

Breaking Away From Hectic Daily Media Production: Unleashing Explorative Innovation Through Inter-Firm Collaborations

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Abstract

Beyond the widespread disruption narrative around media innovation, journalism scholarship has put forward valuable remedies to counteract a techno-deterministic perspective by embracing socio-constructivist and socio-technical approaches. Nevertheless, thus far, scholarly attention has primarily been directed towards the newsroom despite the journalism field having undergone significant structural transformations. In this article, we adopt an organisational perspective to journalism innovation and apply it to the emerging locus of inter-firm collaborations in journalism. In fact, while the newsroom has traditionally been considered the dominant location for implementing innovations, an increasing amount of media work currently occurs in decentralised settings. Our study draws upon 20 qualitative interviews with media practitioners and media managers who have been involved as project leaders in inter-firm collaborative projects. These projects have received institutional funding specifically aimed at fostering media innovation. We strive to understand how practitioners conceive of innovation in their overall activity, what obstacles they encounter in their usual routines, and how collaborative practices support them in their innovation trajectory. Our findings indicate that innovation is predominantly perceived as a demanding and complex ongoing practice characterised by adaptation to an evolving environment and hindered by a lack of resources and time. We also find that collaborations offer media practitioners a temporary framework for balancing their efforts to keep up with the demand for daily media production and their aspiration to carry out explorative activities. Lastly, our research reveals that these collaborations provide occasions for knowledge exchange and self-reflection that are frequently absent in non-collaborative settings.

Keywords

dissonance; explorative innovation; inter-firm collaboration; journalism innovation; news media organisations

1. 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; Steensen & Westlund, 2020). Regularly, a new, supposedly disruptive technology or an innovative product attracts the attention of industry leaders and academics for its potential to save or kill the journalism industry. Examples were the pivot to video in 2015, podcasts, the metaverse, blockchain technology in the early 2020s, and AI, including the latest developments of large language models in late 2022. When such products and technologies are discussed as applicable to journalism, the technological component is usually regarded as the only deterministic agent that can transform media consumption patterns and influence organisational re-arrangements of news production and distribution. However, the social context in which these technologies are adopted receives little scrutiny, both in the public discourse, at the industry level, and even in academia. Each new artefact is expected to introduce significant change due to its inherent novelty, compelling the journalism sector to merely respond adaptively to the repercussions of unforeseeable circumstances (Creech & Nadler, 2018). However, journalism scholarship has illustrated, from the early 2000s, the multifaceted nature of innovation processes. By practising a socio-constructivist approach to innovation, the focus has shifted away “from the effects of innovation to the process of innovation,” with a 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 building a wide scholarly understanding of the social dynamics of innovation in the newsroom (Paulussen, 2016).

However, the contemporary media landscape has profoundly changed in the last two decades. If traditional newsrooms are far from becoming extinct, they have become an increasingly less dominant form of “employment and organisation in journalism” (Deuze & Witschge, 2018, p. 169) than they were in the 20th century. Digitisation, notably, has contributed to amplifying the competition at the level of news offer. Furthermore, the financial stability of traditional news organisations has been challenged by declining print circulation, insufficient digital revenue growth, and the rise of digital platforms and news startups. With the exception of a few cases, these transformations have led traditional news organisations to make hard decisions regarding staff layoffs (Nielsen, 2018) and R&D investments (Küng, 2015). The increasing precarity of the profession has contributed to fueling the phenomenon of freelancing and entrepreneurialism, with journalists creating their own companies and independent small-scale brands (Deuze & Witschge, 2018), often depending on grant-based support to conduct their operations. In other cases, new journalistic companies have been born as a reaction to societal phenomena, such as 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 many news media to support the 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 the newsroom is broadened and remodelled, becoming much more fragmented, diverse, and layered. In line with this shift, the locus of innovation, the actual location where creative ideas are discussed, negotiated, tested, and implemented, is

no longer only the institutionalised setting of the newsroom (Hepp & Loosen, 2021). Contemporary news organisations increasingly seek external collaborations to engage in activities that demand specialised skills and knowledge not fully available within their internal structures (Cook et al., 2021). Partnerships with external providers, such as tech startups, consultancies, content agencies, and other non-traditional journalistic actors, have become more attractive due to the increasing technological complexity and rapidly evolving media consumption habits. In this article, we claim that this emerging decentralised innovation practice represents an under-researched yet increasingly significant setting for journalism innovation in the contemporary journalistic landscape.

