

google news initiative

startups lab europe report

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Google News Initiative

The Why 1



Wonderful in many ways, Europe is a difficult market for media. As in most western societies, digital disruptions have upended revenue streams, communities and mindsets for European media businesses. That's in addition to the challenge of operating in a fractured market, home to myriad different languages, cultures and ecosystems.

If you try to launch a media startup here, you better have some stamina and some grit.

Luckily for Europe, there are plenty of media entrepreneurs out there who have just that. They are idealists, trying to inform audiences that are often overlooked and underserved by established media.

The Google News Initiative, media startup accelerator Media Lab Bayern and the European Journalism Centre set out to support these types of founders. The GNI Startups Lab Europe provided coaching, funding and network to 10 promising new media companies from all across Europe. As the previous iterations of the GNI Startups Lab in India, North America and South America before it, the Startups Lab Europe offered news founders an analysis of their status quo and the challenges ahead of them, and used a thoughtfully curated curriculum to help them overcome these challenges and grow into sustainable news organisations.

"The participants of the inaugural GNI Startups Lab represent the future of the European digital news ecosystem. Though these emerging publishers are highly diverse in terms of background, editorial focus and geography, every one of them shares a steadfast commitment to engaging their community in innovative new ways. The GNI is honored to support them", says Conor Crowley, startups lead at the Google News Initiative.

From Lisbon to London, from Italy to Romania, the Lab attracted an incredibly strong field of participants. They serve deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences in France and Hungarians in Transylvania, proving that there are still many audiences out there deserving of great journalism that informs and advocates for them.

“The participants are as different as the media ecosystems they come from, but they often have similar problems and can help each other. We are glad to support them with our proven innovation methods”, says Lina Timm, Founder and CEO of Media Lab Bayern.

This report contains the design, the curriculum, the successes and the learnings from the GNI Startups Lab Europe. We describe challenges that all participants have in common, and their individual ways of dealing with them. We share the struggles they faced, and how their perseverance, their creativity and their idealism have given us much reason for optimism. Or as EJC's director Lars Boering puts it:

"It is inspiring to see the courage of media entrepreneurs across Europe who venture into uncharted territory to build new journalism startups. It's a privilege for the European Journalism Centre to support them in finding innovative ways to tell stories and serve audiences that have often been overlooked by traditional media. We're incredibly happy to have brought these entrepreneurs together to learn from each other."

We hope that the insights from this report will serve as valuable reading for other media founders, those trying to build the future of media and anyone with an interest in ensuring European media remains as vibrant and diverse as the continent itself. The participants of the GNI Startups Lab Europe show that such diversity is possible.



Conor Crowley
Lead GNI Programs



Lina Timm
CEO, Media Lab Bayern



Lars Boering
Director, European
Journalism Centre

Startup successes and what the industry can learn from them

Audience Growth

Growing audience is no longer the only way to earn money with content — the rise of subscriptions and memberships has made it possible for publishers to sustain even on small audiences. Nevertheless, reach is still an important goal for many media startups, not just in financial terms, but also to create impact for their journalism. For shado mag (find their case study on page 17), this was a matter of PR: a prominent feature in the BBC helped them double their reach in a very short time. Partnerships and positive coverage like this helps media companies of any size.

Média’Pi achieved the same goal by adjusting their paywall approach and distributing some of their content for free. This not only helped grow their audience, but also served as a potent proof that they serve their whole community, not just subscribers. (Read all about it on page 19). What seems like a sure way to lose revenue here turned out to be a motor for growth.

These experiments don’t discount traditional approaches to growing reach. As you can read on pages 19 and 20 respectively, Časoris and RADAR Magazine used the Lab to expand on existing channels and optimize their websites, SEO and social media. Časoris was not afraid to try new things on TikTok and was rewarded with viral hits. RADAR hired an agency to help increase traffic from social media, highlighting the benefits of working with external help on certain areas of expertise.

Subscription Growth

Turning reach into loyal subscribers remains a huge topic for many Lab participants. For many, newsletters proved to be an effective tool. In the Startups Lab, this was true for both established and newly created newsletters. Girlhood started a newsletter around a new product and generated more than 2000 subscribers (page 26), while Baynana (page 28) launched their first newsletter. The success of both shows that newsletters are still an easy and user-friendly way of generating leads and reaching readers with regular content updates.

Mensagem de Lisboa (page 30) and Átlátszó Erdély (page 32) both already had newsletters when the Startups Lab started. Through their experiments, they learned that newsletters can be a useful instrument a bit further down the funnel. While both grew their subscriber base through “regular” means, they also found that events and other offerings served as a popular entrypoint into their respective communities — attendees often converting into newsletter subscribers and engaged users.

Revenue Growth

Without a solid financial foundation, efforts to generate reach and subscribers will not be enough. That’s why a strategy leading to financial sustainability was a core goal for the startups in the Lab. Our participants found value in a structured approach. SideStreet Malta (page 34) hardly had any revenue and almost no financial oversight when they entered. But they leveraged the Startups Labs coaches massively and almost tripled 2021’s revenue in the first two quarters of 2022 alone.

Recorder from Romania showed the success of a less conventional approach. In Romania, citizens can choose to pay some of their taxes as donations to social organisations. With this knowledge, and a specialized campaign developed in the GNI Startups Lab, the Recorder team doubled their amount of regular donations. You can read about their learnings on page 36.

All of the success stories from the GNI Startups Lab Europe are worth a read. They show the myriad experiments media companies of all sizes can try to achieve success — or at least gain valuable insights in the process.

