

**GNI**

**Startups Lab  
Hispanoamérica**

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Google News Initiative

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# 1. Introduction

In the fall of 2021, **SembraMedia** launched GNI Startups Lab Hispanoamérica with the goal of **strengthening independent digital media organizations** that inform underserved communities and publish stories that other media often neglect.

"**GNI Startups Lab Hispanoamérica**" is a media business accelerator designed to help journalists and other social entrepreneurs build stronger news organizations by developing leadership skills, diversifying revenue sources, and increasing operational efficiency and impact.

After a rigorous selection process, **10 digital native media outlets** were chosen from more than **350 applicants from 18 countries**.



Some numbers from GNI Startups Lab

The selected media organizations received grants of \$10,000 to \$30,000, as well as more than 120 hours of strategic and tactical consulting support during the six-month acceleration program. (All numbers in this report are in U.S. dollars.)

We sought out media organizations that had already demonstrated they were serving the public interest and providing valuable information to their audiences, but needed help developing new revenue sources and building stronger teams. Consistent with our mission at SembraMedia, our goal was to help journalists and other socially-minded media entrepreneurs to build stronger organizations so that they produce more journalism with greater independence for years to come.

Most of the media in our cohort operate with small teams and limited resources, but they have an impact that punches above their weight when compared to the larger media organizations. The majority of their founders told us they started their news organizations not because they wanted to become entrepreneurs, but because they felt compelled to cover topics other media neglect. The media that participated in our GNI Startups Lab are filling news deserts, and working hard to attract audiences that often feel under-represented by existing media outlets in their markets.

The aim of this report is to share highlights from our work with each grantee. This report also offers more general insights about the opportunities and challenges we discovered as we sought to help these media organizations improve their sustainability.

“It was six months of hard work, learning and growth. A journey that helped us move forward toward institutional and corporate maturity.”

Patricia Mercado Sánchez  
Founder, Conexión Migrante

## Key impacts

**Team size:** the grantees increased the size of their teams by 23% on average.

**Return on funds granted:** the media outlets earned an average of 299% more revenue than the amount of the grants they spent during the six-month program.

**Traffic growth:** media outlets grew traffic to their websites by more than 16% on average.

## 2. More than 350 applications: How we chose media organizations

The GNI Startups Lab selection process was divided into two stages. First, we started with a broad promotional campaign and a relatively short application form. After the window to submit applications closed, 350 applicants were carefully reviewed and 68 media outlets were chosen to advance to a more comprehensive evaluation process conducted by a diverse team of judges, which included:



**Abraham Torres**  
SembraMedia  
ambassador in  
Mexico



**Fabiola Gutierrez**  
SembraMedia  
ambassador in  
Bolivia



**Indhira Suero**  
SembraMedia  
ambassador in  
the Dominican  
Republic



**Sebastián Auyanet**  
SembraMedia  
ambassador in  
Uruguay



**Jury members met to review applications.**

After a rigorous review process SembraMedia’s jury chose **20 finalists** to move forward to phase two, which involved a comprehensive assessment process.

## 3.

## How we assessed and selected the 10 grantees

One of the main challenges when selecting grantees for this program was choosing relatively small media organizations that were ready to receive more than 100 hours of consulting during the acceleration process. To evaluate the 20 finalists, we asked for more detailed information and hired a team of specialists to conduct **assessments** that focused on **five key areas**:

**Financial health**

**Management capacity**

**Audience and reach**

**Journalistic quality and impact**

**Business model and revenue sources**

In addition to submitting a longer application in the second phase, we asked all of the finalists to complete a series of documents and reports for the judges to review, including:

**A profit and loss statement for the previous fiscal year**

**An organizational chart including all team members**

**A business model canvas**

To help media leaders complete all of these documents, we hosted a webinar focused on how to complete a business model canvas. We also provided one-on-one sessions with an accounting consultant to help them develop a profit and loss statement. Finalists had one month to complete all of these documents.

To assess financial health, we had accounting consultants review their financial reports. To measure management capacity, we sent human resources consultants to interview media leaders and write an assessment. To understand their audience and reach, we asked for direct access to their Google Analytics accounts and had an expert review their traffic. We had a community manager review their social media accounts and provide an assessment. We also had experienced journalists review their websites and other aspects of their work to assess their journalism and impact.

Once all of this information was collected, our jury evaluated each media outlet's assessment report and related documents to select the 10 grantees for the program's first cohort.

The assessment process proved an excellent complement to the applications from grantees and enabled the jurors to make more informed decisions about our final selection. The process also proved to be a learning opportunity for the 20 finalists who told us that the steps they took to complete the assessment made them take time to rethink their missions, better understand their budgets and revenue options, and consider how they manage and structure their teams.

The assessments also served to help our strategic consultants get a head start on the development of action plans at the beginning of the acceleration process. Finally, we created a summary of each assessment for the 10 finalists that were not selected so that they could at least benefit from our recommendations.

This is how the leader of one of the media outlets that was not selected during the final stage explained the process: ***"The experience was very valuable to learn more about ourselves and we hope to continue growing in the future."***



## 4.

## Acceleration for 10 grantees: Action plans and challenges

The challenges faced during the six-month acceleration process were complex. Our diverse group of grantees came from seven very different countries, with distinct political and economic implications. The grantee organizations also entered the program with different objectives and challenges. To make the most of their time, they had to make big decisions at the beginning of the program that had a significant impact on their team structures.

To move forward in the acceleration journey, each organization was assigned a **strategic consultant**, who met with media leaders every week during the program. During the first month, the consultant focused on **understanding the organization's main challenges and opportunities**, and worked with the media leaders to develop an **action plan to guide their work during the acceleration process**.

Although their action plans were tailored to their unique needs, all of them focused on key areas of support, including:

**Diversifying and improving revenue sources**

**Strengthening leadership and management skills**

**Better defining roles and responsibilities among team members**

**Reviewing and improving accounting and financial practices**

**Improving knowledge of their audiences**

**Developing new products and services to diversify revenue sources**

Once this "road map" was created, the media leaders worked with their strategic consultants, as well as tactical financial consultants to develop a budget to help them invest the funds from the grants they received, based on the goals in their action plans.

One of the most important lessons we've learned during the last few years at SembraMedia is that before we can help media organizations work on new revenue sources to achieve sustainability, it is crucial to first work on building a solid foundation. This requires support early on, for leadership and team management, as well as accounting and finances.

In our research, and through our experience with previous acceleration programs, we've learned that a key element of this process is to **define clear roles for each team member**. Equally as important is making sure the media leaders with each organization have a clear understanding of the organization's income, expenses, and the help they need to manage finances as they grow. In some of our earlier programs, we first had our strategic consultants work with grantees to define action plans, and then assigned tactical consultants based on their needs. Now, we start each grantee off with support in these **two key areas of tactical consulting: management and finances**. Our experience with the GNI Startups Lab program confirmed that this process was crucial for every grantee. What's more, this kind of early intervention helped grantee organizations make faster progress in the program, avoid common mistakes, and ultimately better understand how to improve their business models.

“During the consulting sessions, I tried to offer them conceptual and methodological tools to optimize the management and organization of their financial resources, as well as encourage financial transparency and integrity. It was very gratifying to see how they learned the importance of proper financial management.”

**Lister González**

Tactical Consultant in Accounting

After both the action plan and the budget were completed, each strategic consultant worked with their grantees, with the support of a team of tactical consultants, to implement the action plans. Another common learning we found is that many of these media organizations benefited from making substantial changes in their workflows and processes, as well as implementing new tools and defining and hiring new team members with expertise in key areas, such as audience development.

“**Designing the action plan was a growing process that involved rewarding conversations with our strategic consultant, Sebastián Auyanet, who could almost read our minds. He knew what we wanted to do, and always seemed to understand our current situation at La Vida de Nos. Instead of imposing rules on us, he worked to understand us, expressed empathy, and helped us implement our ideas in a way that was invaluable. Then, we had to demonstrate all of that in numbers with our financial consultant, Lister González. We started with an initial budget that ultimately had to be adapted to the new ideas we were developing. That’s how these things work: ideas do not always go hand in hand with their implementation, so we had to be quite flexible when estimating our expenses.**”

**Albor Rodriguez**  
Cofounder and General Manager  
La Vida de Nos

## **Webinars and group activities helped grantees learn from each other**

At SembraMedia, we have found that some of the greatest value and insights in media acceleration programs come from what grantees learn from each other. Each organization has its own journey, but there is a shared path they all have in common, regardless of their content focus or geographical differences. That is why we wanted to create opportunities for grantees to share the lessons they learned with each other along the way.

