A HANDBOOK TO INNOVATE THE MEDIA SECTOR THROUGH STARS4MEDIA

STARS4MEDIA

Stars4Media.eu

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1) What is Stars4Media and why participate?

The context behind Stars4Media

European news media face an unprecedented crisis. It is, first of all, a crisis of identity: ever since digital platforms have entered the media field as new gatekeepers, traditional news media have struggled to re-position themselves in a digital-first media landscape. Financial resources and trust have both kept declining ever since, with worrying trends at play.
News media are both businesses and players of a democratic arena: whatever the trajectory of change looks like in the information landscape, political and societal effects take place.
The European Commission, already in the previous mandate, has addressed directly the crisis of the news media by starting to channel resources towards media innovation. Among other actions, the Stars4Media Pilot Project was launched, responding to a proposal voted by the European Parliament in 2018.

Stars4Media is a pilot programme for European media to facilitate cooperation between media professionals ("rising stars") with the goal of accelerating media innovation and cross-border coverage in Europe**.** It aims at enhancing media innovation through skill-building activities from different EU countries around specific Initiatives, to test ideas and technologies, introduce new business models and produce new types of contents.
The Stars4Media programme is implemented by a Consortium formed of Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Europe's MediaLab (Fondation EURACTIV), European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA), with the co-funding of the European Commission.

What are the benefits?

In the first edition of Stars4Media, media professionals had the chance to:

- cooperate with another European media over a maximum of 12 weeks
- gain practical skills such as quality reporting, data journalism, fact-checking, AI and translation technologies, marketing, and social media
- be part of a community of media professionals in Europe

Media outlets managed to:

- grow their network with the best innovative media companies in Europe and top media leaders
- test ideas, develop new products and new business models and innovate
- develop and motivate their staff and future management

2) Stars4Media Initiatives

The Stars4Media 'Initiatives' are innovative ideas developed by small cross-border and cross-disciplinary teams of media professionals around several thematic waves. During the Stars4Media First Edition, Initiatives were proposed around the following waves: DATA for media, TRUST in media, and Media response to Coronavirus.

Image 1. Highlights of Stars4Media First Edition
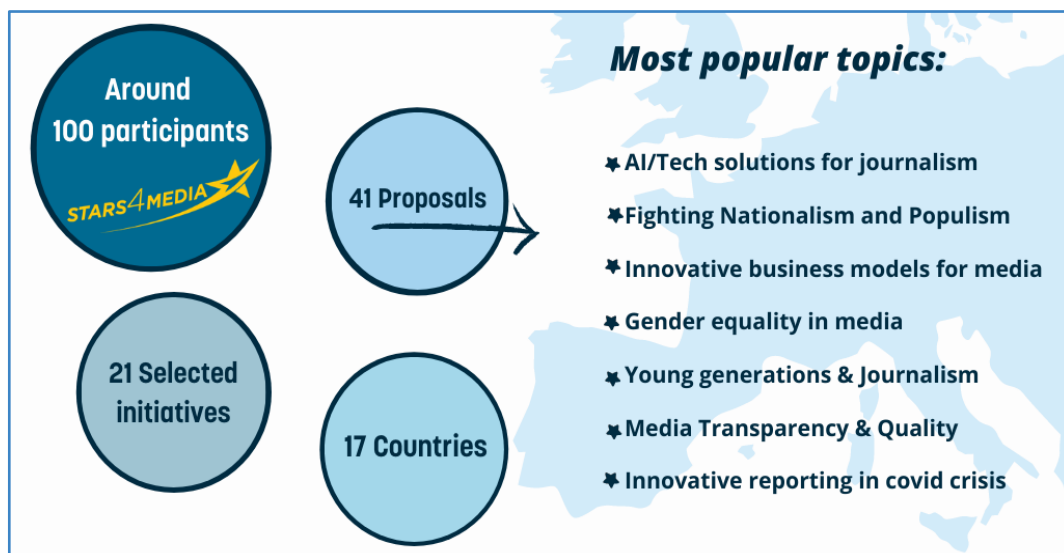
Out of the 21 supported initiatives, **5 were awarded the Stars4Media Prize**, as follows:

- **Trust Prize: "**Wounds of Europe", developed by Linkiesta (Italy), and Bulle Media (Belgium), for their Podcast series **Oltre l'Europa** focusing on six national conflicts, based on data journalism and historical research.
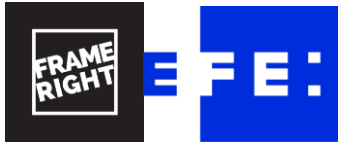 Video presenting the initiative

- **Data Prize: "**Visual journalism without constraints", by Frameright (Finland) and EFE (Spain), is enabling content creators to know what they publish and how the content is being shown to the public.

