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Breaking barriers: the role of external innovation support in enhancing media organisations' innovation processes

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, external support for journalism innovation has grown, driven by public, private, and philanthropic actors, such as governments, tech companies and foundations. This paper analyses how these supporters assist media organisations in overcoming common challenges and barriers in their innovation processes. Using the German WPK Innovation Fund as a unique research setting, it adopts a qualitative longitudinal multiple-case study approach combining interviews, document analysis and observations to examine 20 innovation ventures in journalism. Findings show that such support can play a pivotal role for media organisations, particularly at the meso level of organisational challenges. The paper provides a framework for future research to analyse other support structures more systematically and holds practical implications for all parties designing and improving them.

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Introduction

Various new actors, including governments, foundations, third-party media labs, and tech companies, have played a growing role in enabling and supporting journalism innovation in the past few years (Benson, 2018; Ferrucci & Nelson, 2019; Mesquita & de Lima-Santos, 2024; Mills & Wagemans, 2021; Milojevic & Larsen, 2024; Myllylahti & Meese, 2024; Noster, 2024; Noster et al., 2025; van Kranenburg, 2017; Wright et al., 2019). This is because innovation, understood as “the introduction of something new that adds value to customers and to the media organization” (García-Avilés et al., 2018, p. 27), does not always emerge easily within media organisations. Instead, it is often constrained by limitations in resources, skills, organisational culture, market and policy environments (Meier et al., 2023; Wyss et al., 2024).

Previous studies note the increase in direct funding and acknowledge its potential benefits, but ultimately, they focus primarily on risks of vested interests (Benson, 2018; Hermida & Young, 2024; Wright et al., 2019) and potential unintended consequences (Myllylahti & Meese, 2024). In contrast, it has rarely been examined

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how and to what extent such support helps innovation projects in journalism to materialise. Against this background, the paper asks the following research question (RQ):

How does external innovation support assist media organisations in overcoming common challenges and barriers in their innovation processes?

This article draws upon the specific research context of the German “WPK Innovation Fund for Science Journalism” (hereinafter: the Innovation Fund). This foundation-funded, but association-administered support structure for innovation in science and data journalism ran from August 2022 to March 2025. The authors were granted continuous access to key stakeholders involved in the fund, including beneficiaries, organisers, and board members. This access enabled a qualitative multiple-case study approach (Yin, 2018) to investigate 20 innovative journalism ventures through semi-structured interviews, document analysis and observations. Although the fund is specific in nature, the longitudinal scope of the research revealed several patterns of interaction between media organisations and external supporters that can hold generalisable insights.

Most importantly, the research demonstrates that external journalism innovation support can play a pivotal role in helping media organisations overcome innovation challenges, in particular at the meso level. Moreover, the findings advance media business studies by moving beyond normative, ethical considerations, offering an outcomes-oriented framework for future research to systematically analyse innovation challenges, support solutions and their interplay. Not least, the study gives practical management implications for potential funders by underscoring the importance of long-term, flexible, and non-bureaucratic funding complemented by capacity-building measures, tailored to the specific needs of different types of media organisations.

In the following, we first introduce existing research on journalism innovation, its support ecosystem, and the unique research context of the Innovation Fund, prior to outlining our methodology. At the core of this article are the empirical results each presented for the micro, meso and macro level of both innovation challenges and potential solutions. Finally, we offer a discussion as well as concluding remarks that prove relevance of our research for both theory and practice.

Theoretical approaches

Challenges in innovation processes for media organisations

Within the study of journalism, innovation can be seen as “the performance of reactions to changes or transformations of news products, processes, and services irrespective of size, radicality, and incrementality through the use of creative skills” (Meier & Graßl, 2024, p. 9). It can thus refer to incremental improvements within media organisations such as the increase in cross-departmental collaboration (Lugschitz et al., 2024) or the development of new digital services based on audience needs (Olsen & Furseth, 2023), but also radical changes like the adoption of generative AI within newsrooms (Grimme & Zabel, 2024). Examining these examples shows that the term innovation does not only highlight new technologies and tools, but also changes in organisational structures or business models (Belair-Gagnon & Steinke, 2020; García-Avilés, 2021). Storsul and

Krumsvik (2013) identified four key innovation categories that often interdepend: product innovations (e.g. new content formats or distribution methods), process innovations (e.g. new organisational structures), positioning innovations (e.g. targeting new audience segments), and paradigmatic innovations (e.g. new business models).