3 The How

The goal of this program was not only to embrace and support high quality, unique content for specific underserved communities in Europe. We also set out to leverage overarching insights that would be applicable to more than just one market or community — unlocking insights into new monetisation approaches for news organisations across Europe.

Three organisations joined forces to do so:



Since 1992, the European Journalism Centre has been building a sustainable, ethical and innovative future for journalism through grants, events, training and media development. They are an international non-profit, headquartered in The Netherlands, that connects journalists with new ideas, skills and people.



The Google News Initiative is Google's effort to work with the news industry to help journalism thrive in the digital age. Our efforts focus on three pillars: working with the news industry to evolve their business models and drive sustainable growth, elevating quality journalism and empowering news organizations with new technology.



Media Lab Bayern is an Innovation Hub and Startup Accelerator for Media Startups, based in Munich, Germany. Founded in 2015, it has provided an extensive programme with funding and coaching to more than 200 startups and teams to date. Media Lab also organizes events and offers services to established media companies to help build the future of media.



“In supporting more than 70 media startups in Media Lab Bayerns programs, we learned that the challenges of startup founders have a deeply-rooted common ground — no matter how big the differences between countries, markets and audiences,”

– Director and founder of Media Lab Bayern, Lina Timm.

A cohort-based program, the GNI Startups Lab Europe was designed to help founders aspire to ambitious self-set goals and to experiment in creating their individual business strategies.

To unleash the potential of proven innovation and business methods, a virtual residency coaching program ensured that all startups and publications were supported in exploring new revenue streams and business experiments.

The program provided a powerful playground to explore new fields of growth, balanced with the requirements of everyday work. With experts and coaches on topics like business modeling, reader revenue, financial planning and more, the teams received a variety of resources to implement and get inspired by. “From our past experience with media startups and accelerators, the European Journalism Centre has seen ample proof of how support mechanisms such as the GNI Startups Lab can contribute to the growth that such organisations seek.

The absolute highlight of the program has been the joint sessions with the participating teams, as we got to learn more about their needs, struggles and aspirations”, confirms Lars Boering, Director of the EJC.

Eligibility

To be eligible for the Lab, a startup project had to be at least six months old, earn less than \$500,000 in gross revenue annually, and had to be independently owned and operated.

Teams had to offer high-quality reporting and original content for local communities, single-topic audiences and/or previously underserved communities on primarily digital platforms. This could also include offering public interest journalism and/or closing an information gap for these audiences.

Startups from these European countries could apply:

Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom

Because of participants’ various countries of origin, English was chosen to be the working language for the program. While different languages are an important part of Europe's rich diversity, we needed a common language, and we learned that the choice of English for this was both an opportunity and a challenge. The decision might have dissuaded some from applying altogether, which is a factor to be considered in further iterations of the program.

Through the extensive network of the Startups Lab team, the call for applications reached all eligible countries. During the application period, Media Lab Bayern communicated with interested startups and publications directly, as well as through two interactive Q&A sessions, hosted by Media Lab Bayern and the European Journalism Centre.

About the applicants

Founders from 29 different countries submitted applications

51%

of all applicants were submitted by female-led teams

48%

of all applicants founded their startup during COVID-19

16%

of all applicants were handed in by solo founders

25%

of all applicants had a team size of 3-5 employees

In total 120 startups applied for the program. Twenty-three country mentors, with a wide-ranging expertise in their local markets, helped narrow down the applications to 18 teams invited to participate in a 4-day trial phase for further assessment. Each team was then asked to pitch their startup and findings. Based on this, an international, diversely skilled jury consisting of Jenny Feldhausen, regional manager, news partnerships at Google News Initiative, Vera Penêda, team lead events & trainings at European Journalism Centre, and Douglas Arellanes, founder and managing director of Mural, selected 10 teams to be invited into phase 1 of the program. The jury was consulted by Media Lab Bayern, who coached the founders throughout the week.