  Learn more here: What we learned during Stars4Media 2020

  Video presenting the initiative

- **Reacting to the Coronavirus Prize:** "The summer of 2020", coordinated by Are We Europe; involving two journalists from De Standaard (Belgium) and De Groene Amsterdammer (the Netherlands) and two freelancers (Johannes de Bruycker, Belgium and Olivia Kortas, Germany), who worked together over the summer to report about the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic in the European Union during the summer of 2020.

  Discover it here: Searching for Europe

  Video presenting the initiative

- **Cross-border cooperation Prize: "**On the run from the past", by Centro di Giornalismo Permanente (Italy), StreetPress (France), El Salto (Spain), which is a cross border investigation collecting stories of citizens who disappeared during the time of southern American dictatorships and found refuge in Europe.
  More: **article** on El Salto, in Spanish; **article** on Street Press, in French.
  Video presenting the initiative

- **Diversity Prize:** "Black City Stories", developed by 3 freelancers (Evangelista Sie from Austria, Ari Yehudit Richter from Portugal and Juliana da Penha from the UK) , is a solution-oriented media platform dedicated to Black People living in Europe, investigating in-depth Black Lived Experiences.
  More here: **https://blackcitystories.org/**

  Video presenting the initiative

Check the 21 innovative partnerships, supported by Stars4Media First Edition:
https://europemedialab.eu/list-of-selected-stars4media-initiatives

3) How to create a good Proposal for Initiative?

3.1. How to read the Call for Initiatives?

The Call for Initiatives is published on the [Stars4Media website](#) and on the websites of the project partners at the beginning of the application period.

The Call highlights some key aspects:

1 - Priorities - Stars4Media is an exchange and training programme aiming at fostering innovation in media. To respond to the Call for Initiatives, you should come up with an idea that can possibly generate innovation through an exchange, while enhancing the competences and skills of the team members involved.

2 - Deadline - please pay close attention to the application deadline(s). There might be several windows of opportunity to present your proposal.

3 - Thematic Waves - these are key topics that address the needs and challenges that the media sector is currently facing. The Stars4Media initiatives should be grouped around these proposed thematic waves:

    1) Journalism, Trust, and Participation;
    2) Media Technology and Marketing;
    3) Other innovations.

Additional topics could be accepted if their relevance is clearly presented by the applicant.

3.2. How to find a partner? And who is a good partner?

Stars4Media supports collaboration between teams of media professionals with complementary skills, from a minimum of two different media outlets, based in different EU countries, working together on a joint Initiative.

Ideally, you could work on a new initiative with a partner that you/your media organisation has already worked with in the past, leveraging existing connections and past successful experience.

Finding a new partner can be a lengthy process. We encourage reaching out to the media outlets and/or professionals of your interest at an early stage, to touch base with a potential partner. Additionally, to facilitate the process, we suggest:

- Join the [Stars4Media community](#), which gathers a pool of professionals interested in the programme
- Reach out to the Consortium partners, presenting a brief description of the profile of partners that you are interested in. Contact details can be found at the end of this document
- Considering the list of media that expressed interest in Stars4Media First Edition (Image 2)

Image 2. List of media that expressed interest in Stars4Media First Edition

List of media companies that expressed interest in Stars4Media
(not committed to participate) 18/03/20:
(*media organisations who have sent a developed Stars4Media proposal for initiative)

Agencia EFE* Les Echos
La Gazzetta dello Sport Yle Uutiset TF1
Business Post Le Tank Media Onet.pl* Roularta
Rossel ÄRIPÄEV Azonnali* Nice Matin Bonnier-Dagens-Industri
Sisters of Europe* porCausa Foundation Trasindex.ro* Creatis Ouest-France
Il Tirreno TV2 Denmark The Irish Times Radio France Café Babel* Corriere della Sera
Phosphore* The Caravan's Journal Concern-Radio/TV Total EU video production*
Näringslivets medieinstitut* Radio Botkyrka Mondadori Group* Secolo Trentino*
Deutsche Welle Linkiesta Profil LUSA News Agency* WSJ-Europe
ARTE Slovenian Press Agency Henneo Dnevnik Público PT*
The Consultancy-for Creative and Digital Businesses
El País Media Duemila Pint of Science
Collectif-Antidotes* Milano Finanza

Image 3. What makes a good partner?

