**Breaking free from hectic daily media production. Collaborative innovation as a platform for wayfinding, exploration and self-reflection.**

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**Abstract**

Beyond the perfunctory *disruption* narrative around innovation, journalism scholarship has already proposed valuable antidotes to a techno-deterministic drift, by practising socio-constructivist and sociotechnical approaches towards media innovation (Boczkowski 2004; Weiss&Domingo, 2010; Lewis and Westlund, 2015). However, scholars so far have mostly focused on the newsroom, despite theoretical research on technology development and change in social practice having illustrated how innovation often takes place at the crossroads of different disciplines and sectors (Bijker, 1997, Tuomi, 2004). Furthermore, in light of a series of structural transformations of the journalism field the newsroom is not anymore the only place for implementing innovations (Hepp & Loosen, 2021).

In this paper we adopt an organisational perspective to innovation practice and apply it to the emerging locus of inter-firm cross-disciplinary collaborations in journalism. We rely on twenty qualitative interviews with media practitioners and media managers who have been involved as project leaders in collaborative projects supported by institutional seed-funding for media innovation. We strive to understand how practitioners conceive innovation in their overall trajectory, what obstacles they encounter and how collaborations support them in their innovation trajectory.

We find that the role and value they attribute to innovation reveal that they mostly conceptualize it not in solutionist terms, but as an ongoing practice of adaptation. We also find that collaborations offer media practitioners a platform for wayfinding creative work and explorative research, thanks to occasions of knowledge exchange, improvisation and self-reflection that are usually unavailable under the hectic rhythms of daily media production.

# Introduction

Expectations and prophecies around the uptake of new technologies and their transformative impact on the field of journalism have long characterised the media innovation discourse, outside and inside academia, and continue to do so (Posetti, 2018; Westlund & Steensen, 2020). Regularly, a new supposedly disruptive technology or an innovative product enabled by an existing technology attracts the attention of analysts, industry leaders and academics for potentially saving or killing the journalism industry. Examples were the pivot to video in 2015, podcasts, the metaverse, the blockchain technology in early 2020s and AI, including the latest developments of AI language models in late 2022. When such products and technologies are being discussed as applicable to the field of journalism, the technological component is usually regarded as the only deterministic agent that can transform patterns of media consumption and influence organisational re-arrangements of news production and distribution. The social context in which these technologies are adopted though, receives little scrutiny, both in the public discourse, at industry level, and even in academia. Each new artefact is expected to bring significant change by default because of its own newness and the journalism industry to just re-actively adapt to the effects of uncontrollable events (Creech & Nadler, 2018). Under the surface of this innovation discourse, online journalism scholarship has illustrated, from the early 2000s, how processes of innovation are more complex phenomena. By practising a socio-constructivist approach to studying innovation, the focus has shifted away “from the effects of innovation to the process of innovation” with new emphasis on how technologies are internalised in the social setting of the newsrooms (Paterson&Domingo, 2008, p.16). This approach has shed light on the critical role of the media practitioners and the organisational cultures of the companies in which they operate. A wealth of research conducted under this socio-constructivist perspective from the early 2000s has contributed to build a wide scholarly understanding of the social dynamics of innovation in the newsroom (Paulussen, 2016).

However, the contemporary media landscape has been profoundly changing in the last two decades. If traditional newsrooms are far from being extinct, they became less and less the dominant form of “employment and organisation in journalism” (Deuze&Witschge, 2017) as it was in the 20th century. The decline of traditional sources of funding for journalism has opened up spaces for experimentation with forward-looking and digital-born news startups (Kung, 2015; Carlson&Usher, 2016, Hepp&Loosen, 2021). The increasing precarity of the profession has contributed to fuel the phenomenon of freelancing and entrepreneurialism, with journalists creating their own companies or independent small-scale brands (Deuze&Witschge, 2017). In other cases, new journalistic actors were born as a reaction to societal phenomena, like fact-checking agencies in the context of online disinformation. More interestingly, the increasing complexity of technological development has contributed to making it too expensive for news media to support in-house development of tailored technologies, making the practice of sub-contracting to external specialised companies more common (Küng, 2015).