4

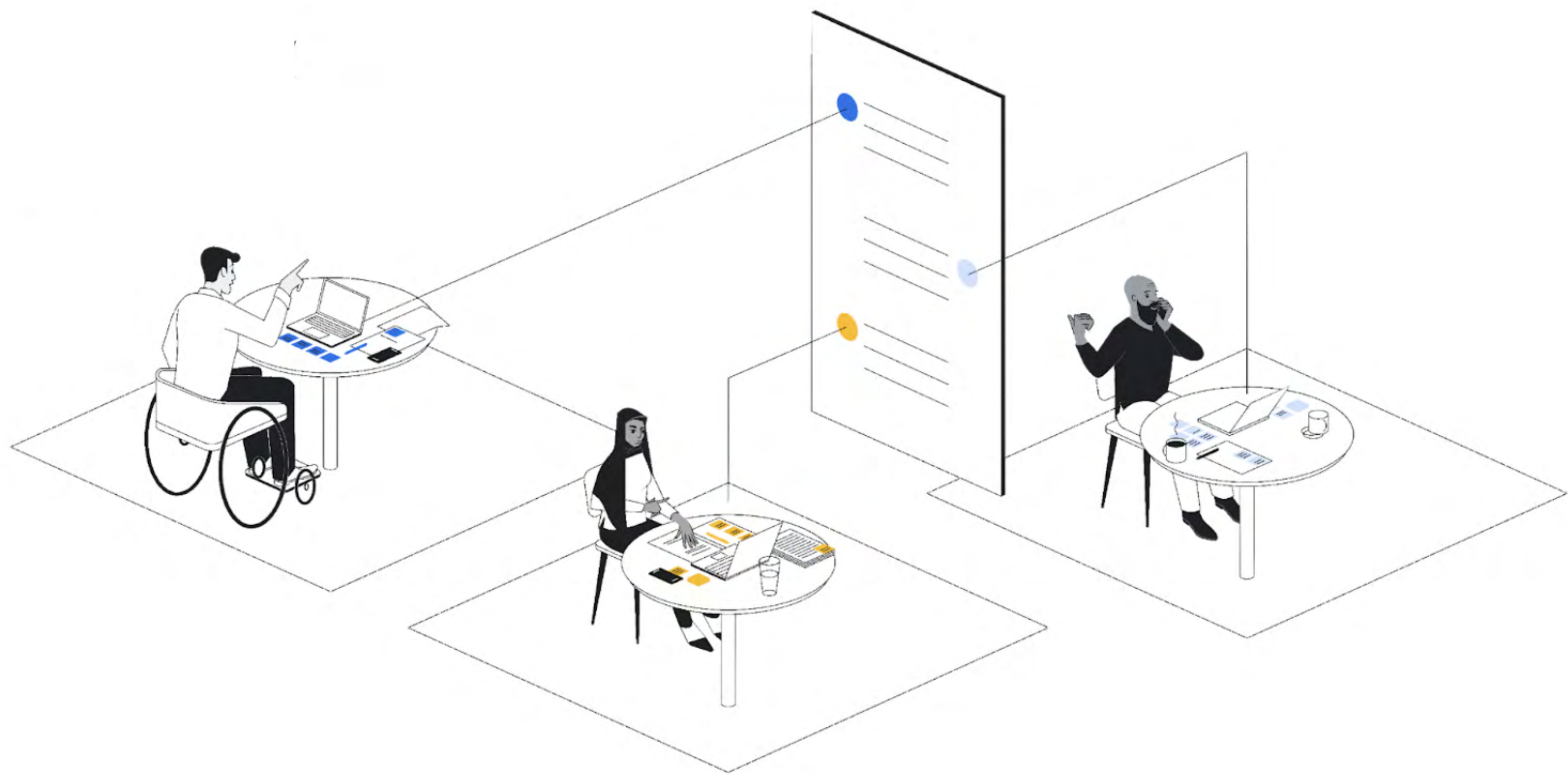
Curriculum

Throughout the program, the Startups Lab team wanted to both support founders by creating financial resilience and create inspirational moments and engaging formats around it. The aim was to impart deep specialized knowledge, tailored to the needs of each startup, while providing enough space for new experiments.

The Lab provided resources for planning and learning and incorporated not only training sessions but elements to build a business and strategy mindset.

Introducing the structure

The GNI Startups Lab Europe was structured into three phases, which gradually built upon one another and increased in pace. Each of the three phases lasted only two months, which led to a high operating speed for the participating teams. All events and trainings listed below were held fully remote, mostly as live video calls.



Trainings

Within the 6-month program, the teams were provided with a variety of trainings to build up skills and collect applicable tips and guidance.

Phase 1: Product Development

The program started with a week of imparting basic entrepreneurship skills and introductions to new coaches and topics in group sessions.

Elaboration on each startup's content, concepts and editorial strategy happened in both group sessions and individual coaching.

Phase 2: Marketing & Growth

For the middle phase, the co-learning concept was expanded with a Barcamp on social media traction, supported by other startup founders from the Media Lab Bayern community.

Additionally and with the help of Google experts and external coaches, search & visibility strategies were introduced and improved.

Phase 3: Business & Sustainability

The program concluded with a lot of deep dive and individual sessions on vision building, financial literacy, leadership, marketing optimisation and fundraising.

Inspiration

The Lab also embedded inspirational elements to stimulate the participating founders.

The following industry experts, established media companies and startups shared best cases and examples of their work:

- On content strategy with Ben Whitelaw
- On membership with Jessica Hayes, deputy director, global supporter strategy, The Guardian
- On subscriptions with Valentina Reese, editor SZ Plus, Süddeutsche Zeitung
- On reader revenue with Katarzyna Ostrowska, subscription growth manager, Puls Biznesu
- On business modeling with Brian Morrissey, founder, The Rebooting
- On local journalism with a global perspective with Jakub Górnicki, founder, Outriders
- On Building a newsroom cooperative with Quentin Noirfalisie, founder, Médor

Support

Teams received guidance and support not only from a coach but from the rest of the cohort.

- Throughout the whole program, each team was coached weekly by Pranjali Henning, an experienced business coach. She helped the teams reflect, create business assumptions and experiments and build team resilience. They were provided with inspiration and guidance through frameworks, best practices, experiences and the network of Media Lab Bayern.

- Weekly cohort meetings were not only a means to update one another, but also to ask for support from the cohort and to share valuable insights and knowledge in a safe environment. Without the fear of competing against each other, supporting one another became a powerful tool to grow together.

Strategically valuable, yet operationally applicable

To integrate the experimental mindset as the main motif in the program, the Lab made use of lean startup methodology. This approach, popularized by entrepreneur and author Eric Ries, is focussed on quick and simple experiments, validation and iteration. The goal is to enable startups to form testable hypotheses for products and business models that can then be validated without a huge investment of time or resources, and easily pivoted on should the validation fail.

To integrate the experimental mindset as the main motif in the program, the Lab made use of lean startup methodology. This approach, popularized by entrepreneur and author Eric Ries, is focussed on quick and simple experiments, validation and iteration. The goal is to enable startups to form testable hypotheses for products and business models that can then be validated without a huge investment of time or resources, and easily pivoted on should the validation fail.