To achieve this goal, we included five interactive group webinars during the acceleration phase, focused on topics that are of interest to the entire cohort. In our GNI Startups Lab, the webinar topics included:

How to create budgets for projects | Melanie Pragier, Director of Finances at SembraMedia

How to work with your audience | Stella Bin, Editor of Red/Acción, and Luciana Coraggio, Editor of Social Media at Red/Acción

Product development for media outlets | Felicitas Carrique, Executive Director, News Product Alliance (NPA)

**How to prepare a pitch** | Janine Warner, Cofounder of SembraMedia

**How to measure impact in a media outlet** | Mijal Iastrebner, Cofounder of SembraMedia, and Soledad Zavala, Coordinator of Institutional Development at SembraMedia

During these webinars, each presenter focused on sharing their knowledge with the cohort, but also creating an interactive space where media leaders could ask questions and share ideas about the topic at hand.

More than 20 people participated in each webinar, including the leaders of all 10 media outlets, and some of their team members, as well as our strategic consultants and other members of the SembraMedia team.



In the final webinar, all of the grantees were required to make a presentation to practice their pitches and share what they had learned during the program.

## 5. The team: How we selected our strategic and tactical consultants



**Abraham Torres**

A journalist, entrepreneur, professor and coordinator of the Bachelor's Degree in Communication at the International School of Communication and Entertainment at Universidad Anáhuac in Cancun. He is also SembraMedia's ambassador in Mexico and has been researching and supporting media leaders for more than five years.



**Agustín Tonet**

A journalist and digital media consultant, who also works as the Audience Development Manager at ImpreMedia, one of the largest media companies in the United States geared toward Latino audiences.



**Ana Soffietto**

An experienced journalist with ten years of experience in the development of digital products and strategies for the media, international organizations, NGOs and governments. She is a consultant in media, technology and audience. And works as the Audio and Interactive Product Manager at Octubre, an Argentinian media group.

After working with a number of media organizations in the early days of SembraMedia, it became clear that no one person could provide expertise in all of the areas media outlets need. With that understanding, in all of SembraMedia's acceleration programs, we provide two types of consulting services: strategic and tactical.

First, we hired six part-time strategic consultants from Latin America who are known for their comprehensive knowledge of the needs of news organizations, product development, content, impact, sustainability, finance, and technology. That team of strategic consultants was led by an experienced project manager, [María Florencia Aza](#), SembraMedia's Director of Strategic Initiatives.



**Cecilia Bazán**

An experienced journalist with a Master's degree in Journalism and Digital Communication, who has a certification in project management, with a specialization in multiplatform content. She also works as Content Editor for the audiovisual production team of La Voz del Interior.



**Luz Mely Reyes**

An award-winning journalist, editor, and entrepreneur who is the Cofounder of Efecto Cocuyo, an internationally-recognized digital news outlet in Venezuela.



**Sebastián Auyanet**

An experienced journalist with a Master's degree in Engagement Journalism from the Newmark Graduate School of Journalism (CUNY, New York). He has also worked as a consultant with The Membership Puzzle Project and as a Social Media Strategist at the U.S. media site NowThis News.

During the six months of the program, media leaders met regularly with their strategic consultants and received a total of 70 hours of strategic consulting to help them develop and implement their action plans, improve their policies and processes, develop new revenue models, and strengthen their business model.

**“It was an incredibly challenging process. It demanded a lot of time, commitment and responsibility from the media outlets to make life-changing decisions.”**

**Ana Soffietto**  
Strategic Consultant

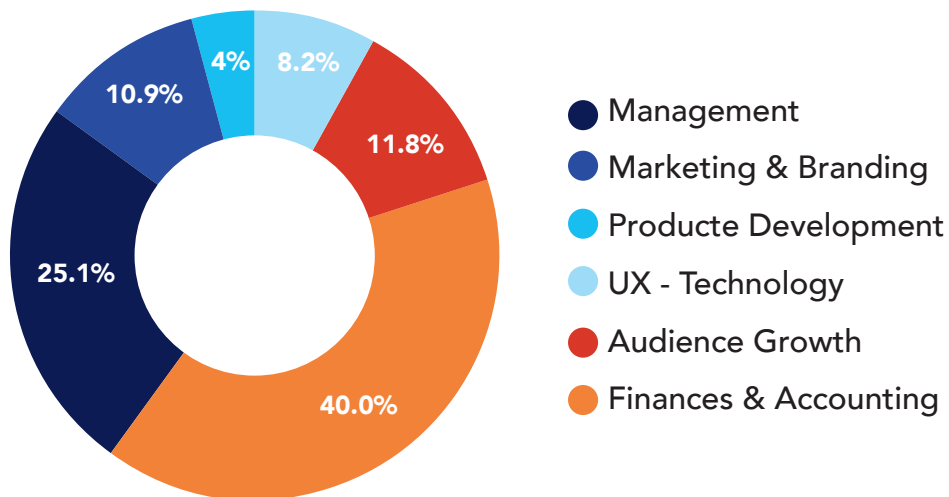
In addition, each organization received 50 to 60 hours of tactical consulting services during the acceleration phase. This type of consulting concentrated on specific areas, which required specialized expertise in areas such as finance, management and leadership skills, audience growth and engagement, product development, marketing, web design, UX, and more.

**“As a tactical consultant, I understand that the goal is to support media outlets so that they can organize their work, define clear roles, and learn to build more efficient processes. First, we need to lay the foundation, and then prepare them to grow. This way, when the peak of the wave arrives, they have all the tools required to face growth in an organized manner. In addition, we also work on topics related to change and leadership as they arise, which are things that every grantee experiences.”**

**Mariel Graupen**  
Tactical Consultant in Management

During the course of the six-month acceleration program, the 10 grantee organizations worked with 15 tactical consultants who provided 525 hours of consulting services for the participants.

The chart below illustrates the percentage of hours of tactical consulting dedicated to each specialty area.



After ensuring all of the grantees received tactical consulting support in management and accounting, we added other consulting sessions in more specific areas. Each media leader was able to choose which team members would receive the support of each tactical consultant. This process enabled not only media leaders to be part of the acceleration program, but also other staff members, which helped the program to have greater impact on each organization as a whole.

**“ The consulting sessions with Mariel Graupen were the best organizational discovery we made. They helped us measure how human resources work in a disruptive initiative like ours. They helped us in a way we didn’t even know we needed. During the six months of the program, the financial consultants helped us organize our accounting for all of our previous years of operation. It was challenging, but very practical and methodical at the same time. This clarity helped us to understand abstract concepts so we could focus on important estimates and budgets. ”**

**Eduardo Quintana**  
 Director, Ciencia del Sur



## Consulting Summary

Each media outlet received 70 hours of strategic consulting and 50 to 60 hours of tactical consulting.

We worked with six strategic consultants and 15 tactical consultants.

We provided tactical consulting in nine different areas:



Content agency models



Audience development and engagement



Product development



Accounting and financial planning



Management and leadership skills



Branding and marketing



Membership programs



Courses and workshop programs



Website development, user interface design and user experience improvement

# 6. The cohort: A profile of each of the grantee media organizations and key impacts

Choosing who would be part of the cohort of 10 media outlets was not easy. The digital entrepreneurial ecosystem in Latin America is huge, and sustainability is a problem that affects a large portion of that community.

Since 2015, our international team of ambassadors has mapped and reviewed more 1,000 digital native media outlets that meet our criteria of transparency, independence, and social impact.

Many of these organizations were founded by journalists to address issues that other media outlets were not covering, or reach underserved communities that lacked reliable sources of information.

## About the cohort:

The 10 media outlets selected represented seven countries in the region: Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay, and Venezuela.

Six out of 10 were cofounded by both men and women; three were founded by women, and one, by a man.



80% of the grantees are niche media outlets that work with underrepresented communities or cover underreported topics.



The following is a description of each of the grantee media organizations, as well as highlights of our work with them during the GNI Startups Lab Hispanoamérica program.