In this evolving and precarious environment, the traditional *locus* of newsroom production is broadened and remodelled into a much more fragmented, diverse and layered one. In line with this shift, also the *locus* of innovation, the actual location where creative ideas are discussed, negotiated, tested and implemented, is not anymore only the institutionalised setting of the newsroom (Hepp&Loosen, 2021). Also as a result of the increasing technological complexity and rapidly evolving habits of media consumption, news organisations look outwards to perform activities that require skills and knowledge they do not fully possess internally (Beckett, 2021). Partnerships with external providers, such tech startups, consultancies, content agencies and other non-traditional journalistic actors have become more attractive for news organisations searching opportunities for value-generation. In this paper, we claim that this emerging decentralised practice of innovation represents an under-researched, yet increasingly significant, setting for journalism innovation, in the contemporary journalistic landscape. In Europe, both at EU level and at national level, public institutions are supporting collaborative innovation and business transformation with new funding schemes and yet little research has been dedicated to them. The *Journalism Partnerships* programme of the EU exemplifies this practice, as well as other national ones such as collaborative innovation schemes financed by the Dutch Journalism Fund and by the Digital Transformation Programme of the Flemish Government, in the framework of the EU Recovery Fund.

Given the growing interest of policy makers in Europe towards collaborative innovation we decided to conduct research on the experience of Stars4Media, the first EU Programme supporting projects of cross-border collaborative innovation. In this paper, we focus specifically on the Second Edition of the Programme (2021/2022), which saw the implementation of 30 collaborative projects involving 76 media companies across 22 European countries. The Stars4Media Programme aimed to support consortia of journalistic and non-journalistic actors working together around projects targeting either editorial, or technological or business innovation. We strive to understand how the team of practitioners involved in these projects conceive innovation in their overall work, what obstacles they usually encounter in their organisations and how the collaborative projects they carried out helped them overcome these obstacles and bolster their innovation trajectory. We examine the “lived experience of journalists” (Heft, 2021) who have been directly involved as project leaders in the implementation of these collaborative projects. The main research question that will be answered in this study is: *How do inter-firm collaborations stimulate explorative innovation in journalism?*

This research question will be broken down into two sub research questions:

*subRQ1: How do journalists involved in collaborative inter-firm projects conceptualise the importance of innovation in their usual work and what obstacles do they usually experience during processes of innovation?*

*subRQ2: What instruments does the collaborative innovation programme Stars4Media provide journalists with, to overcome the obstacles usually experienced during processes of innovation?*

# Theoretical framework

## Explorative innovation in journalism as an organisational endeavour

From the early 2000s, journalism scholars started to suggest that innovation in journalism is not simply about technologies transforming the industry, but also about how the different agents involved in the process of change in the social context of the newsroom module their individual interests, negotiate their objectives, hinder or support the development of an innovation (Paulussen, 2016). In line with this socio-constructivist tradition, paraphrasing a definition of Garcia-Aviles et al. (2018), innovation in journalism can be defined as the collective practice of leveraging on creative skills to generate value for an organisation and for the users/customers of its products/services. The meaning of value, however, which is a central construct in this definition, is far from being self-evident when it is referred to innovation. When can we say that value has been generated? On the one hand generating value can entail a set of marginal changes and refinements in products and processes, in this case referred to as exploitative innovation. On the other hand it can involve the radical rethinking of internal workflows or the creation of novel editorial products and services, in this second case referred to as explorative innovation. This latter case is considered much less common than the first one, because explorative activities require a managerial commitment to mobilise the needed resources for creating an environment that is conducive to exploration and innovation (Porcu, 2017). Journalists, furthermore, usually dedicate almost entirely their creative energies to the execution of the day-to-day activities (Koivula et al., 2020). A wealth of empirical research in the field of organisational studies has demonstrated that news media companies usually struggle to make space for exploratory activities, as they find it hard to balance daily media production and explorative innovation, an ability that has been labelled as ambidexterity (Porcu, 2017; Koivula et al., 2022). Yet, it is exactly through practices of explorative innovation that value can materialise in its most significant, and financially rewarding, scenarios. In this study, we refer to journalism innovation by having the explorative version of it in mind, as we aim at examining news media organisations performing activities entail a detour from their standard operational daily routines, rather than a marginal improvement of them.

