

Collaboration or co-optation? Navigating power asymmetries in publicly-funded innovation partnerships for the journalism sector

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Abstract

In recent years, policymakers have become increasingly engaged in supporting the digital transformation and the innovation trajectory of journalism. Among these efforts, collaborative innovation grants involving journalistic and non-journalistic actors are emerging as a new approach, particularly in Europe. This study examines a publicly funded innovation programme implemented in Flanders between 2023 and 2024, employing such collaborative model. Based on semi-structured interviews with senior decision-makers involved in the collaborations the findings indicate that while collaborative innovation projects hold potential for knowledge sharing and explorative innovation, a significant gap exist between expected and actual benefits. More specifically, this study shows how both the inherent complexity of collaborative innovation practice and the specific programme's design magnify commercial imperatives, opportunistic behaviors, and resistance to change, particularly from large, established players, during project implementation. Ultimately, while intended to drive sector-wide innovation, these programmes can unintentionally reinforce existing power asymmetries in the sector if the complexities of their collaborative structure are not effectively managed.

Keywords

Collaborative innovation, collaborative journalism, cross-sector collaborations, digital transformation, journalism innovation funding

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Introduction

In recent years, Europe has witnessed a growing interest towards public support for the innovation and the digital transformation of the journalistic industry (European Commission, 2024; Noster et al., 2025). Several countries have adopted schemes specifically designed to address the innovation needs of private-sector news media (Nielsen et al., 2019), while European institutions have also begun launching similar efforts. The rationale behind such policy interventions is rooted in the notion of ‘social contract’ which identifies a mutual relationship between media and democracies (Murschetz, 2022). According to this logic, public intervention in journalism innovation support serves a dual function: addressing the industry’s urgent need for adaptation in an era of continuous technological and economic shifts while simultaneously advancing broader societal objectives linked to democratic resilience.

In this phase of experimentation with funding opportunities, certain public funding bodies have recently embraced the idea of supporting the digital transformation of the journalistic sector by offering grants for cross-disciplinary collaborative projects. Previous empirical research on collaborative programmes involving individual journalists and technologists has provided encouraging evidence supporting the potential of this approach (Baack, 2018; Lewis and Usher, 2016; Zambelli and Morganti, 2024). The grants offered by these programmes typically involve temporary partnerships between organizations with different specializations and *know-hows*. In line with the logic of open innovation (Klaß, 2020), such collaborations ideally create orchestrated frictional dynamics and perplexing situations (Stark, 2009) which can ultimately lead to outcomes that individual partners could not achieve alone.

However, research has also cautioned that when this model is applied to large commercial news organizations, a critical mismatch may arise between how such organizations articulate discursively the expected advantages of collaborative work versus their concrete willingness to engage in it (Slot, 2021). These actors are typical wary of sectoral competition, more inclined to patrol their internal boundaries, compared to emerging or non-profit organizations, and to control innovation processes from inside.

Considering these ambivalent indications regarding the potential implications of cross-disciplinary collaborations as a promising innovation avenue for the field of journalism, in-depth analysis of concrete cases becomes more urgent. To respond to this research need, this study presents an interview-based investigation of a recent publicly funded collaborative innovation programme, part of the Digital Transformation Relaunch Plan, financed by the Flemish government. Launched in early 2023, the programme allocated €12 million to collaborative innovation projects, as part of an ambitious €35 million plan for the recovery of the Flemish media industry, as a response to the COVID-19 crisis. What makes this case particularly compelling is the scale of its funding, significantly larger than most comparable initiatives (Noster, 2024). Such budget has primarily attracted major industry players, offering a rare empirical ground to observe how collaborative innovation dynamics unfold in practice, and to assess how the endorsement usually expressed by large news organizations translates into genuine engagement during collaborative work.

Through expert-interviews with senior decision-makers in managerial, editorial, and innovation-focused roles, this study aims at unpacking the possible tension between the intentions to participate in these funded projects and the concrete collaborative dynamics, as this can illuminate points of contact and discrepancies between discursive and practical involvement. This paper, hence, aims to answer (RQ) the two following interconnected questions:

RQ1: What are the primary motivations for managers of Flemish journalistic and technological companies to engage in funded collaborative innovation projects?

RQ2: How do participating companies navigate the balance between their individual strategic interests and the collective goals of the consortium during the implementation phase?

Evaluating the effectiveness of the programme in fostering journalism innovation through collaborations is out of the scope of this research. However, based on the results on the empirical analysis, some larger implications for journalism as a sector are being discussed, specifically around the perceived impact of the grants from the point of view of the beneficiaries, *vis a vis* the expectations of the funding agency.