## AVISPA MIDIA

Country: Mexico 🇲🇪

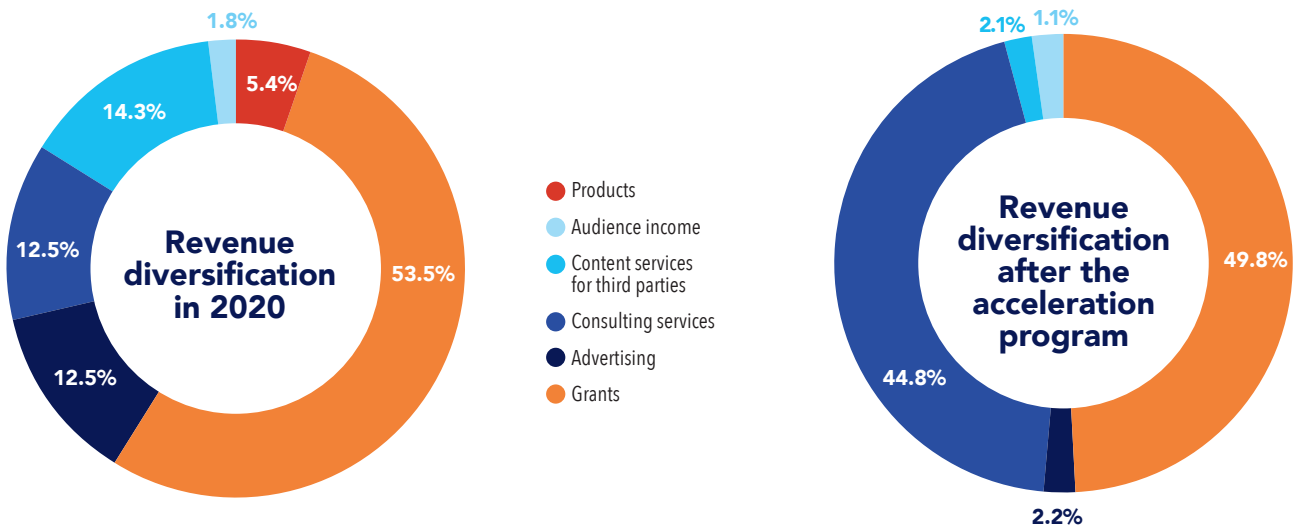
Focus: Human rights / gender / environment

URL: <https://avispa.org/inicio/>

**Avispa Midia is a free and independent media project that was created to increase participation in political, social, environmental and economic issues that are a part of everyone’s daily lives.**

**Main goal of the program:** developing a content agency

**Changes in income diversification** (not including the GNI Startups Lab grant)



**Main impacts:**

- Developing a content agency (Enjambre Estudio) as the organization’s main source of revenue
- Improving accounting and financial systems and reorganizing administrative tasks
- Changing their organizational structure



**Francisco Navarro**  
Finance Coordinator

**“ We wanted to participate in the program for the financial aspect, but the rest of the program surprised us. We learned to make decisions that were challenging at times. Today we are more assertive and confident.”**



**Ciencia del Sur**  
 Descubrí, aprendé, compartí.

## CIENCIA DEL SUR

**Country:** Paraguay

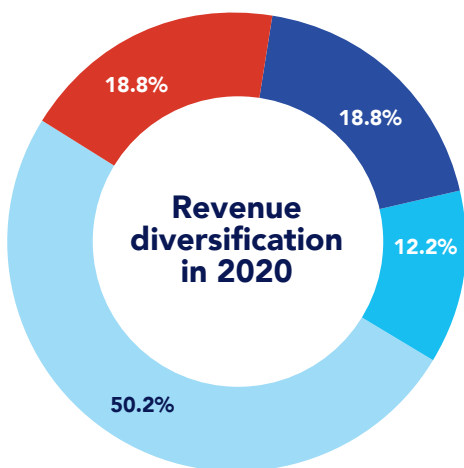
**Focus:** Science

**URL:** <https://cienciasdelsur.com/>

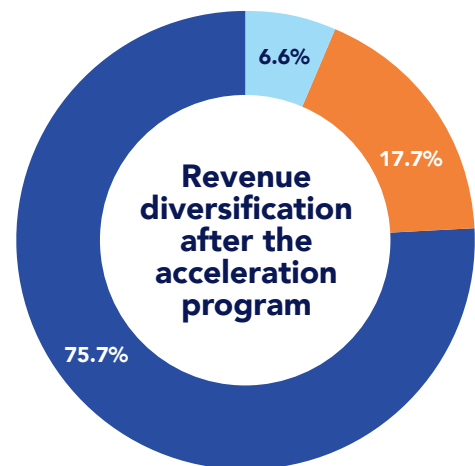
**Ciencia del Sur is a private undertaking of journalists, researchers, scientists and communicators that promotes the dissemination of high-level scientific journalism in South America.**

**Main goal of the program:** developing an educational strategy for the organization through workshops and training services

**Changes in income diversification** (not including the GNI Startups Lab grant)



- Products
- Audience income
- Content services for third parties
- Consulting services
- Advertising
- Grants



**Main impacts:**

- Formalizing the organization as a simplified joint-stock company
- Adding two new team members: a sustainability coordinator and an audience editor
- Planning trainings and workshops as a funding source



**Eduardo Quintana**  
 Director

**“ We became empowered as a media outlet. It gave us a chance to think of ourselves as a company. We radically changed our mindset. ”**



## CONEXIÓN MIGRANTE

**Country:** Mexico 🇲🇽

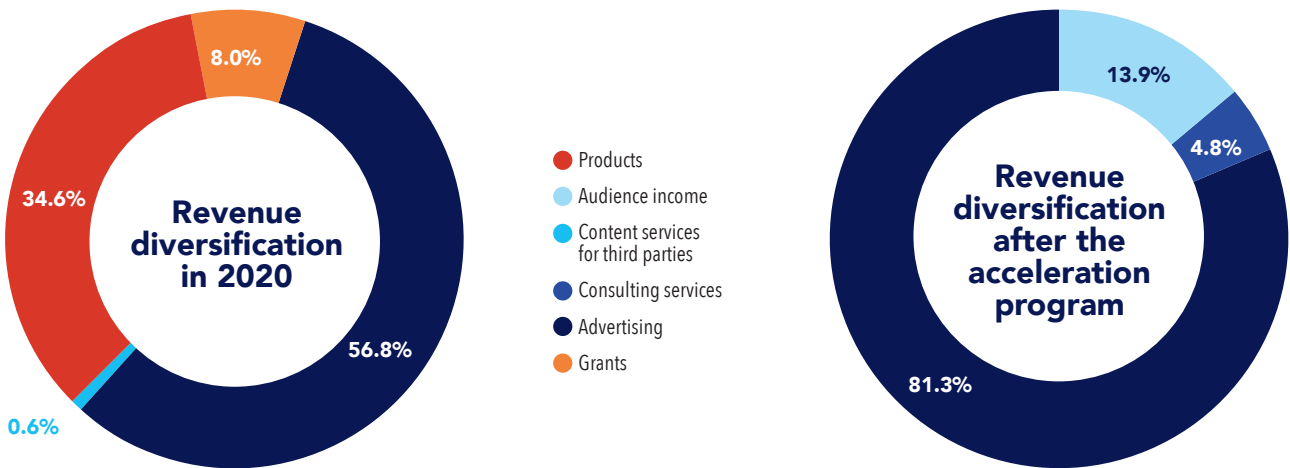
**Focus:** Migration

**URL:** <https://conexionmigrante.com/>

**Conexión Migrante is a digital native media company that offers services and information to immigrants and their families from Mexico and other parts of Latin America.**

**Main goal of the program:** developing a consulting agency and improving the organization’s membership program

**Changes in income diversification** (not including the GNI Startups Lab grant)



**Main impacts:**

- Creating a new business department and hiring a business director
- Launching a new consulting business unit called “Digital Solutions”
- Better defining the roles of the directors and hiring an editor-in-chief



**Andrea Ornelas**  
Institutional Development Director

**“ We were given tools that we can use. We have made a big commitment to our future.”**



## ESCENARIO TLAXCALA

**Country:** Mexico 🇲🇽

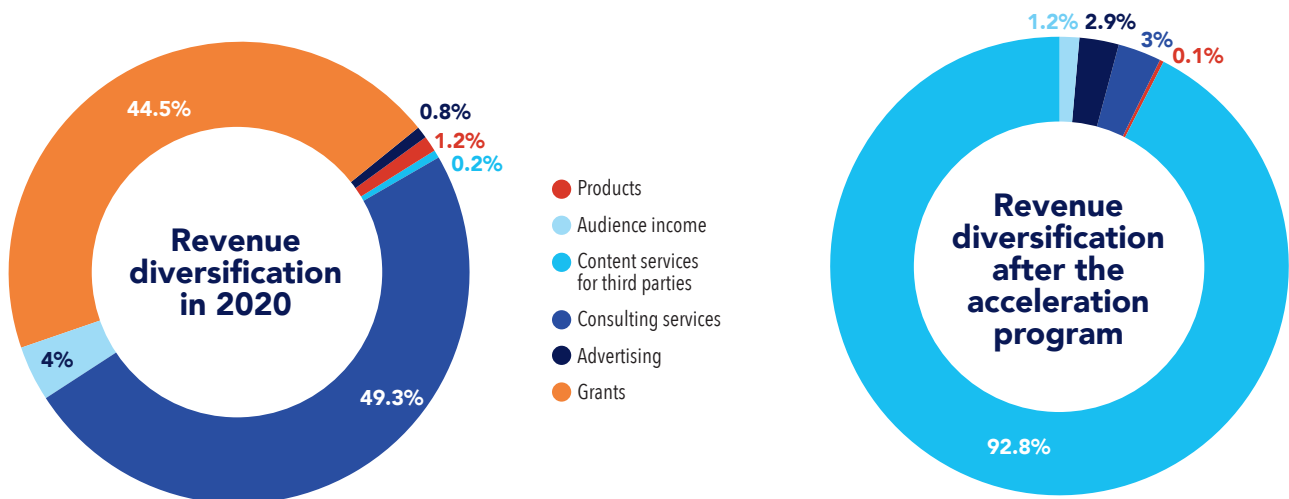
**Focus:** Human rights / gender / environment