In the past, some scholars tied the future sustainability of journalism to the profession’s successful adoption of these innovative products and practices, arguing that it is crucial for media organisations in order to adapt to the changing market situation and react to new audience preferences (Anderson et al., 2014). Yet, others question that a stable industry such as journalism can easily adapt to and adopt innovations (Ferrucci & Perreault, 2021). This challenge is often described as the “liability of newness” (p. 6), which suggests that established organisations forced to reinvent themselves in light of disruptive technology are rarely equipped to do so, creating a gap between enthusiasm for innovation and the skills and structures needed to implement it effectively (Ferrucci & Perreault, 2024). More precisely, journalism as a field faces several internal and external factors that limit its capacity for sustained innovation (see Table 1) (Meier et al., 2023; Wyss et al., 2024). In consequence, many new media ventures have ultimately failed (Buschow, 2020), legacy media continue to experience major layoffs (Bossio & Nelson, 2021) and innovation processes within both traditional and non-traditional newsrooms frequently stagnate (Schmitz Weiss & Domingo, 2010).

For instance, internal factors at the individual, micro level may hinder innovation, such as distrust among colleagues, but also in management decisions, rigid newsroom structures as well as reluctance to embrace new approaches (Meier et al., 2023). Journalists resistant to innovation can thus create significant obstacles for those who are intrinsically motivated to drive change (Ferrucci & Perreault, 2021; Konieczna, 2014).

At the organisational meso level, legacy media often lack a culture of failure, preventing change through experimentation. In contrast, new media organisations may promote such a culture of change, but struggle with their often founder-centric leadership, where concentrated decision-making limits both innovation and the recognition of knowledge gaps (Wolf et al., 2023). Financial resources also play an important role: while sufficient funding may enable innovation by allowing for appropriate staffing and infrastructure, in particular technical, a lack of resources remains a significant barrier (Wyss et al., 2024). Finally, external

Table 1. Obstructive Factors for journalism innovation.

	Internal Factors	External Factors
Micro Level Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Distrust among colleagues and managers ● Resistance to experimentation among staff 	
Meso Level Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Absence of a failure-tolerant culture; rigid structures ● Lack of expertise in relevant fields (tech, admin) ● Limited resources, including finances and personnel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of relevant industry network ● Lack of collaboration and open innovation
Macro Level Factors		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Market challenges ● Lack of political support ● Uncertainty about interests of external funders ● Public distrust in media

Source: Own illustration based on (Meier et al., 2023).

factors such as insufficient connections with relevant industry contacts facing similar innovation challenges can exclude organisations from valuable partnerships, ideas or open innovation processes (Klaß, 2020; Zambelli & Morganti, 2024).

At the macro level, regulatory frameworks, market conditions and societal trends may both hinder or support innovation, depending on how media organisations respond to them (Myllylahti & Meese, 2024; O'Brien & Wellbrock, 2024).

The ecosystem enabling and supporting journalism innovation

In response to these innovation challenges, public, private, and philanthropic initiatives have arisen in recent years, that increasingly play a crucial role in fostering journalism innovation by providing financial resources, training, and networking. Among these novel innovation support structures entering the field of journalism are professional associations, third-party innovation labs, tech companies, government funding agencies, and foundations (Harbers et al., 2024; Lowrey et al., 2019; Noster, 2024).

For example, foundations have emerged as prominent funders of journalism, ranging from large national or international entities to small community foundations (Ferrucci & Nelson, 2019; Konieczna, 2022). The most notable example was the 2023 announcement of Press Forward, a \$500 million strong coalition of U.S. based foundations aimed at revitalising local news, with a strong emphasis on driving journalism innovation (Dudley, 2024). Non-foundation venture philanthropists have joined the funding ecosystem, such as the Google News Initiative or the American Journalism Project in partnership with OpenAI (Creech, 2024; Mesquita & de Lima-Santos, 2024). Finally, several Western governments have introduced specific innovation policies for media organisations (Noster, 2024; Noster et al., 2025; van Kranenburg, 2017).

Despite the mentioned benefits, research often takes a critical view of the intermediary role played by these novel actors. Scholars highlight that support structures frequently come with conditions, such as foundations mandating the adoption of specific technologies or other innovative approaches (Benson, 2018; Wright et al., 2019). Similarly, the tech giants have been criticised for “seeding entrepreneurial ideologies across the journalism field” (Creech, 2024, p. 2) and approaching journalism innovation as merely a financial issue (Hermida & Young, 2024; Mesquita & de Lima-Santos, 2024). The substantial resources that these stakeholders distribute to news organisations potentially grant them with significant influence over the future of journalism, raising concerns about “media capture” by donors (Schiffrin, 2021). With regards to public funding, scholars also raise some concerns about unintended consequences, such as funding potentially skewing competition (Myllylahti & Meese, 2024).