## Dynamics of internal collaborative innovation in journalism

Organisational research in the newsroom has advanced the idea that explorative innovation benefits from being carried out collaboratively (Gade&Perry, 2003, in Paulussen, 2011; Küng, 2017; Pastor, Garcia-Aviles, Carvajal, 2021). Under an organisational/processual perspective, literature on integration has examined dynamics of intra-firm collaboration between the different social groups that compose a news media company. Building on previous studies on firm integration, the rationale is that an integrated firm, in which different assets of specialised knowledge are coordinated, is conducive to innovation and more suitable for operating in an uncertain environment (Gade&Raviola, 2009). The theoretical building block which supports the correlation between a mix of specialised assets of knowledge and innovation is the concept of dissonance (Stark, 2009). Dissonance refers to the type of entrepreneurial attitude of a firm that “regularly and recursively produces perplexing situations” (Stark, 2009, p.5), in which friction is generated by the encounter of multiple evaluative principles. Organisational *taken-for-granteds* are set aside and new knowledge is generated. This concept, despite being developed outside journalism and media studies, had a remarkable fortune in journalism research (Nielsen, 2012; Westlund&Lewis, 2014; Lewis&Usher, 2016; Wagemans&Witschge, 2019). The reason for this fortune may be attributed to the fact that journalistic organisations have historically evolved as internally divided structures, where organisational walls reflected internal sets of competing values co-existing in one entity. A wall between the editorial and commercial departments has been a necessary tactical choice to protect editorial integrity from market interests (Schudson, 2012). A wall between the editorial and the tech departments has also constituted a characteristic trait of newsrooms, in this case because of an historical tendency to consider technologists as media professionals of secondary importance. These two main lines of organisational divide have been scrutinised by journalism scholarship. Despite different professional cultures and occupational ideologies of technologists and journalists, research has demonstrated that the coordination of them into an intentional community can fruitfully lead to creative tech-driven solutions which otherwise would not be considered, as several single case studies have shown (Nielsen, 2012; Baack, 2017; Lewis & Usher, 2016). With digitization, in fact, it has become increasingly evident how technologists should not be seen just as practitioners in charge of the maintenance of the infrastructure, but as key actors for the development of new products and services (Westlund&Lewis, 2014). Also the case of the collaborations between journalists and business people has received extensive academic scrutiny. Drew and Thomas (2018) identified structural and individual factors that can shape the outcomes of cross-functional teams. Cornia, Sehl and Nielsen (2018) found that the once dominating norm of separation is being now deconstructed in the discourse of senior executives, in favour of the emergence of a new norm-building process in which collaboration and adaptability already plays a central role. This shift seems to be confirmed by the results of a longitudinal study on perceptions of intra-organizational innovation of Norwegian newspaper executives (Westlund, Krumsvik, Lewis, 2021). This body of empirical evidence, emerging from different case studies, is indicative of a trend of newsroom integration and of a positive correlation between internal collaboration and journalism innovation, implicitly supporting the analytical validity of the concept of dissonance.

## Inter-firm collaboration: an avenue to media innovation?

It might be consequential to assume that, as news executives increasingly recognize the importance of stimulating inter-departmental integration and collaboration to achieve explorative innovation, there might be a specular track of managerial support for enabling dynamics of inter-firm collaborations. However, when it comes to collaborations *inter pares* (between news media companies with similar size and editorial profile)*,* there are at least two substantial reasons to conclude the opposite. First, newsrooms operating within the same country, or covering the same region or topics, are often competing for the same resources, hence engaging in collaborative innovation projects with their competitors seems to imply a paradox (Gade&Raviola, 2009; Graves&Konieczna, 2015). Secondly, a cultural reason contributes to complicate the hypothetical scenario of inter-firm collaboration: the socialisation of journalists working for legacy media has coincided with a process of active delimitation of the field, along the line traditional/non-traditional journalistic actors, which Bourdieu would have have attributed to the necessity to “mantain a dominant vision of what journalism is” (Eldridge II, S.A., 2018, p.556). This identity-building process tends to translate into an act of boundary preservation which may hinder processes of collaboration. In light of these two reasons it seems consequential that both collaborations *inter pares* and collaborations between traditional news media and non-traditional journalistic actors (such as non-profit investigative online outlets, fact-checking organizations, data journalism communities, etc) seem likely to encounter cultural resistance. This is especially valid for legacy media, as confirmed by recent research (Slot, 2021): incumbents are usually introverted when it comes to innovation and have their own staff on the payroll dedicated to that, or they rely on external companies to which they outsource specific tasks, which is not a form of collaboration. In light of this, it’s hard to support the claim that inter-firm collaborations either between journalistic actors only or between journalistic and non-journalistic actors for stimulating explorative innovation can generally be a straightforwardly viable option.