In Europe, both at the EU level and at the national level, several public institutions are currently supporting collaborative practices in journalism, mostly with a focus on investigations, but lately, with growing attention also to innovation and business transformation. The EU's Journalism Partnerships Programme exemplifies this practice, as well as other national and regional ones, such as the Flemish government's Digital Transformation Programme (Relanceprojecten voor de Mediasector) launched in 2023 in the framework of the EU Recovery Fund. However, despite the increasing availability of such funding opportunities, dedicated research exploring the impact and effectiveness of these initiatives is scarce. Given the growing interest of policymakers in Europe towards collaborative innovation, we decided to conduct research on the experience of Stars4Media, the first EU programme supporting cross-border collaborative innovation projects. In this article, 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. We strive to understand how the team of practitioners involved in these projects conceive of 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 bolstered their innovation trajectory. We examine the "lived experience of journalists" (Heft, 2021, p. 147) who were 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 collaborative projects stimulate innovation in journalism?

This research question will be broken down into three sub-research questions: How do journalists perceive and emphasise the significance of innovation within their routine work? What are the primary obstacles they encounter during processes of innovation? And how, in the experience of journalists involved in the innovation programme Stars4Media, are collaborative projects useful to overcome the obstacles typically experienced during innovation processes?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. *Explorative Innovation in Journalism as an Organisational Endeavour*

From the early 2000s, journalism scholars started to posit that research on journalism innovation should extend beyond simply examining how technology transforms the industry. The focus gradually shifted towards investigating how the diverse actors participating in the processes of change within the social setting of the newsroom shape their individual interests, engage in negotiations to achieve their objectives, and either impede or facilitate the progress of innovation (Paulussen, 2016). In line with this perspective, García-Avilés et al. (2018) define innovation in journalism as the collective practice of leveraging creative skills to generate value for an organisation and for the users/customers of its products/services. However,

the meaning of value—a central construct in this definition—is far from being self-evident when referring to innovation. When is value being 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 their creative energies almost entirely to the execution of 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 (Koivula et al., 2022; Porcu, 2017). However, it is precisely through the enactment of explorative innovation practices that the potential for substantial value creation and financial rewards emerges. In the present study, our conceptualisation of journalism innovation aligns with its explorative form, as we seek to investigate news media organisations engaging in activities that deviate from their regular operational routines rather than simply making incremental enhancements to them.

2.2. Dynamics of Internal Collaboration in Journalism: Dissonance as an Essential Ingredient for Innovation

Organisational research in the newsroom has advanced the idea that explorative innovation benefits from being carried out collaboratively (Gade & Perry, 2003, as cited in Paulussen, 2016; Küng, 2017; Valero-Pastor et al., 2021). From an organisational/processual perspective, literature on integration has examined the dynamics of intra-firm collaboration between the different social groups that compose a news media company. In the literature on convergence, the rationale is that an integrated firm, where 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, as presented and discussed in Stark's book *The Sense of Dissonance* (2009). Dissonance refers to the organisational attitude of a firm that “regularly and recursively produces perplexing situations” (Stark, 2009, p. 5) in which friction is intentionally generated through the encounter of multiple evaluative principles. This means that a company's management encourages situations in which professionals with different profiles and disciplinary backgrounds are brought together to develop a solution or solve a problem. Within this type of setup, organisational taken-for-granted are set aside, and novel insights are generated. The concept of dissonance, although originating from fields outside of journalism studies, has gained considerable traction within the realm of journalism research, particularly among scholars focusing on the dynamics of intra-firm collaboration (Lewis & Usher, 2016; Nielsen, 2012; Wagemans & Witschge, 2019; Westlund & Lewis, 2014). This may be attributed to the fact that journalistic organisations have historically evolved as hierarchical organisations and internally divided structures, where organisational walls reflected internal sets of competing values co-existing in one entity. The inflexibility of such sub-divided structures has materialised in the relatively unsuccessful experiments of news organisations that set up so-called intrapreneurial units to unleash hidden innovative potential. In these experiments, small and flat startup-like units embedded in the larger structure of the company were established to stimulate organisational creativity through

collaborative teams. As attested by the study of Boyles (2016), however, the prevailing top-down management culture heavily hindered the success of these initiatives, thereby showing how organisational hierarchy can negatively influence a company's trajectory of innovation.