Integrating the European perspective

The phases were separated by two pitch days, giving the teams the opportunity to demonstrate their progress to a group of media industry experts. The pitches were considered a challenge and a chance to practice and gather valuable feedback from the industry. Media Labs coaches helped the teams incorporate this feedback in the following phase.

The Who 5

The GNI Startups Lab cohort was geographically diverse, with coverage areas across eight countries, including France, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom. It was diverse in the audiences served, ranging from the deaf community in France to Hungarians in Romania. And it was diverse in the genders represented: In both the applications and the final participants, around 50% of the teams were founded or co-founded by women.

Different startups found success in different ways during the Startups Lab — and often in more than one way. Below, you'll find success stories from each of the participants.



The GNI Startups Lab Cohort was geographically diverse, with coverage across Europe.



Success Story: shado mag

shado mag is a multimedia startup — including a website, social media presence and print magazine — operating at the intersection of arts, activism and academia. The founders bring together voices from diverse fields in an effort to encourage collaboration and amplify its impact. shado is also a platform: They believe those with lived experience of an issue or injustice are best placed to advocate for meaningful change within that space, and should have a platform from which to tell their stories.

Participants



Hannah Robathan
Founder

Isabella Pearce
Co-Founder

On the evidence of the Lab, shado mag has already succeeded in creating this platform. A shado-produced short film about a women's refugee soccer team attracted great interest and even had shado and one of its founders featured on the front page of the BBC. The launch of the film doubled the number of unique visitors on shado's website, a great success for a startup looking to reach a bigger audience.

This success is not to say that there are not still challenges to be overcome. Experimenting with new revenue streams was an area of interest for shado, as was understanding their audience better. The team researched, tested and launched a new paid newsletter. The coaching in the Startups Lab helped them identify corporations with an interest in equal opportunity employment as a relevant (and affluent) audience for shado's specific learnings and views on the world.

“The program gave us an invaluable opportunity to engage with our audience through user interviews, surveys and polls and we feel a lot more confident now about who our current user is, and who our target user is, too.”

— Isabella Pearce, co-founder

What's next?

In the immediate future, shado mag will continue to work on their corporate newsletter package and hope to attract some high-profile companies to this offer. They also plan to use their momentum to approach impact investors and secure further funding. And they want to continue their other pilot projects to be the best and most relevant they can be for their community.



Success Story: Média'Pi

Média'Pi is a French startup that delivers news in French Sign Language (as well as French subtitles) to both a deaf and a hearing audience. Média'Pi has an important social role fighting for accessibility for the deaf and giving visibility to Sign Language to support inclusion. They are run by a diverse team: 80% of the staff is deaf or hard of hearing and 20% is hearing.

Participants



Noémie Churlet
Founder



Sara Panichi
Marketing Director



Média'Pi Team

Média'Pi offers videos about general news and topics specifically for the hearing impaired. It also functions as a learning platform — and it's considered a reference in Sign Language for the signing public both deaf or hearing. While hearing people are overwhelmed with too much information, the deaf and hard-of-hearing community lacks sufficient content offers.

As a young media organisation catering to this audience, a main goal for Média'Pi was to increase their reach and grow reader revenue. Not an easy task, because as passionate journalists, incorporating marketing insight into their daily work was difficult, as was making the time to try new things. “A big part of the program for us was that it not only forced us to make the time for experiments, but also provided us with the support we needed to do so”, says Sara Panichi, marketing & sales director at Média'Pi.

During the Startups Lab, the team did something they had never dared before: offer some of their content for free. Média'Pi needs all the income it can get. Prior to the Lab, they operated a hard paywall and offered 100% paid content. With a freemium model, the team thought that it could generate revenue and reach new audiences at the same time. During the Lab, they succeeded in opening up to new audiences and converting them into subscribers by offering a high-quality content experience.

Next to attracting new subscribers, keeping old ones engaged was another key challenge. The team increased the visibility of older, evergreen content on their website and worked to make their in-site search engine more accessible to users and prevent churn.

Through its participation in the GNI Startups Lab Europe, Média'Pi achieved:

- Freemium model: Experimenting with free content next to an existing paywall was a huge achievement and led to many insights on user behavior. Overall the efforts grew the reach of Média'Pi's website by 30%.
- YouTube launch: Média'Pi started a YouTube-Channel as another outlet to reach more people of the deaf and hard-of-hearing community.

“The deaf community lacks access to information — with the freemium model, we are making an effort to be there for the whole community, not just our subscribers.”

- Sara Panichi, marketing & sales director

What's next?

The team wants to continue to work on their new “lean startup” mindset after the program, away from silos, towards a more agile and experimental way of work. They will also continue to put out free journalism alongside their exclusive content. They want to diversify their revenue streams and become more independent from government grants.



Success Story: Časoris

Based in Slovenia and founded in 2015, Časoris is an award-winning online newspaper for children. Their vision is to inform, guide and inspire children through trustworthy news. Časoris offers timely, relevant articles on current affairs, sports, science and entertainment in a kids-friendly language, accompanied by questions for reflection and further explanations.

Participants



Sonja Merljak Zdovc
Founder

Like most of the participating startups from Eastern Europe, Časoris and the people behind it have also been strongly affected by the war in Ukraine. But through the uncertainties and the mental toll this situation took, the team worked hard and successfully to increase reach, engage users and create a more playful experience for its audience, experimenting with both gamification elements and the design of their website. During the Lab, Časoris found a new way to reach their audience, especially on TikTok. An additional goal was also to broaden the audience: To serve its young community even better, Časoris wanted to get more teachers and parents interested in the site — and maybe even convince them to finance it for their children.