What research can do is to study specific scenarios of collaborative practice to indicate in which contexts and for which journalistic actors collaborative innovation can become a viable, and enriching solution. In fact, despite the obstacles presented above, there is a growing academic consensus that the practice of inter-firm collaboration is gaining traction in the field (Konieczna, 2020; Slot, 2021; Cook, 2021, Heft, 2021). Collaborations between news media companies have been studied in the context of journalistic investigations, both in large-scale global operations such as in the case of the Panama Papers (Heft, 2021) and smaller-scale initiatives, at local level, such as in the case of some South American initiatives (Schimtz Weiss et al., 2018; Chacon&Saldaña, 2020). More recently, research has pointed out that the practice of collaboration is taking off beyond the scope of investigative journalism and different studies have captured this momentum. At theoretical level, Graves and Konieczna (2015) explored the idea of collaboration as a practice of field-repair in which the democratic mission of journalism is revamped by news-sharing, despite journalism remaining a competitive occupation. Heft and Baack (2021) advanced the concept of intermediaries of changes and pointed to how small-scale collaborations “can contribute to a gradual integration of transnational practices” into daily media production. Their work builds on the idea of Pioneer Journalism (Hepp&Loosen, 2019): groups of individuals that manage to reconfigure the organisational structures in which they operate through experimental practices. At the level of empirical research, Heft (2021) discussed the phenomenon of grant-based collaboration from below, by examining the motives, the advantages/challenges and the ways in which these collaborations take place, and concludes that they contribute to the normalisation of the practice in the field. Cook (2021) has examined the conditions for inter-firm collaboration as a revenue strategy for politically pressured news media. She finds that despite collaboration being not embraced straightforwardly by the companies examined in her study, the revenue opportunities make the case for collaboration to become a central dimension for journalism’s economic viability. Slot (2021) conducted a study of Dutch collaborative innovation projects in journalism and finds that despite the variety of actors (incumbents, non-traditional actors, freelancers, etc) all organisations deem collaborative innovation important, in their phase of transformation, particularly for the knowledge sharing aspect and the importance of making strategic connections. However, their take on this practice, under a critical perspective, signals “more a discursive practice than a practical ambition” (Slot, 2021, p.427), which can be explained by the high level of competition and self-awareness that characterises the Dutch journalistic field.

# Design and Methods

On the basis of this literature review we decided to examine the phenomenon of collaborative innovation between journalistic and non-journalistic actors, through the lens of dissonance. A guiding assumption of this study, in fact, is that dissonance is the main value of these collaborations as it may act as the incentive to break from the competitive constraints of doing innovation collaboratively. Departing from this assumption we seek to understand, from the experience of the media practitioners, which unique instruments are provided to media companies for achieving explorative innovation in collaborative settings, as opposed to non collaborative work. In this sense we understand the design of our research as explorative (Mayring, 2014) and hence we decided to opt for a qualitative method to answer our main research question.

