

PhD in Media and Communication Studies

Collaborative Innovation in Journalism. The Practices and Politics of a Precarious Promise.

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Abstract

How is public funding for journalism innovation being used by its beneficiaries? And is innovation an adequate and satisfactory funding principle for public institutions to guide the transformation of journalism, in times of growing pressure on its public value dimension?

This dissertation investigates these questions in light of a growing policy interest, especially in Europe, in supporting the innovation trajectories of journalistic organizations as they grapple with the socio-economic disruptions caused by digital platforms' dominance. It focuses specifically on publicly funded programmes that support *collaborative innovation* projects, in which journalistic organizations are encouraged to build synergies with actors from technological and business domains to develop novel and potentially transformative solutions. This emphasis on cross-disciplinary collaboration reflects a broader shift away from newsroom-centric paradigms and towards hybrid media systems, where editorial and innovation capacities are increasingly decentralized.

The dissertation advances a composite theoretical framework, drawing from socio-constructivist and organizational perspectives, and conceptualizes collaborative innovation as a *contested trading zone*, a space where journalists, managers, and policymakers negotiate competing needs, constraints, and interests. Methodologically, it adopts a comparative case study design, examining two public innovation initiatives: the cross-national Stars4Media programme (EU-funded) and the regional Flemish Relanceplan (publicly funded in Flanders). Through expert interviews, survey data, and document analysis, the study explores how different actors engage with, interpret, and operationalize collaborative innovation in practice.

Findings show that collaborative innovation is a highly context-dependent and actor-specific practice. While policy frameworks promote it as a way to stimulate system-wide synergies and financial sustainability, on-the-ground practices often diverge from these goals. In *Stars4Media*, participants embraced a "sandbox" logic, using the grants for experimentation, professional development, and community-building, rather than aligning with the programme's emphasis on financial viability. The *Relanceplan* revealed an even deeper disconnection: large incumbents often leveraged their proximity to policymakers to shape the programme and navigate the collaborations in ways that primarily served their commercial interests, often marginalizing smaller players and undermining collaborative ideals.

The study further argues that *innovation*, as currently deployed in journalism policy, suffers from conceptual ambiguity and a techno-centric bias, which risks reinforcing existing power imbalances and sectoral concentration. Without more inclusive and clearly articulated frameworks, innovation policy may ultimately function as an instrument of consolidation rather than sector-wide transformation.