Because they operate in a small market, attracting sufficient private donors has been a challenge for this not-for-profit newsroom. During the Startups Lab, they enhanced their capabilities to reach and attract paying members, but also adapted their focus from individual donations to institutions like corporate philanthropy and other players in a B2B context.

“The team embraced the challenges posed by the workload with great success”, said Ronja Schneider, senior program manager, Media Lab Bayern. “Collaborating with a Gen Z teenager to create original TikTok content was a bold yet creative move, which led to a local viral success story.”

Through its participation in the GNI Startups Lab Europe, Časoris achieved:

- Increased reach: Časoris built on existing channels to increase app downloads by 46% and increased conversion from Facebook by 5%.
- TikTok success: During the GNI Startups Lab, the team created four viral videos on TikTok, reaching more than 10,000 children each and increasing their following by 27%.

“The interviews with our readers offered priceless insights into their motivation for reading and supporting Časoris,” says Sonja Merljak Zdovc, editor and founder of Časoris. Based on the learnings from these interviews, the team was able to design their other experiments, learn from them and ultimately create their successes in the program.

“We were able to consider our strategy, get the big picture of what we are doing, and, for the first time in the life of our project, create a business plan — all thanks to what we learned and also to the time that we were given!”

-Sonja Merljak Zdovc, editor and founder

What's next?

Both in the short and medium terms, Časoris hopes to grow with additional team members to free up leadership for fundraising efforts. Recently, they hired a former colleague for editorial support. “We believe that business sustainability cannot be reached without the support of our readers. Therefore a lot of our efforts will go into campaigns to help them realize that without their contributions and support, media like Časoris can not exist”, says Sonja. Until that goal is reached, the team will continue to explore other revenue opportunities.



Success Story: RADAR Magazine

RADAR Magazine is a monthly online magazine from Italy. It was created out of its founders' firm belief that to understand how global issues impact our lives locally, we need solutions-oriented journalism that breaks down complexities. RADAR Magazine aims to do just that by combining great storytelling, facts and award-winning photojournalism.

Participants



Gianluca Liva
Founder



Marta Frigerio
Co-Founder



Anna Violato
Co-Founder

In the GNI Startups Lab, RADAR's goal was to tweak, experiment and optimize existing and new offers to their fullest potential. A new focus on search engine optimisation, social media and ads helped the team to not just attract more readers, both casual and engaged, but also to test new channels and revenue streams.

One of these experiments led them in the direction of corporations with like-minded brands and organisations. The biggest of these is a big editorial project with the Club Alpino Italiano, the Italian alpine club. Here the team works to combine their editorial efforts with sponsorship- or ad-based revenue streams, specifically chosen for this project. If it succeeds, it could be an example for many corporations of its kind.

Through its participation in the GNI Startups Lab Europe, RADAR Magazine achieved:

- **Successful redesign:** Through a user-centric redesign of their website, the team increased the sessions per visit by 20%.
- **More traffic from social:** Working with an agency, RADAR Magazine increased traffic from social media by 11%.
- **Better SEO:** According to the team, the new focus on SEO was fundamental in having some of their most optimized articles rank incredibly well, helping them in turn reaching a new, wider audience.

RADAR Magazine also faced increasing challenges as a nonprofit in Italy. Not-for-profit organisations pay less in taxes, but the status limits the revenue options they can legally pursue. A for-profit status offers more options but increases the tax burden. Startups Lab coaches supported the team in finding the help they needed to navigate these pitfalls.

RADAR's legal hurdles illustrate how the heterogeneity in Europe can create different challenges for participants with similar problems. For Gianluca Liva, a journalist and one of RADAR Magazine's founders, that was a benefit. "We could see that there are profound differences in the journalistic ecosystems of each country and, in some cases, the approach used by our colleagues was a source of inspiration for us", Liva says.

"We were focused mainly on the editorial side, paying little attention to the business one. Now we consider our content products, analyzing the feasibility and sustainability of every single project."

-Gianluca Liva, co-founder

What's next?

RADAR Magazine wants to continue on the path they are on now: They want to sharpen their journalistic work to become "those you can count on if there is an environmental problem in your area", as Liva puts it. They want to continue to grow in terms of audience and engagement. And they will continue to think of their editorial initiatives in terms of business sustainability. Their next journalistic series on both local and national issues are already in the works.

GIRLHOOD*

Success Story: Girlhood

Girlhood is a community and media platform by and for girls and young women around the world. To create a platform that reflects ordinary girls' stories, they're creating a pipeline and a community-powered media organisation: They train girls in storytelling, edit and produce their work, and curate and publish their stories. Their goal: to show the world as seen through girls' eyes.

Participants



Masuma Ahuja
Founder

Throughout the program, the team utilized plentiful user research to identify two core needs their audience had: The journalism training Girlhood offered was just as important as the vibrant and supportive community they offered. “A young woman told us that she has joined our workshops to learn something, but stayed on because of the friends she's made and the community she has found”, writes Masuma Ahuja, founder of Girlhood.

Since Girlhood's target audience is in the age group 15-25, monetizing that community proved a challenge. The team experimented with “Ally Memberships” to address those who wanted to support the mission without being part of the target audience. Another challenge was dealing with the video chat fatigue affecting many potential users during the coronavirus pandemic. Girlhood moved quickly, and worked with the help of their users to create additional offerings intended to provide content and community without adding to the mental toll of endless video calls.

Through its participation in the GNI Startups Lab Europe, Girlhood achieved:

- **New offerings:** The program helped the team to develop new offerings in addition to their popular digital workshops; among them a newsletter, a creativity toolkit, a jam session and an event series.
- **Interest in their toolkit:** A preliminary newsletter for the creativity toolkit achieved more than 2000 subscribers within a few weeks.