This study builds on a body of twenty qualitative semi-structured interviews with the project leaders of the collaborative projects of the Second Edition of the Stars4Media Programme. The project leaders, in the framework of the programme, were the persons that represented the main partner organisation that initiated and coordinated each of the thirty collaborative projects supported by Stars4Media Second Edition. The project leader was the person with the wider understanding of both the project implementation and the collaborative dynamics between the partners. In the medium-size companies involved in the interviews, this person was also usually covering a managerial position, while in bigger organisations (established legacy media) was instead usually covering a middle management position. In these latter cases we asked a manager at a higher level to join the interview to respond specifically to questions related to the history and practice of innovation in the company. The decision on how to select the interviewees was guided by the principle of the so-called theoretical sampling (Mayring, 2014), as we decided to interview only the project leaders of the projects led by a news media organisation. Project leaders representing collectives of freelancers or non-journalistic organisations were not interviewed because their position was considered not in line with the scope of our study. This selection narrowed down the number of interviewees from the total thirty project leaders to twenty. The companies represented by the twenty interviewees were mostly medium (50-200 employees) to large size (+200 employees). These news organisations typically carried out their projects in partnership with tech startups, consultancies, design studios and other non-journalistic actors, often entailing a strong degree of cross-disciplinarity in the composition of the partnerships.

The interviews took place after the implementation of the collaborative projects, between March and April 2022, partly in person, partly remotely. They were all recorded and lasted an average of 64 minutes*.* They have been subsequently transcribed with the support of an automatic voice-to-text transcription tool and then manually revised. The transcripts were coded with the support of MAXQDA, following the systematic and focused analysis method (Rädicker & Kuckartz, 2020), as part of qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014, Puppis, 2019). Both deductive and inductive coding was practised. We developed deductively from theory a first set of broad categories that were already incorporated in the interview guide and we started to code the interviews on the basis of these categories. After this step, we identified the main categories relevant for our research question, and we engaged in a further work of open coding, to inductively create new subcategories for answering our sub RQs. After these steps, the codes that were relevant for our research question were put in relationships to each other and translated into thematic areas.

Each interviewee was informed via email and in person, before the start of the interview, that the conversation was taking place as part of a study that was not connected to the implementation of the project. In fact, we as researchers were also known by the interviewees as members of the consortium that coordinated the Stars4Media Programme. For this reason we clarified that none of the points discussed in the interviews could affect, *ex post,* the evaluation of their projects or the allocation of the grant, which at the time of the interviews had already taken place, based on the decision of an independent jury.

# The Stars4Media Programme

The Stars4Media Programme was launched in 2019 following a proposal of the European Parliament to support media innovation in the EU by enabling cross-border collaborations between European media organisations. The basic idea behind the Programme is to provide grants for collaborative consortia of two or more media organisations working together on an innovative project for a limited amount of time. In the Second Edition of Stars4Media, which ran between 2021 and 2022, thirty collaborative innovation projects were selected, awarded with a grant and enabled to implement their proposal, across four months. Collaborations happened mostly remotely, also due to the still ongoing travel limitations related to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the partners were supposed to work in a collaborative logic, and not in contractor-client relationship, hence contributing equally to the final result, with frequent online interactions, regular checkups and mutual knowledge exchanges enabled by remote collaborations or video conference tools. The success of such projects can depend, first of all, on a mix of structural factors of the collaborations, such as the intensity of the collaboration, the cross-disciplinarity of the profiles involved in the projects and the previous history of the partners in terms of collaborations (Zambelli&Morganti, forthcoming). On top of this, however, the implementation of the projects needs to be contextualised in the wider history and organisational context of each company. For this reason, we investigate what role innovation plays in the media companies the interviewees work for, what obstacles are usually encountered in doing innovation and how these collaborative projects have helped them achieve their objectives, by offering solutions to these obstacles.

# Discussion

## Innovation as a practice of constant adaptation

Before the interviews started, all interviewees were provided with a working definition of innovation to guide the conversation, which was in line with how innovation was intended as part of the Programme they took part in. Innovation was presented to them not as merely overlapping with technological innovation (Posetti, 2018), but with a range of diverse practices and processes (possibly, but not necessarily, enabled by new technologies) aiming at improving/upgrading the editorial offer and the services of their company, at optimising internal processes through the use of tech-driven solutions, and at experimenting with new potentially promising revenue lines. Provided with this type of process definition, the respondents were asked to articulate why innovation is important in their overall practice and what they want to achieve with it. Several respondents (six mentions) framed it as a key practice for their survival, by using variations of the semantic domain of necessity:

*It's out of necessity that a company has to innovate, at least that's my belief. (VRT)*

*Media is in a permanent crisis. So agencies are no different. It is a survival mode, we need to use IT, because we have less editors, and we have less resources also. So we have to try to think of the best way to provide a better service without spending much on resources. (EFE).*

