the initiative leaders believe that future grants are the most likely opportunities of future monetization. Smaller percentages (never higher than 40%) are associated to the other options available: new investors, new revenue lines, new business model, enlarged audience, new partners.

This finding may suggest that the same media experts that might act as coaches in the pre-selection phase, could also continue their coaching activities throughout the implementation of the initiatives, to ensure stronger outputs in terms of future sustainability.

4) Most initiatives focus on editorial innovation, little space is given to technological and marketing innovation.

The vast majority of selected initiatives have delivered results in the area of editorial innovation, while smaller space has been given to technological and business/marketing innovation. While this can be an indication for a stronger interest in editorial innovation, this could also be a sign of a weak communication effort by Stars4Media for triggering marketing/technology oriented proposals.

5) Cross-border virtual collaboration is not an obstacle, even for partners cooperating for the first time

In light of the consequences of the pandemic, **virtual cooperation** was set as the norm, complemented, only where possible, by physical exchanges. Fears of rejection for a different structure of collaborative work, were strong, as initially Stars4Media was promoted a programme for physical cross-border exchanges of media professionals. However, for more than two-third of the media professionals involved, **the aspect of virtual cooperation did not create major**

obstacles. Rather, it was an occasion to optimize the internal workflows and the overall implementation of the initiatives. Even more interestingly, **virtual collaboration created unexpected benefits in several cases.**

6) Assure the right amount of financial contribution to the media professional willing to innovate

Each media professional working on an initiative and showing evidence of the expected outcomes, received 6000 Euros. **This micro-financial contribution that the Stars4Media project provided is not sufficient. It only partially compensates the total costs carried by the media involved in the initiatives.** The teams involved have often contributed with additional human resources, notably senior professionals, to support the junior beneficiaries. Media companies need to invest extra time and resources that are not captured by the reimbursement scheme. The risk is that media professionals, when not properly compensated on a financial level, might lose the incentives to invest extra time and commitment. This can seriously jeopardize the innovation potential of any programme that is constructed around increasing innovation through virtual and physical exchanges.

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Interested in discovering more about Stars4Media? Check out our LinkedIn community at <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/13801060/> and our webpage at www.stars4media.eu



*The **Media Programme** of SMIT, a research group at imec and VUB, consists of 45 junior and senior researchers. The researchers are specialist in various policy, market, and user research methods. Their work spans the fields of national and European media and competition policy, cultural diversity, public broadcasting, the sustainability of creative industries, immersive media, data and valorisation, privacy, media literacy, and digital inclusion. The programme is headed by Prof. Dr. Karen Donders (karen.donders@vub.be). The programme is also in charge of **Mediahub Brussel**, that is investing in education, innovation and collaboration in the Flemish and Brussels media sectors. The Mediahub Brussel is supported by the Flemish Government.*