Literature review

This study sits at the intersection of multiple literature strands, including organizational and media management research, journalism innovation policy, and collaboration research. In the following review the strategic inclination of media organizations towards innovations is being assessed across these literature strands, to contextualize how decision-makers have traditionally approached innovation practice and the ways such practice may be shaped by external funding and by a collaborative dimension.

Strategic decision-making in journalism innovation

For large, profit-driven news organizations, engagement in innovation practices is typically driven by managerial decision-making rather than bottom-up initiatives. From a commercial point of view, innovation is in principle a key asset in contemporary journalism: if the scope of a private organization is maximizing profits, then innovation is an important currency to operate within the competitive logic of any given industry, journalism included, and effectively address evolving market conditions (Küng, 2013). Early ethnographic works on innovation processes in newsrooms chronicled the straddle between change and stability, with managers as proactive agents of change and rank-and-file journalists shielded behind the walls of their conservative culture of professionalism (Ryfe, 2009; Singer, 2004).

Later research, however, has revealed how decision-making processes around innovation have been, in many cases, implemented without clear definitions of the intended strategies (Hendrickx and Picone, 2020), or in a vacuum of vision coupled by a general

organizational anaemia (Villi et al., 2020). Such evidence has offered a more layered picture of management's positionality towards innovation, with scholars highlighting how innovation has been "used in a banal and perfunctory fashion with a heavy bias towards PR and marketing" (Lehtisaari et al., 2018: 1031) or as a "goal without specific values, and the only option for disruptive unstable times" (Hermida and Young, 2021: 40).

A compelling explanation of this performative approach towards innovation has been offered by the new institutionalism perspective. The tendency of managers to lean on legitimacy, top-down mentality, mimicry and institutional stasis would be a reaction to uncertainty (Boyles, 2016; Lowrey, 2011). The result of this becomes, at best, an engagement in only incremental and marginal change, shortcuts and good-enough decisions. At worst, as the research of Posetti (2018) has accurately illustrated, a tendency to mainly perform random acts of innovation, either to entice young audiences (Ferrucci and Perreault, 2021) or seek short-term gains instead of structural efforts of renewal that may generate long-lasting financial relief (Koivula et al., 2022).

Innovation grants: A widely needed yet contested instrument

Bridging the literature on news organizations' strategic approach to innovation with research on the role of external funding in innovation practices brings critical questions to the forefront. How does the availability of external funding shape news organizations' motivation and interest towards innovations? And how does implementing innovations within the framework of a funded programme shape management's approach? Does funding unlock new opportunities for exploratory, long-term, and structural transformation or it simply reinforce existing patterns of mimicry, short-term exploitation, and the pursuit of short-term "shiny things syndrome" initiatives (Posetti, 2018)?

Available evidence has offered mixed results. Some recent research showed that, under specific circumstances, funding for innovation projects can trigger engagement in innovation practices by enabling organizational ambidexterity and triggering an explorative mindset (Zambelli and Morganti, 2024). Other studies, however, highlight how the typical emphasis on short-term deliverables in innovation projects often fails to accommodate the inherent recursive innovation logic. For instance, in cross-sector collaborations between public and private actors, the pressure to meet predefined targets within a set timeframe has been found to "intensify the disparity between long-term visionary planning for explorative development and short-term exploitative action for tangible results" (Virta and Malmelin, 2022: 48). In other cases, rigid short-term goals have clashed with the need for an iterative approach to innovation implementation, stifling creativity and wayfinding (Willemsen et al., 2021).

Furthermore, direct subsidies for journalism innovation often end up benefiting incumbents at the expense of emerging players (Eder and Sjøvaag, 2025; Hermida and Young, 2021; Nielsen and Linnebank, 2011). A comparative analysis of five European countries found that targeted subsidy programmes, such as those in Austria, often failed to achieve their intended innovation goals, whereas countries like Spain and the UK exhibited higher levels of innovation experimentation despite lacking dedicated public aid (Kaltenbrunner, 2024).

Lastly, under certain conditions, such schemes may foster dependency on government handouts (Murschetz, 2020). Similar concerns have emerged in recent research examining journalism innovation funding from private technology companies like Google and Facebook. Studies have identified instances where such funding has led to financial dependence on subsidies (Mesquita & De Lima Santos, 2024; Munoriyarwa et al., 2025) or even facilitated infrastructural capture, wherein media organizations become entangled within the digital ecosystems of dominant tech firms (Papaevangelou, 2023).