The work Girlhood did in the GNI Startups Lab fell on fertile ground. With every experiment they got feedback from people who were eager to get involved and to find ways to engage further. Even outside their target audience, people reached out to offer their support and mentorship.

“Recent months helped us develop a solid foundation and come up with a long list of potential offerings that would resonate deeply with our audience.”

-Masuma Ahuja, founder

What’s next?

Girlhood used the Startups Lab to develop a solid foundation, gain a better understanding of their users, and to develop a long list of potential new offerings. Next, they want to continue working on their strategy, diving deeper into what they learned about their audience. Testing different messagings and products is the way Girlhood wants to continue to build and grow.



Success Story: Baynana Magazine

Baynana Magazine is the first social and public service journalism magazine written in Arabic and Spanish, founded by and targeted at refugees. It offers useful information to the Arabic-speaking community in Spain and builds bridges between migrants, refugees and Spaniards.

Participants



Baynana Founding Team

For Baynana, a huge part of the GNI Startups Lab was exploring new reader revenue streams. To that end, the team tried a host of different steps — from validating and launching a newsletter to experimenting with new content formats like video on YouTube. They implemented a new social strategy focussed on attracting reader revenue, and changed their entire communication towards a membership model.

The team puts their audience first — every step was validated and tested with readers, and the team learned to conduct reader interviews to inform later strategy. “We received a lot of good feedback and learned what else our readers needed from us”, says Elvira Delgado, one of Baynana’s journalists. The team also experimented with ethical advertising with established migrant business owners. Their corporate structure, however, presented some challenges.

Baynana is part of the bigger NGO Por Causa, which brings together experts, researchers and journalists to work on migration topics. This structure limited Baynana somewhat when it came to possible revenue streams. It was a challenge for the participants in the Startups Lab to convince the rest of their organisation to search for revenue streams beyond grants — a challenge they now confront with new ideas and supporting data.

Through its participation in the GNI Startups Lab Europe, Baynana achieved:

- **Successful experiments:** In their efforts to turn readers into paying members, the team experimented, among other things, with launching a newsletter. Within a few weeks, they had more than 150 subscribers.
- **Know how in methods & tools:** The team learned how to take advantage of their limited resources. With lean startup strategies, they now feel like they can create a good strategy to face their challenges head on.

“The program marked a turning point for Baynana. We now have the knowledge we need to improve our content and to become an important and influential news outlet.”

-Elvira Delgado, journalist

What's next?

In the coming years, Baynana Magazine wants their journalism to be a staple in both Spanish and Arabic. They want to support the non-Spanish-speaking members of their community by providing useful information while continuing to bridge the language gap by telling stories in Spanish. They also want to become an example for other teams trying similar things elsewhere in Europe.



Success Story: Mensagem de Lisboa

Mensagem is a local online magazine for Portugal’s capital. Its mission is community — bringing to light what neighbors are doing in and for the city. Mensagem covers local politics and social issues and puts the daily needs of its users at the center of its reporting. The editorial office is based in a café downtown called Brasileira, acting as a connection point to the city and its people.

Participants



Catarina Carvalho
Founder



Mensagem Founding Team

The concept of building a community around a brand is a quite literal mission for Mensagem. It comes as no surprise that building, maintaining and monetizing this community was one of the core challenges the team wanted to work on in the Startups Lab. That happened digitally, through experiments aimed at increasing conversion, but also physically through the production of merchandise and the plan to start pop-up-residencies in different areas of Lisbon.

This intermingling of physical community space and the digital membership revenue model opens up new and exciting possibilities for Mensagem. “Conversion” is not just from digital reader to digital member, but also happens from café customer to digital reader and so on. Sponsorships and the option to reward digital members with physical access to the newsroom (and coffee) are additional avenues Mensagem is exploring.

Through its participation in the GNI Startups Lab Europe, Mensagem de Lisboa achieved:

- **Readership growth:** During the course of the program, Mensagem saw their readership increase by more than 50%, accompanied by a slight increase in sessions per user. Newsletter subscribers also rose steadily.
- **New mindset:** The whole team developed a new outlook, thinking about paths to sustainability as well as the journalistic product, which had been their sole focus.
- **New Audiences:** A goal Mensagem set for itself was to include more expats — “new locals”, as they call them — into their community. A first expat event in English attracted more than 50 new Lisbonners.

Expanding their presence in their city is now a top priority for Mensagem de Lisboa, inspired not least by their visit to the International Journalism Festival 2022 in Perugia. In addition to more regular meetups in their main office, the team hopes to hold meetings in different parts of town as well and to establish a presence wherever their community is. “This is what Mensagem is, not only a news or information project but also a community project, an inspirational project”, says Catarina Carvalho, one of Mensagem’s founders.

“That's the kind of impact we want: a sense of belonging and well-being through inspirational and useful information.”

-Catarina Carvalho, co-founder

What’s next?

Mensagem de Lisboa already sees a lot of community impact in their work. Their goal after the program is to continue on the path to financial sustainability. They aim to do that, in their words, with “a bit of journalism, a pinch of business and a lot of community management”. With the launch of their membership project, they aim to involve their community even more in the creation and monetisation of their business. And they want to grow — not just internally but also in terms of their reach within the metropolitan region of Lisbon.



Success Story: Átlátszó Erdély

Átlátszó Erdély (Transparent Transylvania) is the only independent, nonprofit newsroom in Romania doing investigative journalism in the public interest focusing on the 1.2 million Hungarians living in Transylvania, Romania. They have worked since 2015 to make public expenditures more transparent and expose corruption, using investigative journalism to reform institutions.