**URL:** <https://escenariotlx.com/>

*Escenario Tlaxcala is a media organization that was launched by a group of citizens and professionals who were worried about misinformation on social media and other media outlets. As a team, we are aware that transparency in public information, citizen empowerment through information, and the need to guarantee the right to information are key elements to move forward as a society.*

**Main goal of the program:** developing a content agency

**Changes in income diversification** (not including the GNI Startups Lab grant)



**Main impacts:**

- Improving their content agency (Ingenius) by redesigning their website and launching three new services
- Hiring a commercial director to oversee the development of the agency
- Getting their first client contract for their content agency outside the state of Tlaxcala



**Aldo Castillo**  
Director

**“ We are very happy, we view ourselves as a very different Escenario Tlaxcala. The biggest general impact is that, as a hyperlocal media outlet, we are now thinking nationally and regionally. ”**



## FEMINACIDA

Country: Argentina

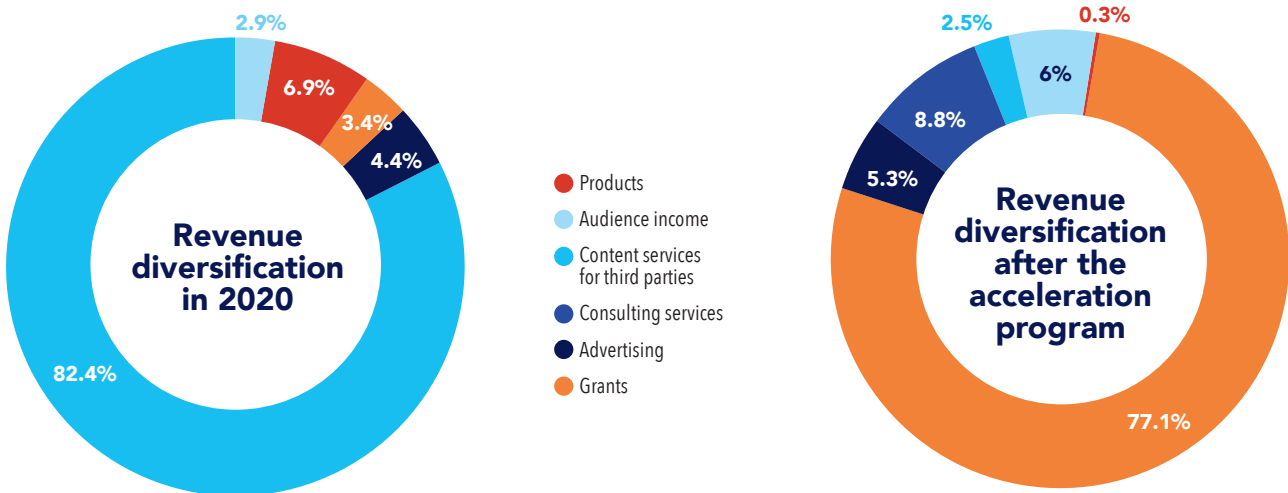
Focus: Gender

URL: <http://www.feminacida.com.ar>

**Feminacida is a self-managed media outlet and collective with a feminist perspective that wants to contribute to the women’s movement and dissidents of journalism and education by making their stories, achievements, and needs more visible.**

**Main goal of the program:** improving their membership program and making their academic efforts more strategic

**Changes in income diversification** (not including the GNI Startups Lab grant)



### Main impacts:

- Adding a new head of finance and a membership director
- Defining new roles and creating an organizational structure
- Relaunching the membership program
- Creating internal work processes to better channel third-party client requests



**“It was an amazing experience. For Feminacida, there is a ‘before’ and an ‘after’.”**

**Solana Camañó**  
Finance Manager and Coordinator  
of the Feminacida School



## LA VIDA DE NOS

**Country:** Venezuela 🇻🇪

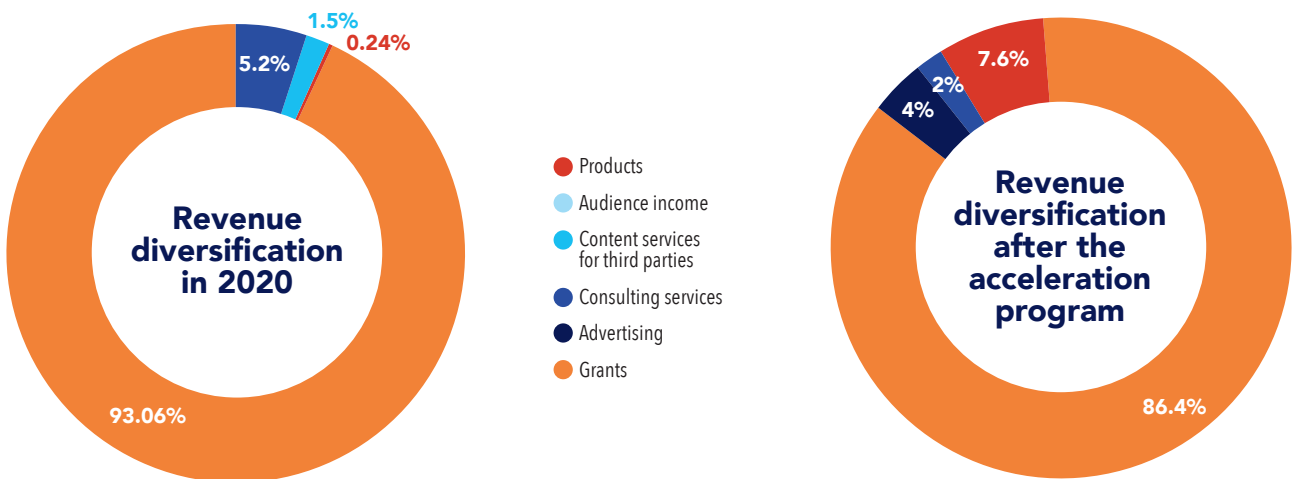
**Focus:** Human rights / migration

**URL:** <https://www.lavidadenos.com/>

*La Vida de Nos is a referential space of carefully prepared stories that seeks to become a bridge for the best expressions of the art of storytelling with a specific goal: sharing stories that move and connect with the average reader.*

**Main goal of the program:** creating a content agency and developing a network of ambassadors for the organization

**Changes in income diversification** (not including the GNI Startups Lab grant)



### Main impacts:

- Reorganizing their management structure and creating a new role: sustainability and finance coordinator
- Hiring a sustainability and finance coordinator
- Creating and launching the website "Grupo La Vida de Nos" with a content agency and a network of ambassadors for the organization



**Albor Rodríguez**  
Cofounder and General Manager

**“ There is a long-lasting impact because we worked on things that weren’t for the short term, but for the long term. It was a space for reflection and internal dialog. ”**





No-Ficción

Narrativa  
Investigación  
Datos

## NO-FICCIÓN

**Country:** Guatemala 🇬🇹

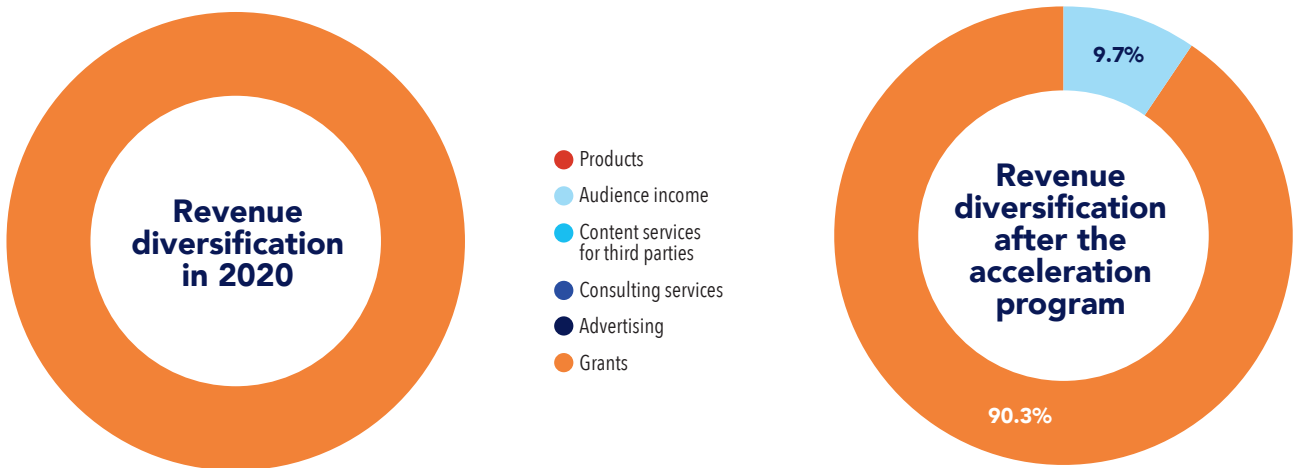
**Focus:** Human rights / gender / environment / migration / justice