Between synergy and rivalry: The fragile balance in collaborative innovation

Building on the previous two sections, which highlighted the often performative and conservative stance of news management toward innovation, as well as the limited corrective power of external funding, it becomes pertinent to explore whether engaging organizations in collaborative partnerships can foster a deeper commitment to structural transformation. Specifically, it is worth investigating whether such partnerships prompt organizations to rethink their practices, routines, and workflows with a view toward long-term change. At least in theory, collaborative innovation appears well-positioned to facilitate this shift.

The concept of collaborative innovation is rooted in a diverse set of theoretical constructs ranging from boundary objects (Star and Griesemer, 1989), trading zone (Galison, 1997), open innovation (Chesbrough, 2003) and dissonance (Stark, 2009). A common thread across these theoretical approaches is the notion that leveraging innovation processes that integrate diverse, and even competing, value systems, expertise, and knowledge domains can produce outcomes that neither individual companies nor single professionals could achieve independently.

Within journalistic organizations, a process of ‘contamination’ between previously separated knowledge domains has been at play since digitization has imposed breaking down internal walls, such as between editorial, technology and business departments (Paulussen, 2016). Mirroring this internal transition, there has been also a progressive opening to external actors, in search of complementary synergies and resources that are not available internally, especially for processes of technological innovation (Gade and Raviola, 2009; Klač, 2020). More frequent interactions have been established with so-called ‘strangers’ (Holton and Belair-Gagnon, 2018), creating a delicate balance between the potential for meaningful change through experimentation and the reluctance to relinquish control over production processes, occupational norms, and ingrained ideologies (Chua and Duffy, 2019; Westlund, 2012).

As noted above, prior research shows that when individual journalists and technologists collaborate within structured programmes, they can foster temporary but productive occasions for innovation, knowledge exchange, and cross-field permeability (Baack, 2018; Lewis and Usher, 2016; Zambelli et al., 2025). However, in the case of larger players, evidence suggests that strong competitive instincts and a tendency to guard resources often limit openness, with commercial and boundary-maintaining logics shaping collaborations (Carlson and Lewis, 2015; Konieczna, 2020; Lewis, 2012; Slot, 2021).

Collaborations are by default complex practices, often characterized by an intense work of coordination and negotiation, as well as by a necessary effort to overcome organizational inertia and reliance on operational habits and routines. Buchanan's club theory (1965) is often used to explain the ambiguous coexistence, in collaborations, of both a cooperative and competitive logic. The different parties forming a collaboration typically associate voluntarily, driven by an interest to collectively achieve a given result which they rationally consider out of their individual possibilities. However, as highlighted by empirical studies that have analyzed the internal dynamics of publicly funded research collaborations, the possibility to successfully manage the partnership is usually challenged by a set of recurring issues (Hückstädt, 2022; Meißner et al., 2022). The main difficulties tend to also arise at the level of organizational setting, such as unequal levels of commitment and certainty, as well as difference (partners work with different methods and workflows) and, fairness. The latter issue is perhaps the most critical one, which arises when a partner, to maximize its specific utility, co-opts a collaborative project by prioritizing its self-interest over the collective result.

In journalism, some recent empirical research has documented this dynamic occurring between partners. Specifically, a recurring problem of fairness has been identified in the disconnection between the ideal of collaboration discursively exhibited by project partners in the initial planning phases or during project acquisition phases, and the individual interests that prevail during project implementation (Virta and Malmelin, 2022; Walters, 2024).

Case study and methodology

The Flemish relanceplan

Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, operates under a federal system where media policy is managed at the regional level, effectively functioning as a state-like policy. Historically, Flanders has lacked a structured, long-term strategy for media innovation. While a dedicated media innovation agency (MiX) was established in 2012, it was soon downscaled (Evens, 2017). The Relanceplan reflects this pattern of ad hoc interventions, shaped by shifting political and economic conditions rather than a consistent policy framework.

This €35 million plan allocated €12 million for collaborative digital transformation projects, aiming to foster cross-sector integration, enhance the visibility of Flemish content, leverage smart technologies and digital tools for greater efficiency, and develop "media platforms of the future" (Departement Cultuur, Jeugd en Media, 2024).

An external jury selected 18 collaborative projects, with applicants proposing their topics, scopes, and partnerships. Projects began in January 2022 and run through December 2024. To maintain a coherent alignment with the study's research scope, this study focuses on a purposive sample of seven journalism-oriented projects out of the 18 funded, which also included non-journalistic initiatives in other areas of media innovation. A table below outlines the composition and focus of these selected projects and participant profiles (Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of collaborative projects analyzed in this study.