Participants



Zoltan Sipos
Founder



Átlátszó Erdély Team

Átlátszó Erdély came to the Startups Lab focused on improving one of their most important revenue streams: donations. While a majority of their funds come from grants, the team aimed to reduce their dependence on this income. They wanted their community to play a bigger role in sustainably funding the company.

In the first stages of the program, they tested their campaign strategy, experimented with more personal reader communications and validated online events as part of their strategy. “The team identified quickly that controversial articles are a driver for attendance at online events. By reusing the content from online events in other formats, they even doubled as a driver for donations” says Ronja Schneider, senior program manager, Media Lab Bayern. Later on, they discovered valuable strategies for building audiences on social media and for their newsletter.

Through its participation in the GNI Startups Lab Europe, Átlátszó Erdély achieved:

- **Subscriber growth:** During the course of the program, Átlátszó Erdély experimented with new strategies to attract audiences to their services. As a direct result of experiments with, for example, social ads, ethical advertising and events, they grew newsletter subscriptions by more than 50%.
- **Structured approach:** The team has developed a new understanding of processes when it comes to turning ideas into campaigns or products. Testing through hypotheses and experiments in particular has transformed the way Átlátszó Erdély approaches their work.

Next to their journalistic work, the team was understandably very affected by the war in Ukraine happening in their vicinity. Together with the Hungarian elections in April 2022, the team was under a lot of professional and personal pressure. “My physical ability to work was stretched beyond limits”, says Zoltán Sipos, one of the founders. Yet, the team pulled through and delivered quality journalism while also working on the growth of their organisation.

“The program gave us a better understanding of who we are as an organisation and as a team. It triggered discussions within the team in a more structured and insightful way about our values, our business model, who we are and what we want in general.”

-Zoltán Sipos, co-founder

What's next?

The team plans to further refine their growth strategy and use further A/B testing on their website to continue growing donations and newsletter subscriptions. Through a pop-up-newsroom, they want to tighten the connection with their community. They believe that answering one question usually leads to new questions, so they want to continue growing, experimenting and innovating.



Success Story: SideStreet Malta

SideStreet Malta is a content creation initiative delivering news directly to their online community. Their main focus is to innovate the way they deliver news, making it accessible and consumable for younger audiences, especially on social media. SideStreet Malta is among the first media companies in Malta to be born completely out of Instagram, TikTok and others social platforms. And while they do have a website, they focus on reaching their young audience on the platforms where they spend most of their time.

Participants



Luigi Sapiano
Founder

SideStreet Malta was one of the youngest companies in the program, and they had their challenge cut out for them: To transform their startup from a pure passion project into a financially stable and responsible company. “We never felt we had a problem with addressing our community or being engaged with or with the impact of our news”, says Luigi Sapiano, SideStreet’s founder. “The problem for us was: How do we get serious about making money?”

The GNI Startups Lab gave the team opportunities and insights they would not otherwise have had access to. Getting access to the business world and learning from coaches and more experienced startups alike was a huge benefit for the team — one they were able to translate into business results.

Through its participation in the GNI Startups Lab Europe, SideStreet Malta achieved:

- **Revenue Growth:** In the first two quarters of 2022, the team tripled the revenue they earned in all of 2021, mostly by putting in place essential financial structures like projections, business plans and regular reviews.
- **Partnerships:** Continuing their rapid financial growth, SideStreet already has partnerships and contracts lined up to secure half their projections for the rest of the year.

These successes, in tandem with the renown from participating in the GNI Startups Lab, opened some doors for SideStreet Malta and enabled them to do better at their core journalistic work as well. They managed to interview some important politicians ahead of the parliamentary election in Malta 2022, among them the leader of the opposition. Sapiano described this as “all the elements of the Startups Lab and their regular daily work coming together”.

For SideStreet Malta, interacting with the rest of the cohort in the GNI Startups Lab was also a huge benefit. Across Europe, old and new media companies face similar challenges, and being embedded in a network of journalists and entrepreneurs inspired them to be more creative and experimental in the pursuit of new ideas, both in content and monetisation.

“The program taught us that SideStreet is not alone, it doesn’t exist in isolation. And that opened our eyes to the possibilities of partnerships and collaborations. ”

-Luigi Sapiano, founder

What’s next?

In the short term, SideStreet Malta wants to grow its team and continue growing in financial terms. They also want to create a video department, both to tell their own stories and to unlock an additional revenue stream producing video content for external customers. And if all goes to plan, they want to grow out of their native Malta and create a platform crossing European borders to connect young people all over the continent.



Success Story: Recorder

Recorder is an independent online publication, founded in 2017. Today, it is Romania's most important independent video journalism platform. Their mission: "Journalism made for our readers, not for obscure interests". They believe in a future for journalism that is based in images, but also publish the occasional report.

Participants



Alina Păduraru
Editor



Recorder Founding Team

Recorder set out in the GNI Startups Lab on a quest to better understand their readers, supporters and content. Metrics and measurement were a big part of this strategy. The team experimented with different tools to better track information from their audience, identify reasons for churn and make informed decisions about their monetisation strategy on YouTube (for example, whether to guide their users towards a YouTube Membership or Patreon). After many tests, they decided to use BareMetrics as their new tracking tool and incorporated it into their workflow.