**URL:** <http://www.no-ficcion.com>

**No-Ficción is a nonprofit journalism production company founded in Guatemala. The organization was created by a group of journalists interested in presenting Mesoamerica through storytelling, research, and data journalism.**

**Main goal of the program:** creating a content agency

**Changes in income diversification** (not including the GNI Startups Lab grant)



### Main impacts:

- Creating the legal entity for a new content agency "La Nevera"
- Hiring a new head of sales and project manager
- Restructuring and better defining roles for the entire team



**Oswaldo J. Hernández**  
Executive Director

**“ We’ve learned so much. We had the best coaches. We didn’t imagine we would receive such high-quality training. ”**



## REVISTA MUY WASO

Country: Bolivia

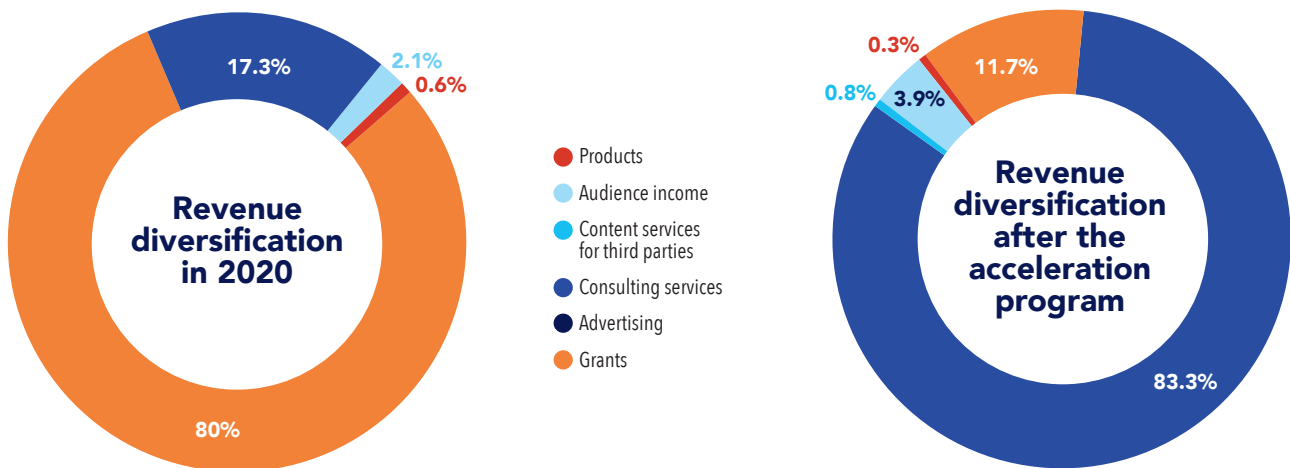
Focus: Human rights / gender / environment / health

URL: <https://muywaso.com/>

*When we launched, we were the first feminist magazine for culture and entertainment in Bolivia. Nowadays, we focus all our efforts on building the Bolivian journalism of the future, together—feminist, creative, collaborative, rebellious, independent, and self-managed journalism.*

Main goal of the program: creating a content agency

Changes in income diversification (not including the GNI Startups Lab grant)



### Main impacts:

- Redesigning the organization’s structure and optimizing it for sustainability
- Creating a department for institutional development and services
- Hiring an assistant for the finances and special projects department



Mijail Miranda  
Editorial Director

“The experience with GNI Startups Lab helped us to go from intuition to planning and being more systematic with our journalism project. We kept all our creative and disruptive potential, but with tools for structuring, managing and assessing, which are resources that we didn’t have before, will help us as we grow.”



## VERIFICADO MX

Country: Mexico 🇲🇪

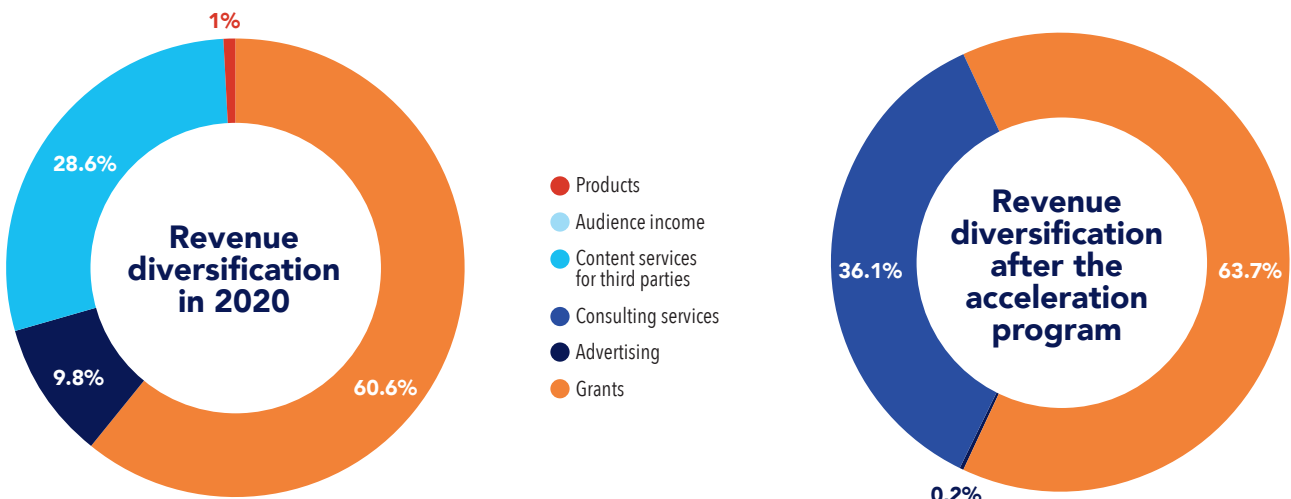
Focus: Fact-checking

URL: <http://www.verificado.com.mx>

**A digital media outlet that analyzes public discourse in Mexico and fact-checks its accuracy.**

**Main goal of the program:** creating an educational unit to produce events and workshops

**Changes in income diversification** (not including the GNI Startups Lab grant)



**Main impacts:**

- Hiring a head of finance
- Hiring a head of business and sustainability
- Defining new roles and improving the organizational structure



**Liliana Elósegui**  
Editor in Chief

“ We didn’t know it was going to be this hard, but it provided so much clarity. Now we’re organized. With this new structure, we work with order and planning, this allows us (in addition to the projects already under way) to accept new projects with new strategic partners.”



## WAMBRA

**Country:** Ecuador 🇪🇨

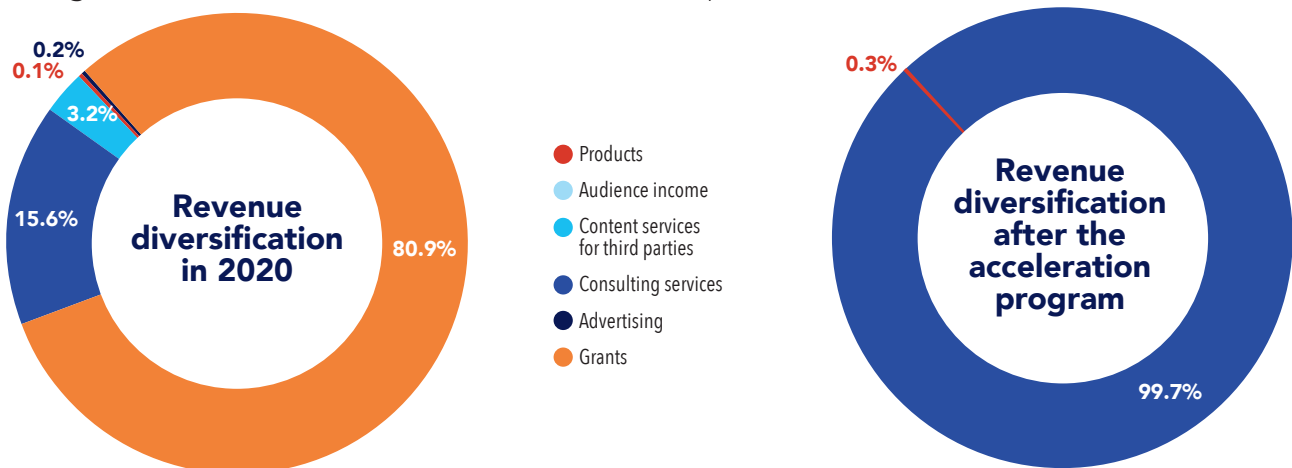
**Focus:** Human rights / gender / environment

**URL:** <https://wambra.ec/>

**Wambra is a community-based digital media organization that is designed to be an information and communication alternative that covers the national agenda, but with a focus on the issues and realities of villages, communities, and towns from both the countryside and the city.**

**Main goal of the program:** developing a membership program and helping Wambra become independent of its nonprofit parent organization, Fundacion el Churo. The change in revenue diversity was due to the separation of their finance from the parent organization. This change is enabling Wambra to build new, independent sources of revenue.