Regarding internal divisions, two main lines of organisational divide have been scrutinised by journalism scholarship. 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 the historical tendency to consider technologists as lesser media professionals. Despite the different professional cultures and occupational ideologies of technologists and journalists, research has demonstrated that their coordination into an intentional community can yield fruitful outcomes in terms of generating creative solutions which would otherwise not have been conceived of, as several single case studies have shown (Baack, 2017; Lewis & Usher, 2016; Nielsen, 2012). The process of digitisation, in fact, has illustrated that technologists should not be considered just as practitioners in charge of the maintenance of the infrastructure but as key actors in the development of new products and services (Westlund & Lewis, 2014). Intra-firm collaborations have emerged as socio-technical practices, in which human actors (both the media professionals and the audiences) have contributed to shaping the process of digitisation by making the role of technological actants increasingly central. This implies that in such settings, a given technology's impact on the newsroom unfolds dialogically due to a complex web of internal negotiations. 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 et al. (2020) found that the once dominating norm of separation is now being deconstructed in the discourse of senior executives in favour of the emergence of a new norm-building process in which collaboration and adaptability already play a central role. This shift seems to be confirmed by the results of a longitudinal study on perceptions of intra-organisational innovation of Norwegian newspaper executives (Westlund et al., 2021).

2.3. Inter-Firm Collaboration: An Avenue to Media Innovation?

It might be tempting to assume that media executives, in line with the increasing trend of internal collaboration discussed in the previous sections, would equally support experiments with external collaborations. However, when it comes to inter-firm collaborations, there are at least two substantial reasons to conclude the opposite. This is especially valid for collaborations between news media companies of the same size, country, and editorial profile. These companies often compete 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 complicating 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 of traditional/non-traditional journalistic actors, which Bourdieu would have attributed to the necessity to "maintain a dominant vision of what journalism is" (Eldridge, 2018, p. 556). This identity-building process tends to translate into an act of boundary preservation, which may hinder collaboration processes, particularly with non-journalistic or non-traditional companies. Slot's (2021) study on collaborative innovation practices of Dutch news media seems to confirm this, especially regarding traditional organisations. Her research shows that on a superficial level of analysis, Dutch news media deem collaborative innovation important for their transformation phase,

particularly for the knowledge-sharing aspect and the importance of making strategic connections. However, from a more critical perspective, their take on collaborative innovation 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. Given these considerations, it is challenging to argue that inter-firm collaborations, whether among journalistic actors exclusively or between journalistic and non-journalistic actors, can universally represent a feasible option for fostering explorative innovation.

Empirical academic research can, however, study specific scenarios of collaborative practices to indicate in which contexts and for which journalistic actors collaborative innovation can represent a viable and enriching solution. In fact, despite the obstacles presented in the previous paragraph, there is a growing academic consensus that the practice of inter-firm collaboration is gaining traction in the field (Cook, 2021; Heft, 2021; Konieczna, 2020). More recently, literature has illustrated that the practice of collaboration is taking off beyond the scope of large investigations such as the Panama Papers (Heft, 2021) towards smaller-scale initiatives at a local level, as in the case of some South American initiatives (Chacón & Saldaña, 2021; Schmitz Weiss et al., 2018) or for politically pressured news media (Cook, 2021). At a 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, p. 15), building on the idea of “pioneer journalism” (Hepp & Loosen, 2021), have advanced the concept of intermediaries of changes to point to how small-scale collaborations “can contribute to a gradual integration of transnational practices” into daily media production. 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. Lastly, the research stream of “open innovation” (Klaß, 2020), which studies settings where companies tactically use the external environment to unleash their innovativeness, has illustrated how news organisations widely experiment with inter-firm collaborations. Specifically, news organisations increasingly seek cross-industry alliances in the form of hackathons, living labs, one-to-one partnerships, or open-source projects (Lewis & Usher, 2013) to jointly develop innovations that require the coordination of highly specialised sets of knowledge.