What makes a good partner?
A good partner will:

✅ Bring complementarity of skills to the team, provide creative and innovative ideas and relevant track records;

✅ Prove trustworthiness and commitment to (i) international professional journalistic standards and codes of ethics and (ii) applicable national rules concerning, in particular, impartiality and accuracy

✅ Be fully committed to work the required number of days, to develop the initiative

3.3. How to write a good proposal?

To benefit from the Stars4Media support, one has to submit a successful **Proposal for Initiative.**

As a general rule, a Proposal for Initiative should be drafted by **a small cross-border and cross-disciplinary team** of media professionals, present **clear objectives** and **aim at fostering innovation in the media sector** (by proposing a new service, content, tool, approach, etc). Each initiative shall be composed of media professionals from 2 or more different media organisations and/or freelancers based in different EU countries. Only **EU residents, of any nationality,** can be financially supported by the programme.

Before submitting a Proposal for Initiative, please make sure to **read carefully the Call for Initiatives,** published on the Stars4Media website or on the project partner's website.

In the Call for Initiatives, you will find a **Proposal for Initiative template**. You can check the Application form from the Stars4Media First Edition for a general idea about the questions that you could be asked to answer. Please note the template might change in potential next editions.

The deadlines for application are announced well in advance. Save the dates!

The interested media professionals have the option to **a) submit a simple draft idea/ expression of interest** or **b) submit directly a "Proposal for Initiative".**

We strongly encourage interested applicants to first send us a Draft idea, before submitting a full proposal. Draft ideas should be submitted in the early stage of the application process, providing basic information about the media professional(s) interested in the programme, their media outlet(s), media affiliation or freelance profile, and a brief summary of the idea. This expression of interest will then be assessed by the Stars4Media team and coached by the Stars4Media experts towards a qualitative Proposal for Initiative.

The Proposal for Initiatives shall cover the following aspects:

1) The need addressed by the Initiative and the plan of action (timeline);

2) Outcome(s) and sustainability;

3) Innovation (content/business/tech);

4) Cooperation and partnership.

Wondering what we consider as Innovation?

The answer is summarised in the image below. You can check the Annex I - Innovation checklist of this Handbook for details.

Image 4. Innovation checklist

You should consider as an innovation ✓	You should NOT consider as an innovation 🚫
The creation of a key product/service for your company with the involvement of a professional whose skills were not usually considered for that product/service	The realization of a journalistic story/reportage/product that does not involve any element of change with the usual methods already applied to carry on key operations in the companies involved
The cooperation of 2 teams of professionals with complementary skills to create a new product/service	A new story. The innovative element does not lay exclusively in the content. The innovative aspect can be at the editorial level, but it has to address how stories are presented or how a certain topic is narrated.
The cooperation of 2 or 3 teams for the realization of a service that responds to a need of the media sector that is still unanswered.	A service/product/technology that is new for your company but is already mature in the media sector. You are not expected to introduce a brand new service/product/technology but you should at least introduce some innovative aspects that challenge the status quo.
The realization of an idea whose implementation requires more effort than the company/professional can commit to, even after the end of the exchange.	

The majority of participants in an Initiative should have a prior media affiliation, in any position, and any Initiative should contribute to the media sector, directly or indirectly. When submitting a draft idea and/or a proposal, the applicant will have to confirm the commitment of its media organisation (or individual commitment, if freelancer) to (i) international professional journalistic standards and codes of ethics and (ii) applicable national rules concerning, in particular, impartiality and accuracy.

Image 5. What made the difference for the successful initiatives?

What made the difference for the successful initiatives?

- **Simple objectives were defined: even though a proposal should be innovative, it should also be realistic and feasible to be implemented in the given timeframe (over a maximum of 16 weeks)**
- **The plan of how to achieve the desired objectives was well elaborated;**
- **The core tasks for achieving the objectives were assigned with a strong consideration of the maximum available timespan;**
- **Tasks were correctly allocated, according to the skillset of each team member;**
- **A business model was foreseen;**
- **The proposal was innovative**

4) How to face challenges related to this training programme?

There are several challenges that any applicant might need to face throughout the whole process of Stars4Media, from the selection to the final evaluation.

These range from **overarching challenges** that may ask applicants' attention from day 1 to the end, to **occasional challenges** that applicants may encounter in the day-to-day implementation of a complex initiative that involves several professionals across different countries.

- **Cultural challenges**: these are overarching challenges and they surely require continuous efforts from all professionals involved.