Project	Partner company	Company type	Participant	Position of participant
1 - AI summaries toolset	Company 1	Broadcasting corporation	Participant 1	Innovation manager
	Company 3	Media conglomerate	Participant 3	Innovation manager
	Company 8	Media conglomerate	Participant 15	Innovation manager
	Company 4	Technological company	Participant 4	CEO
2 - Modular journalism toolset	Company 2	Technological company	Participant 2	CEO
	Company 7	Regional news tv channel	Participant 7	Senior journalist
	Company 14	Broadcasting corporation	No participation	No participation
	Company 9	Broadcast and media services company	Participant 10	Postproduction manager
	Company 6	Higher education institution	Participant 6	Researcher
	Company 16	Legal studio	No participation	No participation
3 - Audience engagement project	Company 5	Video production and comm company	Participant 5	CEO
	Company 10	Local newspaper	Participant 11	Editor-in-chief
	Company 12	Local news tv channel	Participant 13	Editor-in-chief
4 - AI text-to-speech tool	Company 8	Media conglomerate	Participant 15	Innovation manager
	Company 1	Broadcasting corporation	Participant 16	Innovation manager
5 - AI personalized digital edition tool	Company 8	Media conglomerate	Participant 9	Innovation manager
	Company 11	Technological company	Participant 12	Project management officer
6 - AR/VR media products	Company 8	Media conglomerate	Participant 15	Innovation manager
	Company 6	Higher education institution	Participant 8	Researcher
	Company 13	Technological company	Participant 14	Co-founder & project lead
7 - AI toolset for subtitles' creation	Company 1	Broadcasting corporation	Participant 17	Innovation manager
	Company 15	Media conglomerate	No participation	No participation
	Company 17	Commercial television company	No participation	No participation

Methodology

The study builds on a qualitative methodology, with expert interviews as the technique of data collection, drawing on the unique process and context knowledge possessed by the interviewees identified (Van Audenhove and Donders, 2019). Seventeen interviews were conducted between November 2023 and March 2024, each with a representative of the companies involved in the seven projects, to gather a comprehensive understanding of the motivations to join the projects and of the collaborative dynamics between the partners. Formal consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interviews, and a topic list was shared in advance. This list covered questions about the participant's role within the organization, the organization's previous experience with funded projects and collaborations, the strategic decisions leading to the formation of the partnership, the collaborative dynamics throughout the project, and concluding reflections on the programme.

Most of the participants in this study are experienced decision-makers in their organizations. The interviews lasted on average 52 min, and except for one case they were conducted online. Thirteen participants accepted to be audio recorded, the remaining four asked that notes would be taken instead. The material was analyzed following the method of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Both during the set-up of the interviews, and during the interviews, I communicated my preconceptions and expectations around certain possible dynamics taking place during the collaborations, as these would possibly influence some of my questions and the way in which the conversation was handled. The transcripts were analyzed with MAXQDA 2022, with three recursive cycles of open coding, through an inductive approach, as I strived to analyze people's own perspectives and unpack the expressed reality of their words without imposing a pre-existing coding framework. Lastly, relevant codes were put in relationship with each other, and themes were developed, reviewed, refined and ultimately named.

Results

This section outlines the main themes that emerged from the interviews, focusing on both the motivations for joining the funded projects and the collaborative dynamics occurring during their implementation. In terms of motivations, two contrasting drivers surfaced. *Theme 1* highlights how in most interviews, participation is framed as a strategic necessity, primarily to access missing financial support and complementary knowledge resources. In contrast, *Theme 2* presents a more contrasting view, pointing to cases where the primary motivation is described by participants as a more mundane effort to secure funding, regardless of any clear innovation goal, revealing the coexistence of pragmatic and opportunistic rationales. A similar duality emerged around collaboration. *Theme 3* captures participants' generally positive framing of collaborative work as a source of learning, although through frictional moments, and synergy. However, *Theme 4* complicates this narrative, showing that beneath the surface, many partnerships were characterized by tension, asymmetry, and contested negotiations, underscoring the complex relational labor involved in collaborative innovation.

Theme 1: Collaboration as strategic necessity; Funding as enabler, cross-disciplinarity as incentive

In virtually all conversations, necessity clearly emerged as one of the most prevalent frames used by the participants to justify their motivation to apply for the funding. Similarly to what found in the study by Slot (2021) around collaborative innovation in the Netherlands, the need to increase market competitiveness is described by news organizations as a driver towards innovation, making the subsidies an attractive means to a clear goal.

Funding as a catalyst for scaling and experimenting. In many cases, the projects discussed in the interviews were described as based on a mature idea that had either already been unsuccessfully submitted to other funding institutions or that was carefully thought of for being scaled up through external funding. Virtually all interviewees described the grant as a necessary scale amplifier and as a risk-management instrument. The overall picture provided by the interviewees was that of a sector with many valuable ideas but limited financial means to fully achieve them.