Even though these support measures were developed precisely to address innovation challenges, existing scholarly work has rarely identified how they can help to achieve this goal. To address the current research gap, this article focusses on the tangible benefits of such support, including both financial resources and non-monetary measures (such as training, networking events, etc.), as well as on the particular types of innovation challenges this support may help to address both short and long-term but also the limitations of such initiatives

The research context

The Innovation Fund supported innovative projects in German science and data journalism, providing approximately one million euros in funding from August 2022 to March 2025. In addition to financial support, the fund organised conference meet-ups, coaching through a partnership with an incubator, and resources for individual training. The fund was managed by the German science journalism association *Wissenschaftspressekonferenz* (WPK) and financed by a consortium of journalism or science-focussed foundations (Buschow et al., 2024). This arrangement enabled the fund to issue grants to both for-profit and non-profit media. It ran five funding calls, attracting 131 valid applications in total. Applicants could choose between two funding lines; line A, providing up to 10,000 euros for experimental projects, and line B, offering up to 75,000 euros for more advanced initiatives. In this way, the fund aimed to encourage both emerging teams and established media organisations to submit innovative project proposals. A final set of 28 for-profit and non-profit projects were selected as most innovative by an independent jury. Examples of innovations include amongst others a B2B platform for visualising satellite data, an open-source tool for data sonification and an AI browser add-on for fact-checking. Each project joined a cohort and received funding for a period of three to 12 months.¹

Accompanying the fund with empirical research offered a highly unique context, as it allowed for a longitudinal analysis of a diverse set of journalism innovations and provided researchers with close, continuous and real-time access to a multitude of data points. This approach captured the functioning of this external support structure as it unfolded, rather than relying on retrospective accounts. Due to the specific set-up, the analysis of the fund's approach to helping media organisations overcome typical innovation challenges holds some generalisability. This is particularly grounded in the methodology that ensured a diverse sample and detailed data collection.

Methods

Sample

The paper followed a qualitative multiple-case study approach (Yin, 2018), thoroughly investigating 20 of the 28 journalism ventures supported by the Innovation Fund over a span of two and a half years (August 2022 to March 2025). The number of examined ventures was deliberately reduced to allow for an in-depth focus on each case that was selected and to eliminate redundancy where they were too similar.² Case selection thus followed a most-different replication logic, based on the rationale that if the fund manages to address the challenges faced by various types of media organisations and teams, it provides the strongest basis for generalisation (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Case diversity was ensured based on five categorical variables: 1) funding line (A/B), 2) organisation's age (in years), 3) legal structure (non-profit/for-profit; identified by corporate form), 4) journalistic expertise (yes/no; identified by presence of a trained journalist on the team) and 5) innovation type (product, process, positioning and paradigm following Storsul and Krumsvik's (2013) typology). Table 2 gives a detailed overview of the cases examined in this study.

Table 2. Cases examined in empirical research.

Case	Funding Line	Age	Legal Structure	Journalistic Expertise	Type of Innovation
1	A	<1 year	–	no	product
2	A	<1 year	for-profit	yes	product
3	A	<1 year	–	yes	product
4	B	1 year	for-profit	yes	paradigm
5	B	6 years	for-profit	yes	product
6	A	<1 year	–	yes	product
7	A	<1 year	non-profit	yes	product
8	B	4 years	for-profit	no	product
9	B	<1 year	non-profit	yes	paradigm
10	B	5 years	for-profit	yes	process
11	A	<1 year	–	yes	product
12	B	9 years	non-profit	yes	process
13	B	1 year	non-profit	yes	product
14	A	<1 year	–	no	product
15	A	<1 year	–	yes	product
16	B	<1 year	non-profit	yes	positioning
17	B	<1 year	for-profit	yes	process
18	B	5 years	for-profit	yes	paradigm
19	B	<1 year	for-profit	yes	product
20	B	<1 year	–	no	product

Source: Own illustration.