3. Design and Methodology

Grounded on this theoretical framework, we decided to examine the phenomenon of small-scale collaborative innovation projects between journalistic and non-journalistic actors. Specifically, we seek to understand which unique instruments are provided to media companies for achieving explorative innovation in collaborative settings, as opposed to non-collaborative ones. We opted for a qualitative methodology to answer our main research question, as we intend to examine the dynamics of innovation from the perspective of the tangible lived experiences of the participating journalists within the collaborations.

This study builds on a body of 20 qualitative semi-structured interviews with a selection of project leaders of the 30 collaborative projects of the second edition of the Stars4Media programme. In the framework of the programme, the project leaders coordinated each of the 30 collaborative projects supported within the second edition of Stars4Media. These project leaders had a deep understanding of both the project implementation and the collaborative dynamics between the partners. In the medium-sized companies involved in the interviews, these people also usually had a managerial position, while in bigger organisations

(established legacy media) they usually had 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. In some cases, project leaders who coordinated a project that entailed a technological innovation invited a colleague from the technological department to the interview to assist with the more technical aspects of the project implementation.

The selection process of the interviewees was grounded on the theoretical sampling principle (Mayring, 2014), as we decided to interview only the project leaders of the projects led by a news organisation. This selection narrowed down the number of interviewees from a total of 30 project leaders to 20. The companies represented by the 20 interviewees encompassed six big companies (>200 employees), three medium (50–200 employees), three small (10–50 employees), and eight micro (<10 employees). The news organisations represented by the interviewees 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 and partly remotely. They were recorded and lasted an average of 64 minutes. They were subsequently transcribed and coded with the support of MAXQDA, following the systematic and focused analysis method (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020) as part of the thematic analysis (Mayring, 2014; Puppis, 2019). Both deductive and inductive coding were 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 based on these categories. After this, we identified the main categories relevant to our research question and we engaged in further work of open coding to inductively create new sub-categories for answering our sub-research questions. Lastly, the different sub-categories pertaining to the main thematic areas that we identified were compared to each other to answer our main research question.

4. Case Study: The Stars4Media Programme

The Stars4Media programme was launched in 2019, following the European Parliament's proposal that media innovation in the EU should be supported by enabling cross-border collaborations between European media organisations. The basic idea behind the programme is to provide grants for collaborative consortia of usually two or three media organisations to work together on an innovative project for a limited amount of time. In the second edition of Stars4Media, which ran between January 2021 and June 2022, 30 collaborative innovation projects were selected, awarded with a grant and enabled to implement their proposal across four months. Collaborations happened mostly remotely due to the ongoing travel limitations related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The companies' representatives we talked to were also the initiators of the projects: they developed the main aspects of the proposal, selected the partners themselves, and then applied to Stars4Media to receive the funding. Stars4Media's second edition received 101 applications, and 30 projects were selected by an independent jury. The project proposals could be submitted to only one of the three available topic tracks or macro-areas: editorial innovation, technological innovation, and business innovation. Typically, these projects primarily focused on the initial phases of ideation and initial testing. The projects that received funding included, but were not limited to, initiatives around the development of tailored AI and augmented reality/virtual reality technologies for the tech macro-area, solution/constructive journalism and novel channels of audience engagement for the editorial macro-area, and the testing of novel

revenue models for the business macro-area. Despite the presence of a lead company in all consortia, all the partners of each consortium were supposed to work in a collaborative logic and not in a contractor-client relationship, hence contributing equally to the result, with frequent online interactions and regular check-ups enabled by remote video conference tools.