The money is the enabler. We have an innovation department of about 15 people and in order to keep this team existing you need to get the money, external funding.. we don't have internally funded research projects, that's not the case.

Participant 1 – Innovation manager at Broadcasting corporation

As indicated by a manager at a leading Flemish tech company specializing in digital solutions for news publishers, partnerships between journalistic and non-journalistic companies already take place regularly. But in most cases, without external funding, the partnership is limited to a simple commercial transaction where a customer buys a product or a service with limited customization. The funding makes room for an extra layer of research and testing, a key justification for allocating public money for innovation, from a policy perspective (Lindmark et al., 2013; Murschetz, 2020).

With this budget there is more possibility to iterate, there is more room for creating different case scenarios and test what works and what does not work.

Participant 12 – Project management officer at Technological company

Searching complementarity: When funding aligns needs. Another widely discussed motivation for applying was strategic complementarity, often framed as an opportunity to engage in mutually beneficial resource exchange. This rationale aligns with insights from foundational organizational and media management research, which highlights resource complementarity as a central driver of strategic alliances in the media sector (Chan-Olmsted, 2006; Gade and Raviola, 2009). This type of exchange often occurred within partnerships between one journalistic organization and a tech company, offering clear complementary benefits: the journalistic partner can access a technology which is not available in-house, while the tech partner benefits from accessing valuable data sets.

We are an AI company, so when we build a technology, we need data. At the moment, we cannot build tech without data, and this project gives us access to data from the media companies.

Participant 4 – CEO of a technological company

In other cases, the motivation mainly involved a strategic interest between two or more news organizations in competition with each other, willing to use the project to exchange best practices by working on multiple use cases, with the support of a tech company working separately with each of them. For example, when the call for project was announced, the representatives of the innovation departments of three large news organizations met, agreed on the topic and on the choice of the technological company to involve, and then applied. Such agreements can happen rather quickly, since the innovation managers of larger Flemish news organizations meet and discuss regularly, despite obvious competition barriers.

For the collaboration, as long as it is about technology and not on content, we have a long-standing habit to cooperate with both [Company 3] and [Company 8], we know each other very well.

Participant 1 – Innovation manager at broadcasting corporation

Theme 2: Follow the money: Opportunistic project acquisition practices

Alongside these arguments, however, many participants also emphasized a more sobering perspective. In several cases, the motivation to join the projects was not driven by a coherent innovation strategy, but rather by more pragmatic, revenue-seeking considerations, often without a clearly defined innovation agenda. In the view of some respondents this dynamic can be partly explained by the type of reaction that such large-scale funding opportunity may trigger, with potentially undesired consequences on the motivations of the companies to apply. When substantial funding becomes suddenly available, the main reason for some companies to apply may easily become the money itself, with improvised project ideas submitted just “to be there”.

There was a lot of money with the Relanceplan and everybody wanted to be there, for many the trigger was just the funding, not the ideas themselves.

Participant 10 – Postproduction manager at Broadcasting and media services

However, in some cases, a deeper systemic issue emerged, as few participants described how certain journalistic and non-journalistic companies routinely rely on external grants as a revenue-seeking strategy. While this behavior was rarely acknowledged by those engaging in it, partner accounts revealed a gap between the strategic motivations some companies claimed discursively and the more pragmatic, funding-driven reasons underlying their participation.

We do not have people on a payroll to search for projects, if it fits the strategy we go for the funded project. Many companies go for the funding, without really having an idea about the strategy.

Participant 12 – Project manager officer of Technological company

In some more problematic cases such behavior materialized at the expense of fulfilling the commitments outlined in their grant proposals, diverting resources away from the intended project work.

They [their partner] are using the funding for paying the personnel, but not to do the collaborative work, and that needs to change.

Participant 14 – Co-funder of a technological company

Overall, the interviews reveal a complex and sometimes contradictory landscape of motivations for applying for funding. While many participants initially framed their involvement as a strategic effort to pursue exploratory projects and leverage complementary resources, a broader analysis of the data suggests that the availability of substantial financial support often became a motivation in itself. Funding serves as both a means to an end and an end in itself, creating an inherent ambiguity. In some cases, this distinction is clear from project to project, but often, the boundaries blur within a single initiative.

Theme 3: Orchestrating dissonance as an organizational process of structural change

After having investigated the motivations for the partners companies to apply, the questions started to touch upon the concrete collaborative work within the projects, including the set-up of the consortia, the benefits and obstacles of working together, the division of responsibilities and the expected outcomes. Interestingly, the exchanges around the collaborative work reflected those around the motivations to join. A tension emerged, again, between a brighter and darker side of the collaboration, making it difficult to apply simplistic labels to a practice that the participants described as characterized by an inherent ambiguity.