Other respondents provided answers directly connected to the category of sustainability, as they interpreted innovation as a pivotal practice for driving audience engagement (three mentions), for diversifying revenue models (three mentions) and for maintaining a company relevant (three mentions). However, innovation was deemed important also for its role in enhancing quality journalism (three mentions), for bolstering the societal mission of news media (five mentions) and for empowering the readers (three mentions). Next to presenting their relationship to innovation in a variety of different terms, including several references to non-commercial and non-competitive dimensions of it, many respondents have also suggested that innovation is crucial for them because it supports their wayfinding process of gradual adaptation to a constantly evolving environment. In the way this effort of adaptation is rhetorically formulated, innovation is often framed as an organisational conundrum, inextricably tied to the culture and the structure of a company, rather than to a matter of simple technological implementation. Frustration, puzzlement and perplexity are involved in this process, because they see innovation as a mandatory but complex arrangement that news media companies are not entirely prepared for.

We certainly need to explore new ways of expression for the content that we have, which is a huge human resource problem by the way, it is not only a technological problem. (La Libre)

Technology, in the words of several interviewees, appears to be insufficient to compensate for the organisational challenges that innovation poses. This resonates with the invitation of Steensen (2013, p.54) to think of innovation through a practice perspective: “the change in the structure of an organization is not necessarily evoked because of influence from outside the organizations [..] but can be evoked through agency from within the organization”. The dialectic between the different agents of the company, the human resources mentioned in the last excerpt, shape (and are recursively shaped by) the structure in which they operate. This is also reflected in the responses that the interviewees have provided to the question of what they aim to achieve through innovation. Innovation was mainly described as an ancillary practice for achieving the objectives and the mission of a company, by enlarging the existing audience, finding new audience segments, supporting the production of qualitative information, empowering the readers and strengthening the sustainability of the companies.

## Navigating obstacles to innovation: moving explorative innovation to the top of the roadmap

The fact that innovation is articulated by the interviewees mostly as an everyday work of adaptation does not entail that it is easily done. We asked the interviewees to identify the main obstacles they typically encounter in their organisation when it comes to carry on innovation. This section of the interviews was explicitly not referring to their collaborative work in the projects carried out as part of the Stars4Media Programme. Understanding what the usual obstacles in their typical routines are, is a necessary preliminary step to identify the facilitating aspects they encountered in the collaborative projects, which were addressed in a following section of the interviews.

When it comes to the responses of the interviewees in terms of innovation obstacles, the lack of sufficient financial resources for investing in innovation was the most regularly mentioned one (12 mentions), both by digital native organisations and by established ones. This is not surprising as it is in line with available evidence. Lack of main was indicated as the main obstacle to innovation in a recent survey on the future of the news media industry (Newman, 2022). Budget cuts and uncertainty about the future results of experiments with new products/services contribute to feeding an already ingrained risk-averse habit at executive level. The idea of developing tech-driven solutions tailored to the functioning of the company is often considered by the management a move that entails too much risk, in the reflections of several respondents. Beyond the uncertainty of the outcome, innovation projects entail extra costs related to the training of the personnel or the onboarding of new professional roles.

[A major obstacle is] the cost of building technologies, including the cost of the people that will work on them. The professionals. They are very, very, highly paid*.*

Furthermore, the respondents often explain how constrained they are by money and time, by indicating that any extra project that potentially deviates from the roadmap is typically either discarded or followed up with limited capacities. This organisational struggle is often described as symptomatic of a chronic situation of overstressed operational capacities, in which both the practitioners and the executives with decision-making responsibilities are cornered in their already full schedule of short-term targets. In their reflection, this situation appears to be the typical vicious circle, in which a lack of money and time leads an organisation to channel all the energy on daily production, which in turn makes it more likely that opportunities of generating added value are missed out, resulting in a loop of limited chances for improving the overall situation.