  One of the reasons why Stars4Media was launched is the lack of cross-border cooperation between European media organisations. This might be the result of a lack of time and resources within news media for international projects, of technical difficulties but also of obvious cultural barriers. It is naturally easier to engage in complex projects with like-minded professionals with similar backgrounds, approaches, workflows, expectations, languages etc.

  The **comfort zone** of working only within a national dimension might ensure media professionals efficient development of workflows but, at the same time, can prevent them from **acquiring skills and competencies that only an international exchange can provide**.

  Working with different cultures can be challenging but it will also open the process of producing new content, technologies or services to different points of view, making **the final results richer and possibly more valuable reach-wise**.

- **Linguistic challenges:** another overarching challenge. A typical Stars4Media initiative is a short project (max 4 months), usually requiring the applicants to invest their time while also carrying out their *business as usual*.

  This means that time is a constraint and obviously communication between teams from different countries should not be slowed down by linguistic issues. Applicants need to be sure their linguistic skills allow them to smoothly work with the other teams and to communicate efficiently with the Stars4Media team (including in the selection and evaluation phases). The Stars4Media team is multilingual and language courses can be covered by the project funding.

- **Administrative challenges:** The administration should be just a task and not a challenge. However, some part of your time in a Stars4Media initiative will be dedicated to administration, and problems might arise when time is limited, or unexpected problems arise.

  This is of course not the most inspiring aspect of the project, but it is necessary that you are on top of it, to ensure you and your initiative members receive the money instalments and to facilitate all communication with us.

The Stars4Media executive team will guide you through every step, what is required from you (especially if you are team/initiative leader) is the following:

- Read carefully all the emails from the executive team (this is an important point: emails are overwhelming, we know, but the better you read our emails, the less you will receive).
- Respect deadlines: Stars4Media is a complex machine, many partners and different organisations are involved. In order to support you and allow you to receive the money instalment on time and proceed with your work, we kindly ask you to respect the deadlines.
- Think of a person in the team that can keep track of the admin procedure and be our contact point. This will allow you to be on top of your admin, and it will allow us easy communication with you.

- **Unexpected challenges:** what we learned from the first edition of Stars4Media is that flexibility is key for the success of such a project. This applies to the whole project, as well as to any single initiative. The Coronavirus outbreak was a massive unexpected challenge that nobody could foresee and its impact on the project was huge. Nevertheless, thanks to the commitment and resilience of the Stars4Media team and the participants, the limitations created by this new reality did not jeopardize the creative potential of the project. Allowing the creation of innovative initiatives in the media sector through the cross-border exchange of skills and competences has remained a cornerstone also in a new reality where remote work has become the norm. While any structural change brings both benefits and obstacles, Stars4Media managed to prioritize the benefits and allow the beneficiaries, in most cases, to make full use of the advantages of the new set-up.
From the design of an innovation programme, to the implementation of a single specific initiative, having a flexible mindset is key for delivering the expected results while cooperating with partners in other EU countries, with time restraints and challenging goals.

5) Frequently asked questions: eligibility, admin details

a) Who is the Project Coordinator of Stars4Media?

The project is coordinated by Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), a university with one of Europe's best media innovation departments (imec-SMIT) and experience with the legal and administrative aspects of exchange programmes, in close cooperation with Europe's MediaLab (Fondation EURACTIV), the Project Initiator, experienced in cross-border exchanges and media needs.

b) How many people from the same media outlet can take part in a team?

Stars4Media encourages cross-disciplinary teams to work together on a joint and innovative initiative. The applicants are required to elaborate on the cooperation that they envisage with other colleagues from other media outlets and their respective roles in the initiative.
The size of a team should be determined by the roles and responsibilities of each team member. A maximum of 3 people per media outlet is eligible for refunding of expenses. In exceptional cases, more people per team can be considered, if their contribution is vital for the implementation of the Initiative.

c) Can a team be composed of only one person per media?

Yes, a team can be composed of one representative per media outlet. In the ideal case, a team would include several professionals with complementary backgrounds, working together on an initiative. There should be one "lead" professional, who will be mostly engaged in implementing the Initiative, and others offering support on particular dimensions.

d) What happens if I can't find a media partner? Will my application be considered?

We encourage participants to look for a media partner themselves and agree on a joint initiative before submitting their application. However, applications from unpaired candidates will also be accepted.

e) How do I apply?