Many participants described the collaborative work as an interplay of competing yet productive perspectives that a partnership brings together, mirroring in practice the kind of orchestrated perplexing situations described at theoretical level by the concept of dissonance (Stark, 2009). They framed collaboration as a process that disrupts taken-for-granted assumptions, compelling participants to navigate tensions and frictions. However, rather than being purely obstructive, these challenges were seen as catalysts for self-reflection and knowledge growth, ultimately enriching the innovation process.

I think really the analysis of the workflows is the main added value of the collaboration, because it also challenges your own way of working, it makes you think what you can do better.

Participant 7 – Senior Journalist at Regional news TV channel

This labor of continuous adjustments needed to overcome frictions and diverging organizational approaches is described as a time-consuming process, but also as a necessary trajectory for transferring key knowledge from a company to another. The co-creation was, in fact, described as marked by various misunderstandings around the technical aspects of the project development. However, while challenging at first, such friction enabled the parties involved to achieve a more comprehensive outcome than either could have accomplished independently.

If we could not get access to their workflows, we could not design the system. And they [the partner] are very critical, we have done so much work and sometimes they still question it. But friction is very important.

Participant 2 – CEO at Technological company

Theme 4: Beneath the surface: How power asymmetries shape collaborative work

Remarkably, though, when the interviewees were invited to delve further into the intricacies of collaborative work, many conversations morphed into more outspoken and critical exchanges. By moving towards the ‘behind the scenes’ of the projects, several participants started to feel more inclined to use the interview as an occasion to critically evaluate the ongoing relationship between the partners. This shift was signaled by how several respondents introduced their answers, with expressions such as “I count on you quoting me carefully here” or “this is exactly the reason why I preferred not to be recorded” or “I had many questions about this funding, and I am happy someone is doing research on it”.

Between exploration and organizational inertia. It is not intended to suggest that all interviewees suddenly began to portray a fully problematic view of their ongoing collaborative work. Many of them described the critical aspects but also stressed the ability of the consortium in finding solutions. However, once this new conversational atmosphere was set, most participants began to disclose some of the ongoing struggles with the coordination of the projects. Only in a few cases the difficulty was openly referred to as just a matter of incompatible personalities. Throughout the interview round, it became evident that a troubled collaborative dynamic was typically the result of an organizational issue.

First, some managers of technological companies openly talked of a change averse culture of the news managers involved in the projects where they were participating. At their eyes, their media partners were operating under a rigid hierarchical routine which

threatens to jeopardize the accomplishment of the project. In one case, for example, the manager of the journalistic company involved in a partnership with a technological company expected the software developed within the project to work immediately, without interfering with existing routines. The result had to materialize quickly and at the lowest price possible, which obviously put pressure on the technological company.

They are very commercially-oriented, there is no room for experimentation, their structure does not support it.. actually the collaboration with the journalists is very nice, I hope you will speak with [Participant 7], and they acknowledge that it is also about change management, and they wonder how we will be able to bring forward the whole crew.

Participant 2 – CEO at Technological company

In several projects this dynamic created a tension between the desire to make room for explorative, and therefore risky, experiments, and the willingness to settle into a reassuring trajectory of predictable and only marginally innovative results, a response that echoes existing research highlighting how institutional stasis and short-term exploitative strategies tend to prevail in innovation work (Koivula et al., 2022; Lowrey, 2011):

When I arrived on board of the project, I pushed for moving towards the long-term track and change the initial plan. We try to move from the old plan to the newer one, more risky, but we will also try to have results on the old plan, since [company 8] wanted to see tangible results..

Participant 16 – Innovation manager at broadcasting corporation

Governance gap: Operating without a protocol. In other cases, participants reflected on the internal tensions as being connected to the lack of a collaborative governance framework of the projects, sometimes depicted as temporary organizational entities without a decisional protocol. Partners usually need time to negotiate the conditions of their engagement, gain mutual trust, and figure out all the practicalities. This preliminary work usually demands substantial energy from the companies involved, especially without a clear decisional framework and clear guidelines indicating how the collaboration should be operated throughout all phases of the project, including how the benefits and risks should be divided.

In some cases, the agreements define a typical buyer-seller dynamic, where the co-creation aspect coexist with, and is endangered by, a fully commercial logic. In other cases, the presence of a neutral partner, like a research institution, contributes to mitigate such commercial tension.

We are neutral, and we look from distance, for us the stakes are lower, if the product does not work.. for us it is about the knowledge, the expertise we can build in human-centric design. This could mitigate some commercial interest.