5. Results

5.1. *Innovation as an Organisational Practice of Constant Adaptation*

In the first phase of the interview, the respondents were asked to reflect on their relationship and history with innovation, referring to their company and not the collaborations. We asked why they considered innovation important in their overall practice and what they wanted to achieve with it. Their responses provided information that was essential for understanding, in the second phase of the interview, how collaborative practices supported their innovation trajectory. This is because different ways of conceiving and practising innovation entail different ways of exploiting collaborations. The responses illustrate that innovation is considered important for diverse reasons, depending on each company's profile, mission, and specific situation. Legacy media tend to articulate the importance of innovation using variations of the semantic domain of necessity, which they link to the urgency of achieving financial sustainability by either strengthening practices of audience engagement or by upgrading the relevancy and public perception of the company. However, smaller media or non-profit organisations tend to deem innovation important for enhancing qualitative reporting, for bolstering the societal mission of the company and for empowering readers. This variety of interpretations suggests that the role of innovation depends on each unique social context in which a company operates.

Furthermore, next to presenting their relationship to innovation in a variety of different terms, many respondents have also suggested that innovation for them is also a complex process of gradual adaptation to a constantly evolving environment, in a logic of continuous trial and error. This is confirmed by the way in which the effort of adaptation is rhetorically formulated. Several respondents framed innovation as an organisational conundrum rather than an opportunity to solve their issues easily. Frustration, puzzlement, and perplexity are described as being involved in the process. Several respondents think of innovation as a mandatory but complex arrangement for which they are not entirely prepared.

“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” (Interviewee 5). As this quote suggests, technology alone appears insufficient to compensate for the organisational challenges that news media companies face during transformation processes. 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 organisation is not necessarily evoked because of influence from outside the organisations....But can be evoked through agency from within the organisation.” The dialectic between the different human agents of the company and the human resources mentioned in the excerpt shape—and are recursively shaped by—the structure in which they operate. Innovation, hence, is not predominantly about which solutions technology can offer but what organisational adaptation is required for humans operating within structures and acting as gatekeepers of technologies in specific social contexts.

5.2. Navigating Obstacles to Innovation: Moving Explorative Innovation to the Top of the Roadmap

In the second phase of the interviews, we moved to the main obstacles they typically encountered when carrying out innovation projects. This section of the interviews also explicitly does not refer to their collaborative work in the projects carried out as part of the Stars4Media programme. Understanding the usual obstacles in their typical routines is a necessary preliminary step to identify the facilitating aspects they encountered in the collaborative projects, which were addressed in a different section of the interviews. Insufficient financial resources, the lack of skills, and the lack of money were among the most regularly discussed obstacles, both by digital native organisations and by legacy news media. The lack of money is not surprising as it is in line with available evidence: Financial constraints were 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 results of experiments with new products/services contribute to feeding an already ingrained risk-averse attitude at the executive level. In fact, innovation is described as an activity that entails extra costs related to the training of the personnel or the onboarding of new professional roles. Several respondents have not simply pointed out how limited resources make the cost of technology inaccessible but how the company's overall skill gap cannot be reduced with extra training or by taking on new staff. The combination of lack of skills and lack of specific profiles causes, according to many of them, their company to fail in bringing a mix of different evaluative principles to the symbolic table around which creative ideas are discussed. The concept of dissonance is useful in this case to illustrate the internal difficulty with the conceptualisation and implementation of creative ideas, as these two quotes confirm:

If you cannot renew your staff, then it is really complicated to have new ideas from the inside. You need to get them from the outside. (Interviewee 18)

I think that there is 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 get there until a certain level, but sometimes you need specific skills, technical skills, skills from data analysts, marketers, and strategists, which we do not have in-house. (Interviewee 3)

More interestingly, similarly to how money exacerbates the skill shortage, it also affects time. Time occupies a substantial space in the interviewees' reflections, who describe themselves as constantly overloaded in their efforts to transform their companies. Daily media production absorbs almost all the companies' energy; therefore, any extra project that potentially deviates from the roadmap is either discarded or pursued with limited engagement. This organisational struggle is often described as symptomatic of chronically overstressed operational capacity, in which both the practitioners and the executives with decision-making responsibilities are constrained by their already full schedule of short-term targets:

Journalists are busy 100% of their time 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 is not their problem. It is a management discussion: making sure that there is time allocated to new initiatives. (Interviewee 4)

Managers are as overworked as everybody else. They do not 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 never stops. (Interviewee 10)

The way the respondents articulate their answers suggests that for news organisations, the difficulty with their innovation trajectory is primarily and inextricably of an organisational nature. Technology is part of the equation insofar as it is implicated in the change process. However, technology alone cannot be a complete solution, nor can it compensate for the organisational obstacles that an organisation faces.