### Changes in income diversification (not including the GNI Startups Lab grant)



### Main impacts:

- Restructuring the organization's roles and budgets
- Creating an audience development department and hiring a manager
- Creating a membership model with its own landing page on the website



**Jorge Cano**  
Executive Producer

“It was a whirlwind. We went through a big renovation. It's a very intense process, but we're very happy.”

# 7. Impacts: initial results

During the six months of the acceleration program, we recorded **more than 220 impacts** among the digital media organizations that participated in our GNI Startups Lab.

These impacts included: developing new revenue sources, improving website design and usability, forming new partnerships, defining new roles, hiring new team members, hosting events, and improving workflows and processes.



The impacts we observed in the early phase of the acceleration program are consistent with what we've learned after working with hundreds of media organizations at SembraMedia over the last few years. Our experience with the GNI Startups Lab confirms the value of providing leadership and management training for media founders. The program also reinforced the importance of helping them better define roles and diversify the skills of their team members, as well as improving workflows and processes that make them more efficient and effective, before doing product development and working to diversify revenue sources.

This kind of consulting support helped them to build more robust organizations so that they were prepared to launch new projects as they worked toward sustainability. In six months, the 10 grantees reported more than 100 impacts linked to changes in their teams and workflows, thanks to working with their strategic consultants, as well as the tactical consultants who focused on management and leadership development.

“Our biggest joy was hearing from the participants that what we did helped them and changed their views about how to work. They also learned about the importance of having management tools to transform themselves as they worked to implement their business and action plans.”

**Marisel Graupen**  
Management and Leadership Consultant

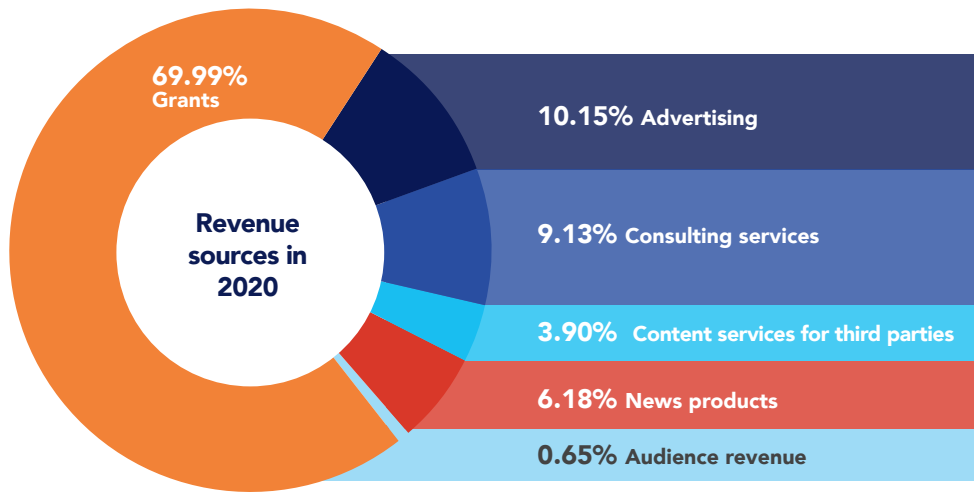
These early achievements had a direct impact on their success in developing new revenue sources, finding potential customers, and ultimately, building more resilient and sustainable organizations.

### Increasing and diversifying revenue sources

One of the goals of GNI Startups Lab Hispanoamérica was to help digital media organizations diversify and grow their revenue sources, in order to build more independent and sustainable organizations.

All of the grantees worked on developing new revenue sources or improving the ones that they already had during the program.

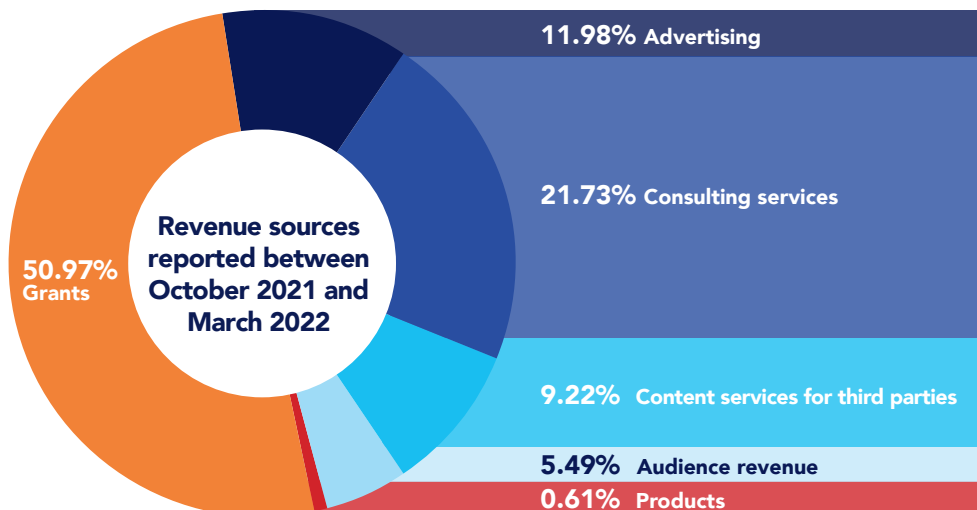
**The following chart shows the average percentage of the total revenue by category of the 10 media outlets in 2020, before they participated in the acceleration program.**



Prior to participating in our acceleration program, most of these organizations were highly dependent on grant funding, which represented 70% of their total combined revenue. Advertising was the second most important source of revenue, and consulting services, which we’ve found especially valuable for the kinds of small organizations in this cohort, came in third.

As they developed their action plans for the program, five media outlets chose to create a content agency or build revenue by offering consulting services. Three media outlets developed membership models, and two focused on developing workshops and training programs to earn revenue through entrance fees and sponsorship.

**In the following chart you can see how, after the acceleration program, these same media outlets had become less dependent on grant funding and had increased other revenue sources when compared with the year prior to the acceleration program.**



*This graphic does not include the grants provided by SembraMedia and GNI.*

We measured the financial impact of the program by analyzing the return on funds granted. We did this by comparing the amount of grant funds that were granted for each media organization with the amount of revenue they generated during the six-month program.

**The result:** media outlets that participated in GNI Startups Lab Hispanoamérica earned an average of 299% more revenue than the amount of the grant money they spent during the program.

We did not include the value of the grants we gave them when we calculated their revenue during the program.

Each media organization received a grant of between \$10,000 and \$30,000. The total amount of funds was \$200,000 and the amount each outlet received was based on the total revenue they had brought in the previous year; those with higher revenues, received larger grants.

One of the challenges we've found in this—as well as other acceleration programs we've run—is that it is hard for small media organizations to develop action plans and then spend all of the grant funds awarded to them to implement their plans, before the end of such a short program. As a result, we based our return on funds granted only on the funds they had spent by the end of March 2022, when the six-month acceleration program ended.

Although many funders require that all grant funds must be spent (or returned) within the contract dates of their programs, GNI was more flexible and we were able to give our grantees more time to spend their grants. That way, they could continue to implement their action plans in the months to come.

We did encourage them to spend at least 50% of the grant during the program. After that, we gave them a six-month extension to continue paying team members hired during the program, and two more months to spend the remaining amount on technology and other services.