Participant 6 – Researcher at a higher education institution

However, the absence of a clear collaborative governance structure can also exacerbate the tendency of some companies to prioritize their own interest over the collective project scope, with each partner trying to get the most out of the collaborative work, for its own gain, and at a detriment of the collective scope, the so-called fairness issue (Hückstädt, 2022; Meißner et al., 2022). A minor partner of a large consortium explained this dynamic by referring to how the technological company of the consortium, the same complaining about the commercial drive of the media companies involved, tries to steer the project in its advantage, losing the larger goal of the project. This requires an internal effort of “consortium policing”, usually operated by a more neutral partner that has a higher interest in the final achievement of the agreed project deliverables.

In such cases, the collaboration becomes intrinsically transactional and competitive, showing the complexity of operating a project through temporary and unstructured decisional protocols. What is particularly noteworthy is that these situations are especially challenging for smaller organizations, as they further exacerbate existing power imbalances within the consortia. For smaller companies it’s much harder to have their own project proposals accepted in the first place, since they lack sufficient resources and expertise to design and write project proposals, as they do not have personnel on the payroll dedicated to external funding acquisition. As a result, they typically participate as secondary partners. However, once involved, they quickly face the challenge of making their voices heard within the consortium.

We cannot afford to not be part of these collaborative projects, for a matter of PR, but then we are confronted with the problem of gaining our share out of the collaborations. [...] the Flemish government demands that one company leads the consortium, but this creates a bit an unbalance, it is hard for [Company 2] to separate their goals and their roadmap from the collaborative deliverables.

Participant 10 – Postproduction manager at Broadcasting and media services company

Design flaw: When programmes amplify power asymmetries. Examining internal power imbalances within consortia through the broader lens of the overall programme design adds another layer of complexity and calls for a more critical analysis. In fact, in the declarations of many participants, the Relanceplan Programme had been designed with large, commercial news organizations in mind. Many indicated that the large-scale grants (those of about one million euro per project) were intended for established organizations for which, however, such external contribution, does not really make the difference in the overall internal balance of investments in technological innovation.

There is a lot of consolidation, look at [Company 15] and [Company 3]. Consolidation and synergy management. These companies move a lot of money, it will not be a few million euros to make a difference, for them it is a drop in the ocean, when it comes to really make a difference in terms of digital transformation.

Participant 12 - Project manager officer of Technological company

Large companies are already in a favorable position when funding becomes available, as they possess the necessary resources and expertise to craft successful proposals. Compounding this advantage, the *Relanceplan* was structured in a way that allowed a single company to participate in an unlimited number of funded projects. In practice, this led to large companies being involved in multiple collaborations simultaneously, not only the large-scale, but also the small-scale. Notably, this aspect of the program's design created significant challenges at the collaborative level. Several respondents reported tensions stemming from the (under)involvement of their partners, often because these companies were spread across multiple funded projects. As a result, they faced operational overload, preventing them from allocating sufficient resources and attention to each individual collaboration.

We have to be honest with the fact that it's really noticeable that [Company 8] is struggling with their daily business, and they are struggling with handling the project, we are really the drivers and [Company 8] isn't ready, does not have people and time to be part of this thing.

Participant 14 – Co-founder and project lead at Technological company

Discussion and conclusion

This study set out to examine both the motivations for joining funded projects and the collaborative dynamics that unfold during their implementation, to explore how these motivations correspond, or come into tension, with the practical enactment of collaboration, a process that previous empirical evidence has shown to be particularly complex (Slot, 2021). The findings of this study reveal that there is no uniform set of motivations driving journalistic and technological companies to engage in publicly funded collaborative innovation projects. Rather, motivations vary significantly across organizations, depending on factors such as organizational culture, prior experience with funding, and strategic orientation. While some companies are, at least discursively, driven by strategic complementarity and a genuine interest in cross-disciplinary innovation, others participate largely for revenue-seeking purposes, viewing collaboration as a vehicle for resource extraction rather than joint development. This reflects a broader dynamic in which the availability of subsidies can incentivize actors to pursue funding primarily for its immediate financial benefits (Murschetz, 2022; Myllylahti and Meese, 2024).

Interestingly, these differing motivations shape how companies behave within consortia: some embrace collective experimentation and knowledge exchange, while others prioritize their individual goals, often to the detriment of shared project outcomes, typically because of path-dependent decision-making routines coupled by a commercially driven mentality. In these cases, collaboration turns more easily into a transactional, competitive space where existing structural asymmetries are magnified, and the collaborative logic is compromised, as already evidenced by other empirical studies conducted around collaborations in the journalistic sector (Virta and Malmelin, 2022; Walters, 2024).