Data collection

The data gathered for this article represents a unique dataset, triangulating 27 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with project representatives and fund organisers, along with 100 internal documents (e.g. emails, applications, reports, jury feedback), and 17 observation notes from various on-site board and jury meetings and workshops surrounding the funded projects. Data was collected continuously throughout the fund's existence and organised in three layers, namely primary case evidence, contextual evidence, and background material.

For primary case evidence, the study employed a longitudinal approach to capture meaningful change in each of the 20 ventures selected for in-depth examination. Multiple sources were gathered at different points in time, including project applications to understand the specific innovation objectives of the respective case, jury feedback where available, midterm and final reports to assess progress, and 23 semi-structured interviews with project representatives (20 initial interviews were conducted a few months into funding and four follow-up interviews one year after funding had ended; in one case, a single interview served simultaneously as an initial and follow-up).³ Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes to explore ongoing challenges and achievements. For all interviews, semi-structured interview guides facilitated the exploration of key topics, including each project's status quo, challenges addressed by the fund, the short- and long-term impact of its support on each case's innovation trajectories, and overall perceptions and evaluation of the fund. This format also allowed flexibility for follow-up questions based on interviewees' responses (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interviews were conducted in German using the video conferencing tool Zoom. They were transcribed and relevant quotes translated into English.

In addition to case-specific data, four interviews with fund organisers (one every six months), informative emails sent by them as well as 17 observation notes from workshops, board and jury meetings were used for triangulation, as they provided further evidence on the context the ventures operated in and institutional processes and decision-making.

Finally, midterm and final reports from the eight ventures supported by the Innovation Fund, not selected as cases, were also considered for background information and to validate whether findings from the selected cases reflected broader trends across all supported ventures (Bowen, 2009).

Data analysis

All three data sources (interviews, documents and observation notes) were included in a qualitative content analysis following a mixed deductive-inductive approach (Mayring, 2014), with a single coding protocol applied across all layers (primary evidence, contextual evidence, background material) to structure all material in the same way, identify recurring themes and triangulate them.

First, categories were developed deductively based on the research question, specifically focusing on common challenges and barriers in innovation processes and types of innovation support that could help overcome them. In a second step, inductive category formation was employed to refine and reduce the material within each category (Saldaña, 2013; Schreier, 2012) and sort them by micro, meso and macro level implications.

The 20 selected ventures served as the core of the analysis. All documents (applications, jury feedback, midterm and final reports) and 24 interviews were coded in-depth. Each case was analysed individually. Cases were then compared with each other to derive general conclusions. Findings from these cases were weighted most heavily in interpretation, and direct quotes and examples were systematically extracted to illustrate identified themes and cross-case patterns in the results section. Contextual evidence and background material were not weighted as heavily as primary evidence, yet they provided crucial validation of patterns observed in the core cases.

Results

The innovation challenges faced by projects funded by the Innovation Fund align closely with those discussed in the literature (see “Theoretical Approaches”), with our findings providing an even broader perspective. In addition to highlighting these challenges, this section explores potential ways to address them through different forms of support on the micro, meso and macro level.

Micro level

Our sample from the Innovation Fund only included a highly motivated set of projects, with team members deeply committed to advancing innovations in journalism. None of the cases showed any signs of hesitation or doubt regarding the innovation objectives they had established. Nonetheless, some experienced difficult interpersonal dynamics that occasionally led to major slowdowns in project progress and sometimes even project termination. For example, a co-founder’s departure due to disagreements caused a complete restructuring of the team in order to replace their skills (cases 1, 11). Similarly, disagreements between non-executive team members just as often resulted in a member leaving the team, causing substantial project delays (case 7). High turnover rates combined with illness among key team members, but

also family responsibilities (e.g. for team members with care work), further slowed down progress (cases 1, 4, 7, 8, 11, 15, 19).

There are actually only two and a quarter of us left, down from the original seven or six people. And of course, that makes it much more difficult to somehow drive this project forward, because then, no, with two people it's also/with my co-organiser, the mother got sick and then of course that has priority and so on and so forth. (case 7)

Some teams also experienced existential fear, which affected morale and overall commitment to their projects.

It's simply not possible because of the psychological pressure. [...] I mean, it's not at all clear how it will go with our project, whether we can make a living from it or not. (case 1)

Particularly in funding line A, project leads were often presented with such complex situations for the first time in their careers, which made it even more difficult for them to continue steering the team effectively (cases 2, 7). One team lead reflected that he still wonders "what [he] did wrong in terms of team leadership", as several members left amid accusations of founder centricity (case 7). It shows that when a team senses uncertainty or lack of confidence in their leader as well as colleagues, team morale and trust can suffer (case 13).