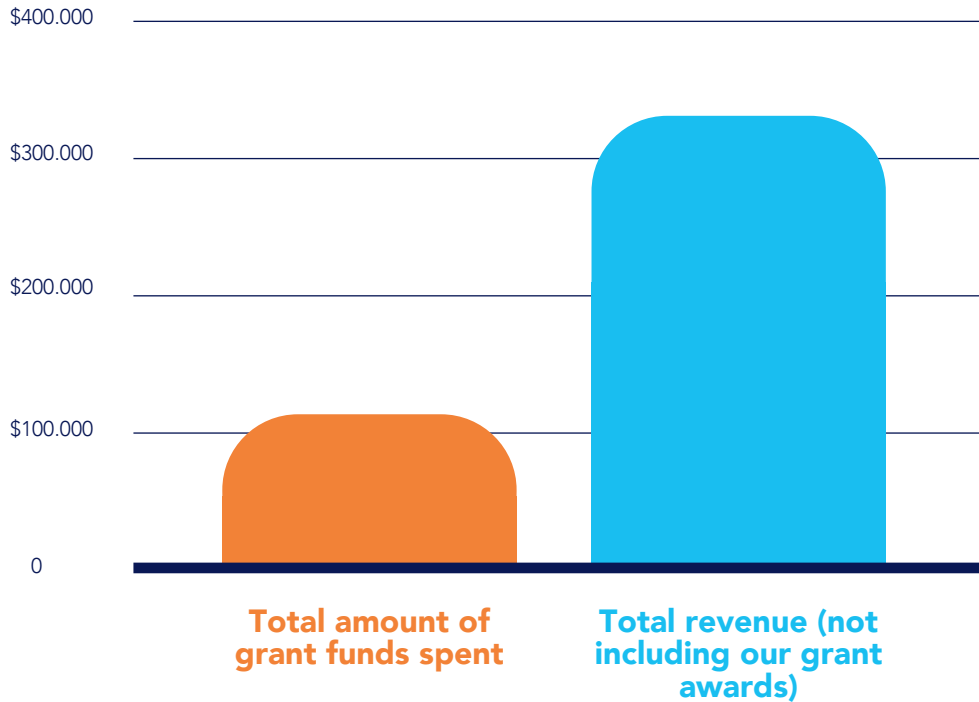
By the end of the program, our participants had spent an average of **55% of the grant funds they received**. Based on our experience, forcing grantees to spend the entire grant too quickly makes them less strategic about how they invest those funds, and can lead them to overinvest in staff and services they may not be able to maintain after the program.

Thanks to additional support from GNI, we now plan to go back and review their revenue six months after the conclusion of this program, and again a year later. We believe giving them this flexibility will help them to be more strategic as they work toward sustainability, and we look forward to sharing our findings about their revenue development and other impacts in future updates.

As illustrated in the chart that follows, at the end of the six-month acceleration phase, the 10 grantees had spent \$110,655 out of the \$200,000 they had been awarded. Their combined revenue during the program was \$330,503.



### Grants spent vs total revenue earned during the six-month acceleration phase



## Partnerships

Another goal of the program was to strengthen the larger community of digital media entrepreneurs in Latin America. The seven new strategic alliances that were formed during the program enabled these news organizations to generate even greater impact, reach new audiences, gain visibility, and share their experience with colleagues throughout the region.

All 10 media leaders also developed relationships with each other and strengthened their networks, which should help them to continue to form new partnerships with regional colleagues in the future.

## Teams

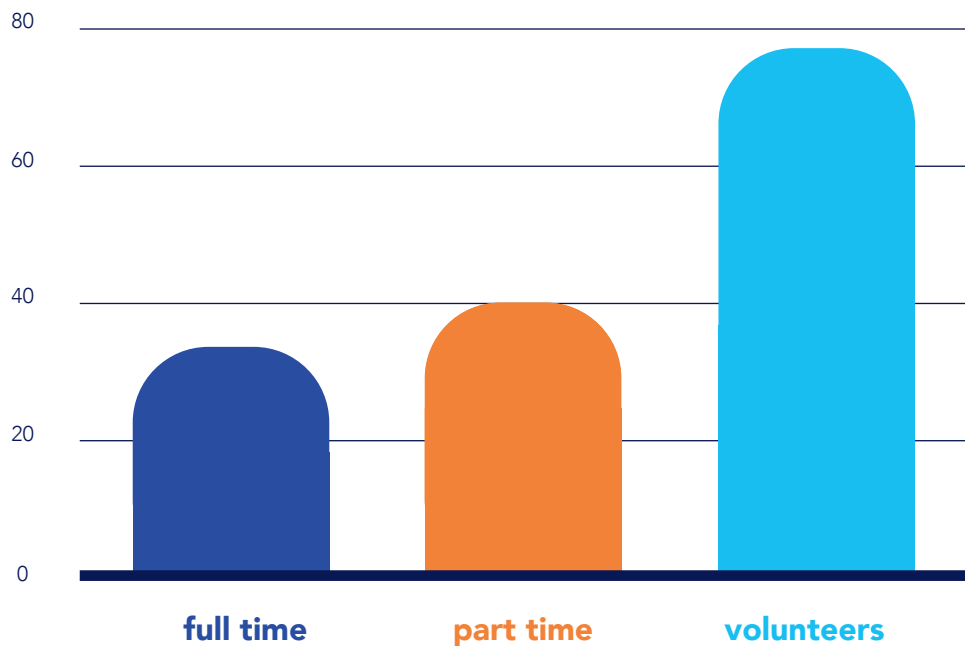
All 10 of the grantee organizations hired new team members focused on audience, finance, and business development, or restructured their organizational charts to focus more resources on business development.

To better analyze the impacts of the program, we divided recruitment into three categories:

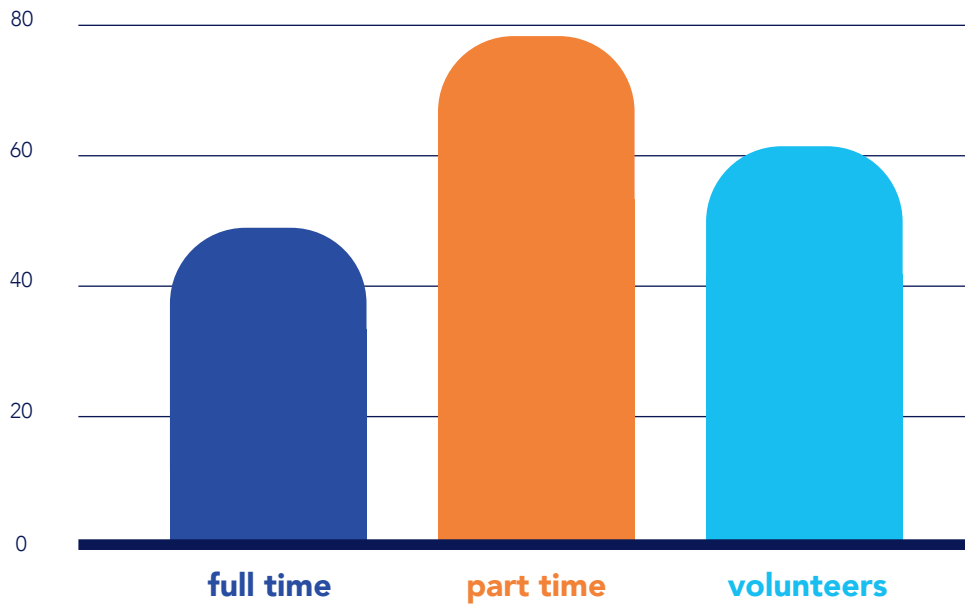
- Full time
- Part time
- Volunteers

As a direct result of the acceleration program, full-time and part-time recruitment increased, and the number of volunteers working for organizations decreased significantly as a percentage of their overall teams. In some cases, the media outlets were able to hire volunteers who had donated their time for years. In other cases, they hired new team members that brought business, finance, and other skills which helped to diversify the team.

**In the following chart, you can see the percentage of grantee organizations' team members who were volunteers compared with employees who were part-time or full-time before participating in the program.**



**In this chart, you can see the percentage of grantee organizations' team members who were volunteers, part time or full time employees after their organization participated in the program.**



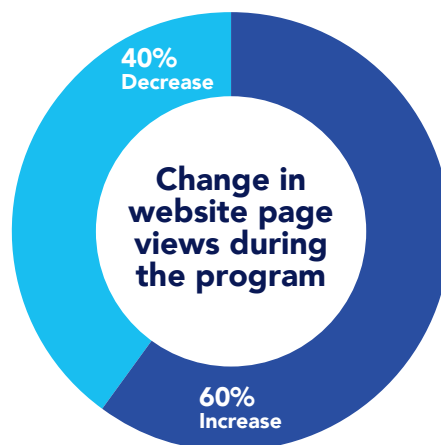
### Audience and metrics

Another challenge we've found when working with digital native media startups that have such small teams, is that when we help them to focus more on organizational development, it can lead to a drop in web traffic. However, based on previous experience, traffic numbers tend to increase again, and often rise to even higher levels, after they complete their work with our consultants.