Journalists are busy 100% of their time with making news, they have no time to innovate with us [innovation lab of a public broadcaster], because they are focusing on news production. And they have targets too. But it's not their problem. It's a management discussion: making sure that there is time allocated to new initiatives. (VRT)

Managers are as overworked as everybody else. They don't get to dedicate the space to say, “Oh, I found this grant, who in my team could do it now?” They are more on visible daily stuff, especially in our 24/7 news operations. Work is never stopping. (Euronews)

Next to budget availability and time constrainsts, several respondents (11 mentions) also referred to the lack of skills as a crucial obstacle, which, at a closer look, is another manifestation of the lack of money. In fact, several of them have highlighted how lack of skills can refer to a skill gap that could be compensated, if more resources were available, by training further the staff. But more interestingly, many of them indicated that lack of skills refers to the company’s failure to bring a mix of different evaluative principles on the symbolic table around which creative ideas are discussed. Practically, this means that the staff is usually not diverse enough in terms of professional profiles and knowledge assets.

If you cannot renew your staff, then it's really complicated to have new ideas from the inside. You need to get them from the outside. (EFE)

I think that there's a gap between what we have as a vision on the one end [..] and the skills that we need to get there. And we can always can get there until a certain level, but sometimes you need specific skills, technical skills, skills from data analysts, from marketers, from strategists, and we do not have in-house. (Are We Europe)

Lastly, particularly in the interviews conducted with the largest companies, a lack of innovation strategy and innovation culture was highlighted (4 mentions), either as a result of a highly uncertain and constantly changing market conditions, or simply because of a lack of managerial vision.

The second obstacle [after money] would be probably to understand where to invest, let's take the metaverse. So, three years ago, it was podcast. And I'm still waiting. I'm still waiting to see if we are saved with podcasts. (La Libre)

I've been working now in four big media companies. And to be very honest, I never saw a strategy. When you ask a top executive what is the vision or the strategy of your group, they will always say ‘subscription’. They bring it down to, I would say, operative parts, they don't have this vision. (Vocento)

## Inter-firm collaboration as an innovation enabler: stimulating explorative attitude by providing a framework

As emerged from the interviews, the limited availability of financial resources has been connected by several respondents to the lack of long-term investment in developing strategic tailored technologies. However, on top of this more systematic investment, the respondents have pointed out how the limited financial resources seem to also influence decisions for embarking even in small-scale exploratory projects. As part of the interviews, we asked whether the support of Stars4Media allowed them to do something they wouldn’t have done otherwise. Nearly all the respondents answered positively. In doing so they showed their difficulty with ambidexterity and confirmed how challenging it may be for them to distribute their available resources between daily priorities and short-term explorative projects, despite these latter ones may generate future benefits that would largely compensate for the risk taken. At the same time they indicated that inter-firm collaborations, when supported by financial grants, can mitigate their reluctance to engage in exploratory projects, by opening up the possibility to re-module their priorities by simply create a temporary budget that allows them to make space in the agenda for something that they perceive as potentially positive but practically not doable without external funding.

I wouldn't have taken time and work on that because that was valuable, it was important but it was not mandatory. I am in the position of choosing what is mandatory, and I can't save time to think about the extras, but the extras can be a game changer in one year. (Bullemedia)

This [Stars4Media project] is something that we could definitely have done, but that it would be a side project that I would do on a Friday afternoon between five and eight in the evening or something like that. Where we would still be super enthusiastic about it, but semi-committed. (AWE)

If companies lack money to innovate, they will innovate when provided with a budget for it. This might seem to be just logical, self-evident and consequential, whereas in practice there is a nuance to be considered. In fact, the budget provided by the Stars4Media project is usually a limited contribution that hardly covers the entire investment sustained by the companies involved, as declared by the participants in the programme. Yet it is sufficient to act as a trigger, a form of incentive which allows them to reshuffle their strategic priorities. The budget provided to them is not discussed in terms of full coverage of the investment.

It's not a lot of funding. But you still have external expectations that you have to live up to. And I think that's quite important for making innovation happen. Because otherwise the daily work will be prioritised (Altinget)

The prospect of a partially financed collaboration provides single entrepreneurial individuals acting within the company with extra legitimacy towards the management. The dialectic agency/structure evoked by Steensen (2013) is exemplified in these cases in which innovation happens as a result of negotiations and mutual shaping between the agency of individual practitioners and the structure of the company within which they operate.