In our sample, external support for journalism innovation proved largely ineffective at addressing these micro-level, interpersonal challenges. This is because support structures like the Innovation Fund typically operate outside the social fabric of any media organisation, unaware of interpersonal issues that may have an impact on a team's cohesion and productivity. Moreover, developing a strong understanding of any team's internal dynamics and supporting an innovation-enhancing culture takes time and effort, which is unlikely to be achieved through a support programme limited to providing assistance at a maximum of one year.

Meso level

Most innovation challenges were identified at the meso level, many aligning with those discussed in the theory chapter, such as a lack of expertise, limited financial resources, and an unreliable support network. Difficulties with self-organisation emerged as a further challenge. For each of these challenges, the Innovation Fund offered potential solutions.

Self-organisation

Regarding self-organisation, several cases struggled with introducing the right tools and systems for collaboration (cases 1, 2, 4, 7, 17). Some teams in funding line A also acknowledged that their main challenge lay in becoming a professional company, given that so far, they had simply been "a group of people that had done this as a hobby" (case 2). As many teams worked remotely, physical distance quickly complicated matters even further (cases 4, 5).

The lesson learned is that for innovation projects in which many things are happening for the first time and need to be tried out anew, it is essential to encourage the project team to

come together [in person] on several occasions. However, since we had a team that lived across Germany, the costs of such a meeting are naturally higher. (case 5)

In addition, diverse working styles created frustrations; differing preferences for communication and workflows led to inefficiencies, complicating coordination efforts. (case 7)

We communicate through Signal, but then some say: “Send me an email instead,” while others say, “No, I’d rather use Signal because I already receive too many emails.” I try to accommodate everyone, but it’s impossible to satisfy all preferences. (case 7)

In the context of the Innovation Fund, facilitating regular in-person meetings for each individual project team appeared to be beneficial, especially when made possible thanks to the fund’s reimbursement of travel expenses (case 4, 5, 17). These gatherings provide an opportunity for team members to collaboratively address emerging challenges, align on goals and build cohesion. Similarly, coachings helped projects to improve their work flows and communication styles.

Expertise

The projects experienced a notable lack of specialised knowledge in one or several key areas relevant to introducing an innovative idea successfully into the market, such as product development, but also monetisation, marketing and legal.

In terms of product development, most challenges stem from a lack of clarity in focus and the general pace of technological development. Several teams found it challenging to prioritise essential functions in their product roadmaps (cases 1, 2, 5, 15). For instance, one team wrote in their final report that at the outset, they had “mapped out a very extensive range of functionalities, which turned out to be too ambitious” (case 8). To successfully execute the project, focus had to be realigned towards the core functionalities and user needs. Additionally, teams particularly focused on technical innovations had to learn how to accommodate for delays in both timeline and budget, often due to unforeseen technological setbacks or changes in programming techniques (case 5). This holds particularly true with the emergence of AI models, which compelled some organisations to adjust their strategies (cases 2, 8). To support these cases, the Innovation Fund offered value proposition workshops to align projects with audience needs (case 6), provided guidance on IT architecture (case 4) and user testing (case 20) – all through a partnership with a media incubator. Several teams also noted that a larger number of collaborative sessions with other teams for troubleshooting and sharing lessons learned would have been valuable (cases 14, 18), in particular if technical and non-technical teams were to meet (case 8).

Where do you start? What worked, what didn’t? [...] That is a topic where it would be really cool to have a sparring session where you can say, this is how we built it, these are our ideas, take a look, how did you do it? (case 18)

After product launch, many teams encountered challenges in generating revenue due to limited scalability, with one project saying that it was a “good thing that [they were] working on a business model, but [...] it’s much more complex and challenging than with other [non-media] start-ups because [they] don’t have a product that can be scaled without end” (case 2). Others were constrained by a non-profit business structure (cases 3, 7) and unclear market potential (cases 5, 6, 19).