We've also found that journalist-led organizations often focus more on developing content than on creating a clear audience strategy or developing marketing plans to attract new audiences.

Despite these challenges, six of the 10 grantee organizations did increase traffic to their websites during the program, while four saw drops in page traffic.

**Overall, when we calculated page views for the entire cohort, traffic grew 16% on average across all 10 media outlets.**



Based on reports from our consultants and grantees, those who say traffic decreased explained that, while they were restructuring their teams, defining new roles focused on sustainability, and working to improve internal processes around non-journalistic tasks, they produced less content. Most of the media startups in this cohort had very small teams of less than five people.

As a key part of the action plans they developed during the program, we encouraged grantee organizations to hire more staff, with a focus on diversifying team skills with new team members who brought experience in business development, sales, and finance. At the same time, we also tried to help them ensure that those new hires could be supported with current and projected revenue. The biggest challenge was helping grantee organizations to hire the key staff they needed to grow revenue, without hiring more people than they could sustain after the program.

**Social media audiences grew during the program**

All 10 media outlets increased their number of social media followers between the beginning of the acceleration phase in September 2021 and when it ended in March 2022.

This chart presents the combined growth rate of followers across the four most popular social platforms used by grantees: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube.

**Growth rate for social media from September 2021 to March 2022**



## 8. Lessons learned

We learned many lessons about how to support digital media entrepreneurs on their journey to sustainability during the GNI Startups Lab. We were also able to improve and enhance many of the ways we've worked with grantees in previous acceleration programs we've run. Meeting regularly with the leaders of each of these media organizations throughout the program gave us a better understanding of the context in which they work and the difficulties they face on a daily basis. Measuring our impact and results throughout the program also helped us to focus on creating acceleration experiences adapted to their specific needs.

Here are the four most valuable lessons we learned (or confirmed) during this program:

### Five key areas of support

After more than six years of studying digital media entrepreneurs and providing training and acceleration programs at SembraMedia, we've identified five key areas where nearly all media organizations benefit from consulting and training support.

During GNI Startups Lab Hispanoamérica, we confirmed once again that these five key areas are vital to helping media startups and improving sustainability:

- 1. Audience development:** customizing how to track and grow audience engagement and content performance is essential to developing new products and ensuring you're meeting audience needs.
- 2. Finance and accounting:** the more media leaders understand their finances, the better they can manage their organizations and plan for the future.
- 3. Management and leadership development:** healthy organizations need strong leaders who are prepared to make tough decisions and manage diverse teams.
- 4. Innovation and tech:** improving web design and integrating new tools can help media better serve their audiences, and get their teams to work more efficiently.
- 5. Revenue and product development:** diverse revenue sources are key to independence and sustainability. Whether you start a membership program, a content agency, or something completely new—identifying and testing new ideas is one of the biggest, and most important, challenges for any entrepreneur.

## Transformation takes time

In our acceleration programs, the media leaders we work with go through a complex learning and strategizing process that often makes them rethink past decisions and reflect on how best to develop their organizations for the future.

During this journey, each decision can require complex internal changes that can be highly disruptive to their teams. We provide a lot of support during the acceleration process, but we've learned it takes time for them to assimilate what they've learned and implement the many steps required to help them build stronger and more sustainable organizations.

Working with such small, diverse organizations in this program, this insight became even more clear: transformation takes time.

During the six months during which we had the honor of working with these inspiring media leaders, we learned even more about how important it is to work on the foundational aspects of their organizations before we help them build new revenue sources. Pushing these kinds of small news organizations to make so many changes in such a short amount of time can be overwhelming, but as many of our grantees acknowledged, it is an important part of the process.

*In the words of Daniela Mendoza, Founder of Verificado MX: "It is a complex and hard process, but it is necessary."*

We know that the strategic and technical support we provide is important, but it's also important to provide emotional support to media leaders while they are learning so much and making such big decisions, and that also takes time.

Some say time is money, but we've been repeatedly surprised by how much time it can take our grantees to spend the money we give them when they are trying to grow their organizations carefully and invest funds wisely. Pressuring media leaders who are going through such a complex restructuring process and, at the same time, continuing to manage news organizations on a daily basis, is not a recipe for success.

Although we're not doctors, we believe in the hippocratic oath: "First, do no harm." That is why we appreciate the flexibility that GNI gave us, so that we could allow grantee organizations to continue to spend their grant funds even after the program ended. We believe this added time will help them to build their organizations more carefully, without overinvesting in teams and services they cannot sustain in the future.

**“ Supporting media organizations during GNI was very rewarding. I learned a lot about each one of them and they all ended up with the tools required to keep a record of their finances. They all completed the process with a clear idea of what their situation was, a budget for the entire year, and an accounting system for their future products and projects.”**

**Andrea Ramos**  
Tactical Consultant for Finances

### **Recruiting the best team members is not easy**

Many of the media organizations in this cohort were founded by journalists and needed to add team members with business, sales, or accounting skills. Based on our experience, there are not enough people in the region (and perhaps the world) who have strong sales and business development experience, and also understand the extraordinary challenges of protecting journalists' ethics while working to grow revenue.

Finding the right people to join any team takes time, but finding people with such a rare skill set, especially when you have a limited budget and little or no experience in business or sales yourself, was a monumental challenge.

### **The importance of thinking of your content as a product**

For many years, journalists were distanced from marketing concepts. In this first GNI Startups Lab Hispanoamérica, we identified that it is key for media organizations to work on their branding. Nowadays, each media outlet must share the users' attention with other platforms, and it has become fundamental to understand how to reach those audiences.

Having a clear branding strategy and a shared vision and mission is key to capturing the communities' attention and showing the services that each media outlet provides.

## 9. Future challenges

The goal of GNI Startups Lab Hispanoamérica was to strengthen projects that broaden the national and international agenda and that shed a light on communities that are often left out of the public discourse.

In six months, we provided tools and support to upgrade the media organizations' work processes, create new funding sources, and improve their sustainability. During this process, we all learned lessons: both grantees and SembraMedia team members now have a better understanding of the challenges that the ecosystem faces. Those lessons make us all stronger.

We know this is just the beginning for the media organizations we had the honor of working with during this program, and we hope that the work we've done together over the last several months will help them to continue to grow and serve their communities for years to come.

But it does not end here. We know that there are many more news organizations in the region that also deserve help building more sustainable business models. We are not the only ones who recognize that entrepreneurial journalists need financial support to grow. But based on our experience, grant funds go a lot further when they are combined with the kind of consulting we were able to provide in this program.

We believe that media acceleration programs like GNI Startups Lab provide one of the best ways to help ensure that media entrepreneurs, like the inspiring leaders we worked with in this program, can provide the vital information their communities need.

We hope this report provides useful insights for the entire, diverse media ecosystem we've come to know through our research and our growing network at SembraMedia. We are inspired by the hundreds of media organizations we know are working hard every day to give a voice to communities that are often left out of the public discourse.

Our experience with GNI Startups Lab Hispanoamerica has confirmed much of what we've learned in our research and training programs: that these kinds of social media entrepreneurs can build more sustainable organizations if they get the right kinds of support. Although this concludes our report, and our first GNI Startups Lab, we are committed to continuing to help independent digital native media organizations in the region achieve sustainability for years to come.



10.

# Who worked on GNI Startups Lab Hispanoamérica

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Director of Strategic Initiatives

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**Isabela Ponce**  
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**Julia Kaiser**  
**Lister González**  
**María Celeste González**  
**María Florencia Alcaraz**  
**María Noel Scanarotti**  
**Mariel Graupen**  
**Mariel Lozada**  
**Martina Refi**  
**Nathalia Restrepo**  
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**Janine Warner** | Cofounder and Executive Director

**María Eugenia Álvarez** | Director of Operations

**María Florencia Aza** | Director of Strategic Initiatives

**Naimid Cirelli** | Director of Communications

**Melanie Pragier** | Chief Financial Officer

**Daniela Fernández** | Director of Innovation

**Soledad Zavala** | Coordinator of Institutional Development

**Ana Minini Venega** | Communications Coordinator

**Magalí Domínguez Lalli** | Data Manager

**Micaela Fernández** | Lead of operative administration

**Martina Deutsch** | Administrative Assistant

**Carolina Sotelo** | Community Manager

**Rocío Caro Pacello** | Digital Support



#### **The Google News Initiative Team**

**Conor Crowley** | Lead GNI Programs

**Juan Manuel Lucero** | Google News Lab Lead, Argentina

**Susana Pabon** | Corporate Communications Manager,  
Google Latin America

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Google News Initiative