5.3. Collaborative Innovation: Stimulating Explorative Attitude by Providing a Framework and an Occasion for Dissonance

In the last part of the interviews, the collaborative projects of the Stars4Media programme were discussed in more detail to connect how the interviewees experienced innovation to how the collaborative projects concretely supported them in their innovation trajectory. When discussing the concrete advantages of the collaborations, curiously, many respondents dwelled on the financial aspect of the grant, which is not itself an inherent element of the collaboration. They pointed out how even the limited financial support they received influenced the decision of their company to re-assess their priorities. The simple creation of a temporary budget allowed them to make space in the agenda for a project that they perceived as potentially valuable but practically too risky without external funding:

I would not have taken time to work on that because it was valuable; it was important, but it was not mandatory. I am in the position of choosing what is mandatory, and I cannot save time to think about the extras, but the extras can be a game changer in one year. (Interviewee 1)

This [Stars4Media programme] is something that we could definitely have done, but it would have been a side project that I would have done 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. (Interviewee 3)

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. However, it is sufficient to act as a trigger to stimulate their explorative attitude and to reshuffle their strategic priorities: “It is not a lot of funding. But you still have external expectations that you have to live up to. And I think that is quite important for making innovation happen. Because otherwise, the daily work will be prioritised” (Interviewee 12).

The prospect of a partially financed project provides single entrepreneurial individuals acting within the company with extra legitimacy to take the initiative and create space in the roadmap and time in the agenda for an explorative project. Clearly, this evidence does not imply that the collaborative dimension itself makes companies suddenly more prone to innovation or even long-term organisational transformation. In fact, temporary budgets for innovation projects could be (and have already been) allocated without a collaborative dimension. The funding agency of Stars4Media—the European Commission—obviously has a normative view on the role of collaboration, especially cross-border collaboration, because its mission is to support the cross-national integration of the European media sector. From how the interviewees emphasised the grant as an advantage, it can be assumed that the collaborative dimension might predominantly be a formal aspect that companies have to comply with to fund a project that they might have in the pipeline but which cannot be financed internally. What seems to confirm this assumption is the

fact that almost all interviews have reflected on how, without the support of Stars4Media, they would have hardly engaged in the project. The interviewees' emphasis on the financial aspect may indicate that these collaborations are strategically used to try out projects and ideas that could potentially work but whose likelihood of success is perhaps judged as low. The experimental nature of these projects seems to confirm this assumption: The companies involved have the rare opportunity to create a temporary, less competitive setting for experimentation that allows them to evaluate whether the effort will pay off, having minimised the risk. Further research might investigate if such experimental projects can potentially become a standard way to support the initial phase of innovation processes or rather mainly serve as a low-risk "playground" setting, exerting minimal impact on the standard innovation culture of news organisations.

The interviewees, however, also reflected on other advantages that were inherently connected to the collaborative dimension itself. Many project leaders emphasised how the project deadlines agreed with the partners created positive peer pressure, which influenced their capacity to make the most out of the project. In their experience, the collaborative dimension creates a logic of mutual expectations and positive peer pressure among the partners and this, in turn, forces each company to commit more strongly to the project. The external budget makes the involvement possible, and the collaborative dimension makes the results more likely to be achieved. Collaborative innovation practices function as temporary frameworks that act as environmental stressors. The companies are involved in a wider environment which allows them to temporarily overcome the difficulty of working on innovation alone. The programme's framework contributes to making the existing organisational structure of a company more fluid and flexible by creating a new unit of professionals who engage in the project beyond the usual organisational boundaries.