To be honest, we haven't thought that far ahead. Of course, it would be fantastic if there were a business model behind it. We had already outlined a few approaches in the application. However, that's probably not the case now with the funding. (case 19)

More broadly, several cases experienced difficulties in developing sustainable revenue models (cases 16, 18, 19) and establishing effective marketing funnel strategies (cases 4, 8, 16, 18, 20). In many cases, coaching was seen as the most beneficial support measure to tackle these challenges (cases 1, 2, 4), because it directly helped teams improve their revenue strategies and provided them with practical tools. However, this measure was not equally suitable for all types of media organisations; for instance, non-profit media found it almost impossible to benefit from the mostly startup-oriented lessons. Others were dissatisfied with the quality of the coaching (cases 8, 13, 17), highlighting the importance of carefully vetting coaches and gradually building a dedicated expert pool. Other than that, regular feedback sessions with funders and networking at conferences were most useful for further refining monetisation strategies. Some projects also valued milestone tracking by the funders to encourage progress (cases 14, 15), while yet others preferred regular meet-ups within the cohort to exchange business insights and updates (cases 1, 4, 6, 8, 18, 19).

I'd be interested to know if creating these connections could be more of a focus, to see if the network can be strengthened. It's a small field with limited funding—so consolidating and empowering the existing players [could be helpful]. (case 12)

Finally, the legal challenges encountered by the projects spanned a range of areas, from navigating corporate and tax law to addressing intellectual property and data protection, all of which posed significant hurdles both at the incorporation stage and as ongoing operational concerns. In particular, projects in funding line A faced issues around choosing an appropriate legal form for their companies and delays in setting them up (e.g. waiting for notary appointments and court registration) (cases 1, 2, 7, 17). Others had difficulties understanding association law and obtaining non-profit status, including the hassle of many interactions with the tax office for this purpose (case 7). Other early-stage issues were related to trademark law and financial compliance (case 2). Furthermore, several projects struggled to determine whether their funding was subject to income tax, leading to a lot of back-and-forth with tax offices (cases 1, 2, 7, 11). More established projects, particularly those in funding line B, needed support in areas such as competition law and compliance with data protection and privacy regulations (cases 10, 18, 20). In several cases, the absence of a structured advisory network for legal and tax matters resulted in delays and knowledge gaps. Pro-actively offering legal risk awareness training could in the future help new media ventures to establish themselves (cases 2, 7). For more established media organisations, implementing an advisory network where legal experts are on standby may be equally helpful to ensure they remain informed about relevant laws and regulations.

Financial resources

Money appears to be a decisive factor in determining whether innovative projects are being initiated or not. Several cases noted that the provided funding was particularly critical for them to launch, as it helped to minimise the risk of personal debt (case 1, 11, 14). Nonetheless, several cases found the budgets they received from the Innovation

Fund to be insufficient to cover the necessary time and resources required to complete their innovation work effectively.

The money provided is simply not that much. It is actually a very small budget for such a big project, isn't it? Even if [the funders] see it differently, the budget is actually quite small. And that is why we deliberately kept [the project] small. (case 5)

Other cases struggled to stay within budget. On one hand, this led to some teams under-compensating working hours. Sometimes even unpaid overtime was undertaken in order to achieve innovation objectives which put many in a precarious position (cases 2, 3, 9). On the other hand, many team members additionally worked as freelancers or held other full-time jobs in order to make a living (cases 1, 6, 7, 11, 14). One interviewee noted that “when the budgets are this low, then you simply can't take the time and say, I'm going to only do this now. Instead, you always do it on the side” (case 14). They often found it challenging to balance their project work with these other financial obligations, causing delays and reducing their ability to focus.

The Innovation Fund was mostly unable to address these challenges, as funding amounts were pre-set for each funding line and could not be adjusted based on project-specific needs. However, it provided clear funding modalities, such as advance payments at the project start. Also, to receive the second and occasionally third funding instalments, projects were only required to submit a midterm report; no presentations or additional requirements were necessary. These minimal requirements were much appreciated by the beneficiaries (cases 8, 16, 17). Timely and clear communication on financial matters from the funders gave projects freedom to operate in ways that suit their goals and workflows, without restrictive oversight (cases 13, 15). Also, the Innovation Fund organised for grant-writing training, offering guidance on identifying relevant supplemental funding opportunities and navigating the application processes for other grants or public funds (cases 3, 9, 14).

Industry network

The majority of cases consisted of team members who were former journalists or had collaborated with journalists prior to submitting their project to the Innovation Fund. As a result, they did not have to rely on the fund for connections with and introductions to other journalists or media managers, as they could leverage their own network for feedback on their products, business models and processes (cases 5, 15, 17).

In contrast, teams without a journalism background did not have that kind of network. For that reason, they also tended to more often than not diverge from journalistic standards during product development, as they often discussed their ideas with individuals from their own fields, such as developers, artists, educators or scientists (cases 1, 6, 8, 14, 20). In some instances, this led to innovations that, despite receiving support from the Innovation Fund to advance journalism, ultimately did not provide any benefits for the industry itself. Other projects simply struggled to focus on their target group.