Having this project done with Stars4Media, a European entity that was ready to finance some of it, gave a legitimacy that shifted how they regarded the project. It gave us a leverage: “Okay, if those people [the Stars4Media Programme] are also behind this project, maybe we should try it” (DNA)

On top of the money, what we decided to label as a ‘programme framework’ has been regularly discussed as a direct influencer of their performance. The framework, in the words of the interviewees, entails the project deadlines, the peer pressure between the partners and the expectations towards the Programme. The financial grant allows these journalists to move up the project’s work from Friday afternoon to the top of the agenda. In this sense, the framework acts as an environmental stressor that allows them to give full dedication to the project, besides the financial contribution, and this is a factor that was regularly discussed in the interviews. Lastly, as a closing question, the interviewees were asked to reflect on whether, and how, the cross-disciplinarity of the collaboration was experienced as a facilitating aspect towards innovation. Almost all respondents were clearly positive on that. Many of them have hinted to the benefit of having a mix of skills that usually is not available internally. But several of them have also articulated the possibility they had in terms of self-reflection around the foundational aspects of their work, confrontation of different perspectives and inspiration. This can be connected to the concept of dissonance, because in the experience of the participants, the collaboration allows them to overcome a narrowness of evaluative principles which they encounter in a non-collaborative logic.

When you bring another person into this team you might have ten new ideas. Nine are garbage, but maybe one is a really, really, really different approach on how to work on that. So interdisciplinary, it's really important. (Sigmalive)

# Conclusion

This paper has investigated how inter-firm collaborative projects stimulate explorative innovation. The analysis of the interviews has revealed how innovation is usually articulated by the respondents as a collective practice of adaptation which is key for the survival of news media companies and is instrumental to achieve their long-term goals. This down-to-earth vision of innovation was shared by most of the interviewees and is in line with socio-constructivist literature: innovation can be de-dramatized and regarded as a social practice carried out collectively by a group of individuals with their “attitudes and strategies, negotiations and knowledge exchanges” (Weiss&Domingo, 2010). When it comes to the obstacles, the interviews reveal that innovation practices are hindered by a mix of shortage of financial resources and difficulty with ambidexterity, which reflects what literature on explorative innovation had already pointed out. This study expands existing literature by indicating that even a limited financial support, like in the case of the Stars4Media grants, is sufficient for news media companies to re-module their priorities and embark on experimental projects. Not having a budget covering the whole cost of the operations does not seem to be a major obstacle. A small but sufficient grant can act as a trigger, by providing innovative professionals within the organisations with an initial capital of legitimacy for convincing the management to push up the project high on the agenda of priorities. This offers one of the strongest rationales to support the idea of seed funding for journalism innovation. Furthermore, also the collaborative dimension of this support seems to have played a role, by creating dynamics of positive peer-pressure, cross-disciplinary knowledge exchange and reflexivity, which connects back to the concept of dissonance. Lastly, the cross-border dimension of the collaborations was indicated by some interviewees as a strong point in terms of reducing the competitive constraints that collaborations with partners in the same national markets would pose.

This study is the first qualitative analysis of cross-border collaborative innovation enabled by seed funding in Europe, and offers several implications for future research. First of all, if these collaborations help media companies focus on explorative innovation, it would be crucial to investigate the effects on the long-term organisational change. Does the involvement in such collaboration modify the habits and attitudes of media companies towards doing innovation collaboratively in the future? Secondly, all these collaborations have enabled the companies involved to carry out a specific project, and some longitudinal study about what happens to the same project after the funding phase would allow us to understand the role played by the grant in influencing long-term investment in the medium/long-term. Lastly, since the end goal of these grants is to improve the overall resilience of the news media industry by supporting processes of business transformation, a question to answer might also be about what profound transformation, if any, these projects trigger in news media companies.

Limitations are present in this study, particularly when it comes to the fact that the phenomenon of collaborative innovation is investigated through the perspective of media professionals that decided to engage in collaborations, but no view is provided from the perspectives of those who have decided not, including what their motives are. The findings, hence, cannot be generalised to news organisations that show limited interest in collaborations. However, we maintain that these results offer an original perspective on a phenomenon that continues to gain momentum and hence deserves academic scrutiny beyond the advertorial discourse around innovation in the field of journalism.

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