In several cases, there is a further facilitating aspect of the collaborations that have contributed to medium to long-term change in the companies. Many respondents have hinted at the benefit of having a larger diversity of profiles involved in the project, which is usually unavailable internally. Furthermore, this mix of competences and different evaluative principles (the cross-disciplinary aspect) has, according to them, created a platform for reflecting on their usual internal workflows and choices. In the experience of many respondents, the collaboration allowed them to overcome the narrowness of evaluative principles that they encountered in a non-collaborative logic. In a word, they experienced a work setting more conducive to dissonance. This scenario also corresponds to the typical collaborative settings experienced by companies that experiment with "open innovation." This aspect happened particularly as part of collaborations that saw journalistic companies working with technological companies. In many of these partnerships, the technological company usually would provide the journalistic company with a solution for a specific problem: an automated process for video analysis and archiving, the creation of a virtual reality-based editorial product, the possibility to module the duration of an audio track thanks to an automated summarising tool, or the application of AI to photojournalism techniques. The journalists involved in these partnerships usually reported that they had not directly learned from the technological partner how to develop the technology further, but they had started to internalise it. However, they did understand how to exploit and integrate it into their work. Furthermore, through the engagement of the editorial staff with external technological companies, many projects contributed to overcoming certain cultural attitudes and resistance towards experimenting with technology. The following excerpt from an interview with a regional newspaper exemplifies this dynamic. The process of starting up the collaboration between the partners also required that the regional newspaper provide a set of professionals from different units to be dedicated to the project, as explained by a media professional from the technology department who joined the interview.

This, in turn, supports the internal dialogue between different departments:

The project leader was a great help in onboarding all those people from different units. They started, really, I would say, reluctantly; they were not keen on experimenting this way because it is not a habit of the company; you could see it in how they were behaving. And at the end of the first meeting, that started to shift and change. And we could see people really excited about the possibilities, and this way of working and how there were different approaches to imagining a project....And those people who did all the conception phase now are knowledgeable a lot on this technology. When I talk to them, they start using the right words, they start to get interested, read about it elsewhere and say, "I saw this and this, and this connects to this." So you start to have this link between all those different people and all of these different units. (Interviewee 7)

6. Conclusions

This article has investigated how inter-firm collaborative projects stimulate innovation in news media companies. The analysis of the interviews has revealed that innovation is understood as a collective practice of adaptation to a changing environment. Innovation can be de-dramatised and regarded as a social practice carried out collectively by a group of individuals with their "attitudes and strategies, negotiations and knowledge exchanges" (Schmitz Weiss & Domingo, 2010, p. 1169). The interviews reveal that innovation practices in news media companies are hindered by a shortage of financial resources, which impacts the available skills, specialised profiles, and time for carrying out innovative projects. This study expands existing literature on journalism innovation by providing a set of practical implications that journalists may consider for strengthening their company's innovation trajectory through collaborations. First, creating external relationships is usually viewed as a tangible benefit as it comes with additional internal legitimacy capital and the possibility of creating long-lasting synergies that extend beyond a single project. Even a limited financial grant, such as in the case of the Stars4Media programme, is sufficient for news media companies to re-assess their priorities and embark on experimental projects. Most importantly, the collaborative dimension itself stimulates positive peer pressure and mutual expectation that is usually unavailable in their companies. Secondly, the opportunity to step away from media production routines offers the opportunity to interact closely with media professionals who bring specialised knowledge that is not usually available internally. If fully exploited, this dimension can result in a long-lasting improvement of media production processes and creative workflows. Several interviewees reflected on how the collaborative setting leads to self-reflection and re-evaluation of organisational routines, which strongly supports their learning trajectory. Lastly, some pointed out how collaboration contributes to generating change at the level of a company's innovation culture by challenging organisational inertia. Journalists, beyond the idea of an unjustified faith in collaborations as a silver bullet solution, can reflect on whether their ongoing or future collaborations can yield such immaterial benefits, which are deemed key building blocks for long-term newsroom innovation.

This study offers a novel qualitative perspective on the emerging phenomenon of collaborative innovation and offers several implications for future research. First, if such collaborations help media companies focus on explorative innovation, it would be crucial to further investigate the effects on long-term organisational change and measurable improvement in the medium to long term, with a longitudinal perspective. Beyond the temporary advantage, companies need to gain financially to continue investing in collaborations. Lastly, since

the end goal of these grants is to improve the overall resilience of the news media industry, the question of the systemic impact of these programmes could also be explored.

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 who actively decided to engage in collaborations. However, no view is provided from the perspectives of those who decided not to, including what their motives were. 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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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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