To mitigate these risks, close mentorship and structured networking during the development phase were particularly critical for these non-journalist teams to persist and to bring their innovative ideas into the field.

Macro level

In most cases only few macro level challenges were observed, which does not necessarily diminish their significance, but rather suggests that the investigated organisations may not have been fully aware of these issues at the time. Nonetheless, one recurring macro level theme was the structure and focus of the broader support ecosystem for journalism innovation. Several cases reported difficulties in securing additional funding from external sources beyond the Innovation Fund, such as foundations, scholarships, or government programmes (cases 1, 3, 7, 9, 13, 14).

We have tried to obtain further funding. We received a micro-grant for two events, but again, we couldn't do everything we wanted to. Foundations don't want to support us at the moment. And the question is now to what extent we can continue. (case 7)

We applied for [two public funding programs]. We had hoped that at least one application would be approved. Unfortunately, although both institutions and organisations found our idea exciting, there was no budget available. (case 13)

In this context, some criticised funders for prioritising “super fancy” ideas in their funding strategies (case 5), arguing that even the most innovative projects eventually require stable financial support for day-to-day operations (cases 5, 9). This critique aligns with existing literature, which suggests that external funders' overly strong focus on innovation may have negative consequences for the industry (Creech, 2024; Wright et al., 2019). Others interpreted these funder requests as reflective of tight budgets (cases 11, 13). Either way, the Innovation Fund's ability to address these concerns was limited, as it represents only one actor within a larger support ecosystem. To achieve meaningful change, all stakeholders – including private, public and philanthropic organisations – would most likely have to collaborate more closely to establish comprehensive guidelines for journalism innovation support, ensuring sustainability within the industry.

Discussion

Our findings both confirm and advance existing research on overcoming common challenges and barriers in media organisations' innovation processes. At the same time, they also provide practical insights for public, private and philanthropic stakeholders.

Theoretical contribution

This study advances theory on media innovation in three ways. First, it confirms that innovation challenges for media organisations manifest across micro, meso and macro levels.

Second, it expands current research by showing that overcoming these challenges requires not only financial resources but also distinct forms of external support. In the context of the Innovation Fund, three types of support proved most beneficial for media organisations: coaching, connection and coordination.

Each type addresses specific innovation challenges. Coaching is about equipping journalistic teams with the expertise, resources and self-organisational methods needed to initiate innovation processes. Its most effective forms include resource libraries, shared

Table 3. Capacity-building solutions for different innovation challenges of media organisations.

Challenges	Solutions		
	Coaching	Connection	Coordination
Micro Level			
Interpersonal Dynamics			
Meso Level			
Self-Organisation	X	X	
Expertise	X	X	
Financial Resources	X		X
Industry Network		X	
Macro Level			
Support Ecosystem			

Source: Own illustration.

best practices, tailored one-on-one workshops or group training sessions on product, business and legal matters. Connection focuses on knowledge exchange and fostering networks and partnerships among journalists, media organisations and external stakeholders. Coordination implies that funders are able to respond promptly to emerging needs whilst minimising administrative burden, for example by ensuring that payouts are structured in a clear manner or by reducing reporting requirements. Different innovation challenges require different combinations of these support types to achieve the best outcomes.

Third, the findings highlight that the interplay between levels is decisive. The Innovation Fund is most effective in addressing meso level challenges, but innovation can still fail if undermined by unresolved micro level challenges. At the same time, macro level factors may determine whether meso level support can scale, for instance through funder coalitions spanning private, public and philanthropic actors or good market and policy environments.

By introducing a matrix that links challenge levels with support types, our research offers a framework to capture these dynamics systematically (see Table 3). Understanding such mechanisms of interplay is essential to move beyond isolated accounts of innovation support.

Practical implications

Our findings from the Innovation Fund carry several practical implications for policy-makers, public and private funds, and philanthropists, albeit not necessarily generalisable.

First, they suggest that while funding is essential, financial resources alone are insufficient to help media organisations overcome common challenges and barriers in their innovation processes. To maximise the effectiveness of funding, it is crucial to complement monetary support with capacity-building measures. This additional support becomes particularly relevant in short-term programmes like the Innovation Fund, which only provided up to 12 months of funding. If funders wanted to have even more meaningful impact, they would need to engage in more hands-on mentorship such as in Accelerator programmes (Willemsen et al., 2021). Also, the coordination and administration of a fund is crucial, as transparent

payment schedules, minimal reporting burdens and continuous milestone tracking enable recipients to prioritise innovation while ensuring that support remains adaptable to changing conditions. In the long term, non-project-based funding may provide more effective support for innovation.