Theoretical implications

The findings from this study highlight the dual potential of publicly funded collaborative innovation programmes in journalism. On one hand, such funding schemes can function as enablers of cross-disciplinarity, amplifying the scale and scope of innovation projects, facilitating resource exchange, and fostering synergies that individual actors could not achieve independently. From this perspective, funding for collaborative innovation underscores the intrinsic value of strategic complementarity as a key driver of journalism innovation, as emphasized in prior theoretical and empirical research (Gade and Raviola, 2009; Klauf, 2020; Lewis and Usher, 2016; Stark, 2009; Zambelli and Morganti, 2024). When successful, these collaborations serve as effective policy instruments, capable of justifying public investment by enabling experimentation and knowledge exchange that would otherwise be hindered by financial constraints or organizational risk aversion (Lindmark et al., 2013).

On the other hand, the same funding instruments can be co-opted by some actors, particularly dominant incumbents, as revenue extraction mechanisms and as platforms for advancing individual strategic agendas at the expense of shared project goals and knowledge sharing. Rather than fostering genuine transformation, such programmes may unintentionally reinforce incumbent logics already identified by new institutionalism and organizational research on journalism innovation practices, namely bounded rationality (Lowrey, 2011), short-termism (Hermida and Young, 2021; Posetti, 2018), and behaviors driven by legitimacy-seeking or contingency (Paulussen, 2016).

Drawing on the analytical insights derived from the findings, the decisive factor in determining whether funding may or may not favor this logic lies in the governance architecture of the funding instrument itself. Additional programme's design elements may have helped mitigate the risk of opportunistic behavior and realign incentives toward collective, long-term value creation. These, based on the data emerged within the interviews, may include setting caps on the number of projects a single company can access, the establishment of clear co-creation protocols, a structured support to smaller organizations during the funding application phase, the distribution of funding over longer time horizons and the involvement of a neutral entity - such as an academic institution or an independent consortium coordinator - to mediate between partners and ensure fair collaboration.

Without such safeguards, collaborative innovation funding risks becoming a subsidy for already well-resourced incumbents who are least in need of public support yet best equipped to capture it. Given how innovation already functions as a dominant discursive framework shaping the trajectory and operational logic of journalism, often within a narrow, market-driven paradigm (Creech and Nadler, 2018; Hermida and Young, 2021), public funding schemes should avoid further entrench this logic by reinforcing path-dependent approaches to innovation.

Given the documented close ties between Flemish policymakers and legacy media (Enli et al., 2019), this evidence raises urgent concerns. The concept and practice of innovation, with its semantic ambiguity, appears to be rhetorically mobilized both by legacy media and by policymakers to achieve either commercial or political objectives.

Several interviewees - many of whom explicitly requesting not to be quoted - referred to the Relanceplan as being politically motivated. From this perspective, rather than being designed to broadly benefit the industry, the programme may have functioned as a means for the government to strengthen its existing relationships with established players. Echoing an argument of [Picone and Pauwels \(2013: 157\)](#), this evidence aligns with the idea that “Flemish policymakers and the ‘interests’ of large media companies seem to have largely found each other in a common belief in ICT and media innovation as an important driver of growth”. While this common belief may not be inherently flawed, the way funding is structured determines whether it serves as an opportunity for a select few or as a catalyst for long-term, sector-wide transformation.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is situated within a relatively small media market, which may limit the generalizability of findings to larger contexts. Additionally, interviews were conducted midway through project implementation rather than at the conclusion, meaning the research captures tensions and challenges as they unfolded but does not account for how conflicts were ultimately resolved or what concrete results were achieved. Furthermore, the study focuses exclusively on senior decision-makers, excluding practitioners who could have provided deeper insights into the day-to-day collaborative dynamics.

Future research could address these gaps by conducting comparative analyses across different media markets to examine how different structural conditions influence collaborative innovation. Furthermore, longitudinal studies following projects from inception to completion could offer a more comprehensive understanding of both conflicts and long-term outcomes. Lastly, closer attention to the programme’s design phase may be devoted, exploring stakeholders’ involvement and governance structures.

Despite its limitations, this study underscores the importance of critically assessing both current and future innovation funding initiatives that adopt a collaborative framework. By shedding light on the tensions, motivations, and structural design flaws within publicly funded collaborative projects, this research provides an evidence-based foundation for policymakers and industry stakeholders to refine and enhance future innovation support strategies, ultimately making them more inclusive, effective, and aligned with the evolving needs of the entire journalistic sector.

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Consent to participate

Participants provided written informed consent to participate in this research.

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