Propose your initiative: You have 2 different windows of opportunity to apply, they will be indicated in the Call for Proposals. There is only a limited number of initiatives that will be co-financed: **there is no 'first come, first served' system** but you are encouraged to submit a draft idea/expression of interest as soon as possible by sending a simple email to info@stars4media.eu. providing basic information about the media professional(s) interested in the programme, their media outlet(s), media affiliation or freelance profile, and a brief summary of the idea. Once you submit it, you will receive guidance and coaching towards a finalised proposal.

f) How are Proposals for Initiatives selected?

A Jury made of relevant experts will assess the proposals for Initiatives by the end of the 2 windows of opportunity available for submission. The best initiatives will be selected and

applicants will be able to start as soon as they acknowledge and accept the provisions of the following rules:
- Stars4Media General Conditions for Participation
- Stars4Media Specific Rules
- Stars4Media Agreement Coordinator - Media Outlet

Those not selected will receive constructive feedback and may submit their reworked proposals by the subsequent deadline, if applicable.

g) What criteria will be used to evaluate applications?

Each member of the jury will evaluate the submitted initiatives of the following dimensions: needs, approach, benefits, cooperation, sustainability and business innovation. These dimensions reflect the sections of the applications form that the applicants have used to present their initiatives:

1) **Needs** → Does the initiative describe the problem it tackles?

2) **Approach** → What will they develop, and how will they do that?

3) **Benefits** → What is the initiative's outcome in terms of benefits for the media organisations

and professionals participating in the exchange?

4) **Cooperation** → How will they work together?

5) **Sustainability** → Will it go on? What revenue model is envisaged?

6) **Business Innovation** → Does the initiative have a business innovation component?

7) **Media partner identified** → Is there a confirmed partnership?

h) What happens if my proposal is selected?

Physical and virtual collaboration: As soon as possible after their successful selections, and for a period of up to 16 weeks, the selected media professionals and their media outlets will carry out their initiative based on virtual and physical collaboration (when allowed by the evolving developments of the global outbreak of Covid-19 and its impact on physical mobility across EU countries). A media expert from Stars4media will provide **guidance and coaching** throughout the whole process of implementation of the initiative.

i) How much money do I get?

The maximum grant per participant is 6,000 euros. In the first edition of Stars4Media, 80% of this grant was EU contribution and 20% was the own contribution of the beneficiaries. The co-founding rate could change in a potential Stars4Media second edition. Subject to the approval of the proposal for a second edition, the grant could be used to cover: (i) all kinds of remote work related to the implementation of the Initiatives; (ii) costs including, but not limited to, software, licenses, equipment, and digital tools; (iii) costs of training (remote and non) necessary for the good implementation of the Initiative (e.g. language skills; marketing; user experience design, etc); and (iv) international travel, accommodation and subsistence costs (when possible).

6) Lessons learned from the evaluation - participants' perspective

An important part of your Stars4Media experience will be the evaluation of your initiative.

First of all, **do not confuse evaluation with selection**. The selection process takes place in the early phases of Stars4Media, after the call for proposals, and its goal is the selection of the initiatives that will have the chance to implement their proposal. This is a competitive phase: there is a limited number of places and only a limited percentage of applicants will get a place.

This selection process is coordinated by the executive team of Stars4Media with the involvement of a distinguished jury made of media experts with different backgrounds and competences.

The **evaluation process** is determining which successful initiatives might be awarded a Prize. However, all initiatives that will be selected to take part in Stars4Media are already 'winners', having passed a selective jury evaluation.

The evaluation of selected proposals takes place in 2 different moments:

- **Midterm evaluation:** an online survey taking place in the middle of your Initiative and addressing initiative leaders. The goal is to track the progress of the initiative, identify potential obstacles, highlight successful partial results, ensure communication of key information to the Executive Team.
- **Final evaluation:** also an online survey taking place after the end of your Initiative and addressing all team leaders.

The goal of these two surveys is to assess the success of the initiative across several criteria in line with the criteria for selection, based on the **evidence of the results achieved and on the description of the main aspects of the collaborative exchange** (overall success, lessons learned/skills gained, cross-border cooperation, impact/innovation, sustainability).

All initiatives will be evaluated by the executive teams with scores and comments and eventually the **jury chairs will be involved to award a limited number of initiatives with prizes, in light of the outstanding results achieved**.

7) Useful links and contact details

Do you have an innovative idea and don't know where to start?
Drop us a line at info@stars4media.eu.

- 21 initiatives developed during the first edition of the programme
- Press release (October 2020)

Videos:
- Stars4Media launching workshop in Brussels (November 2019)
- Stars4Media Lab (March 2020)
- Media4Europe conference (Stras4Media final event, October 2020)

For Project Management related matters:
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