Second, support needs to be tailored to the needs of different types of organisations. We identified at least three distinct groups based on their development stage and their specific needs for financial and capacity-building support: Experimenters, Pioneers and Experts. Experimenters were typically part of funding line A and often operated either as early-stage startups or without any legal structure at all (e.g. freelancers). They required minimal financial resources, focusing on validating first product ideas. Their primary needs included broad capacity-building, such as acquiring skills to refine ideas and accessing networks for feedback and collaboration. This latter part was enhanced if they did not have prior experience in journalism. Experimenters valued strong coordination and predefined structures by the funders. Pioneers were usually part of funding line B and further advanced than Experimenters, often as established startups. They required substantial funding to scale their innovations. Pioneers benefitted from specific coaching to improve revenue models, optimise marketing funnels and professionalise financial and legal planning. They also relied on targeted connections with potential partners or investors and, like Experimenters, valued strong coordination by the funders to streamline processes. Experts included established SMEs or larger media organisations funded under line B. These organisations mostly required significant funding for day-to-day operations. They did not need additional capacity-building or connections, as they already possessed the expertise, infrastructure and network necessary for their work. Nonetheless, Experts expressed interest in meeting experimenters and pioneers, recognising them as potential future collaborators or beneficiaries of their initiatives. Additionally, Experts showed little concern for how the Innovation Fund was coordinated, given their extensive prior experience with philanthropic, private, or public funding.

In consequence, while the Innovation Fund is rooted in supporting science and data journalism, it is worth considering the above implications when designing, building or improving other funds in the field.

Conclusion and limitations

By utilising the Innovation Fund as a unique research context, this article aimed to analyse how external innovation support helps media organisations overcome common challenges and barriers in their innovation processes. The fund provided continuous access to stakeholders, documents, and meetings, enabling an in-depth analysis of how such a support structure functions in practice.

This study advances the scholarly discourse on external support for journalism innovation by shifting the focus from normative and ethical considerations to a more outcomes-oriented analysis. In particular, the findings provide a framework for future research to analyse other existing support programmes more systematically. The latter builds on the established micro, meso, and macro levels. By introducing coaching, connection, and coordination as additional analysis categories, it enables a more nuanced evaluation of both innovation challenges and capacity-building solutions and allows to consider the interplay between them.

In terms of practical implications, the study underscores the potential significance of long-term, flexible, and non-bureaucratic funding, complemented by capacity-building measures, with particular emphasis on aligning support with the specific needs of different types of media organisations, distinguishing at least three groups: experimenters, pioneers, and experts. These insights contribute to practice by providing actionable guidance for funders aiming to design or improve their own innovation support frameworks.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. For example, our research has been based on a specific support structure based on philanthropic funding, allowing only for a certain degree of generalisability. Future research should explore other such funds and compare their results with this research. Similarly, it could be beneficial to analyse the interplay between philanthropic, public and private funding mechanisms to comprehensively map the wider support ecosystem for journalism innovation. Finally, this study situates its findings within a specific country's context, thereby contrasting with much of the existing, often critical, work on philanthropic innovation support in the United States. Also, it does not consider any other regions in the world. However, in order to get a fuller picture, future research should examine how these innovation ecosystems function across diverse geographic and cultural contexts, including beyond the Western hemisphere.

Notes

1. The budget per project was determined in a way to cover different types of expenses, with only 50% permitted for internal personnel costs. The remaining funds could be allocated to other items, e.g. external personnel and material or operating costs.
2. Ventures excluded from in-depth analysis were not interviewed and received less analytical attention (see next sections “Data Collection” and “Data Analysis”).
3. Cases 4 and 16 were led by the same representative, but were separate projects; to simplify their interview experience, the follow-up for case 4 and initial interview for case 16 were conducted at the same time. Cases 1, 2, 4 and 7 were interviewed twice, as they were the only ones that at the time had been out of funding for over a year. Funding for all other cases was more recent, so they did not qualify for a second interview.

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Chat GPT-4o mini was occasionally used to improve language, similar to the services provided by a proof-reading agency. Generative AI was not used for any other purposes in this article.

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