The team also experimented with new revenue streams and learned to think outside of the box. In Romania, citizens can choose to pay a part of their taxes as donations to social organisations. With this knowledge and a targeted campaign, Recorder managed to attract a significant number of tax donors to their cause. "The experiments we worked on, the social media campaigns we came up with and the new tools we managed to implement on our website now allow us to collect donations more easily and will pay off in the long run in strengthening our sustainability", says Alina Păduraru, one of Recorder's reporters participating in the coachings.

Through its participation in the GNI Startups Lab Europe, Recorder achieved:

- **Doubling of donations:** Recorder's targeted experiments and improvements translated into a twofold increase in the amount of donations they received out of Romania's tax donation scheme.
- **New audience connection:** The team learned the importance of regular contact with their audience. Talking to audience members is now a huge source of inspiration for the team.
- **Organisational resilience:** The team moved from the startup-newsroom stage of their development, where everyone did everything, to the organisation stage. They clarified tasks for every staff member, and designated a specific individual to manage fundraising as well.

The Startups Lab experience embedded the practice of experimenting deeply within the Recorder team. “Now we know how much there is to learn from simply setting skepticism aside, being brave by trying new things and being open to losing some financial resources in case of failure”, Păduraru says . The weekly conversations about their experiments in the Lab and the analysis of key challenges were received very positively by the team.

“ I’m sure we will become more and more curious, and that experimentation will lead us to new paths.”

-Alina Păduraru, reporter

What’s next?

Recorder wants to continue their growth into a “mature” newsroom; to this end, they are planning to hire more qualified journalists as well as an internal developer and to create different specialized departments within their company. They want to continue trying new things and, of course, publish impactful journalism that helps producing long-lasting change in Romania.

Insights for program design

Establishing a new mindset usually takes a lot of time. And the entrepreneurial and journalistic mindsets especially don't come together naturally. Journalistic values like truth, respect for human dignity and informing the public in an objective manner are more relevant than ever, and can be enhanced by an entrepreneurial spirit. This includes creating a vision for the future, which in a couple of years might turn into reality or not. It includes forecasting budgets and income streams until the end of the year, which might turn out in a different way than anticipated. It demands that founders allocate budgets and set goals for strategic initiatives, which founders can only assume are the right ones. It also includes pitching in public and therefore speaking very subjectively in the startups' favor to large audiences. All these practices and projections can be challenging for journalists whose training and everyday work don't account for them.

Guiding towards entrepreneurship

A key element of the lean startup approach is the fact that every element of a business can be interpreted as a testable assumption. Exploring new revenue streams and ways to engage with the audience in a meaningful way were fixed elements that were subjected to this experimental approach throughout the entire program. Through the weekly sessions with the resident coach, the teams were encouraged to test quickly, starting small with new ideas about monetisation and allocate their grant budgets towards testing their formulated assumptions. Learning and adapting quickly, rethinking existing structures and income streams, became a universal motif in the coaching.

“ In order to work with a plan, we had to completely change our mindset and see our journalistic work from a different perspective.

Anna Violato
Journalist, RADAR magazine

Defining what a successful experiment looks like isn't an easy task. It takes strategic thinking, decision making skills, imagination, courage and pragmatism to put new ideas to the test with both new and loyal audiences. The 10 participating teams were constantly asked to experiment and develop these skills, in addition to their usual content creation.

“ With the help of the lean startup model, the other business tools and the knowledge from the workshops, we were able to analyse our business idea and strategy for the first time, put it in a broader context and — very important — develop our business strategy even further. Before that, we were simply creating content and trying to survive while doing so.

Sonja Merljak Zdovc
Founder and publisher, Časoris

Building community as a foundation

The success of supporting programs like the GNI Startups Lab Europe doesn't simply rely on a balanced curriculum or the extending of a grant — it also heavily depends on the engagement of the participants.

The experiences from previous programs showed that learning in cohorts sparks a lot of motivation and supportive interaction among the participants. Participants regularly keep up with each other's successes, look to their cohort for inspiration and fresh perspectives and share experiences, creating a unique network that evolves beyond the duration of the Lab. This means so much more than simple synergy or network effects. It's the support and presence of other people in the same situation, learning collaboratively and openly sharing their thoughts and experiences.

“We were really happy to share what we knew when we were asked to, and we felt grateful we had the opportunity to engage with other's insecurities and troubles in growing their media businesses, as we felt less alone in our struggles. These six months were therapy and a time to grow for us.”

Alina Păduraru
Reporter, recorder

As a remote-only program with participants from all over Europe, creating this social intimacy to share personal and professional hurdles was a real challenge. Luckily, the team of the Startups Lab was able to create a big moment of togetherness during the International Journalism Festival in Perugia for a majority of the founders.

Facilitating/elevating inclusion of languages

Choosing a common language to share experiences and knowledge was key to execute this program successfully in Europe. This had an effect on who was eligible and able to apply and also heavily influenced the participants and ultimately the design of the program itself.

Founders of three teams were not able to attend trainings or coaching sessions themselves, as they are not proficient enough in English. The team of the Startups Lab was able to provide sign language interpretation for the team Media'PI, which is founded and mainly operated by deaf and hard-of-hearing people. The other teams however sent representatives from their existing staff to participate in trainings and events. Though the joining team members benefited from the program, transferring the knowledge onto the founding team and therefore shaping their business strategy was more complex and time-consuming for them than for direct participants.

Hands-on learning experiences

As reflected in the design of the Lab and its curriculum, the goal was to transfer knowledge not on a theoretical level, but in a tangible, easily applicable way. The participants were not supposed to simply learn about frameworks and mechanisms of business modeling and entrepreneurship. The goal was to enable them to start applying what they learned right away.

After taking part in the program, more than 80% of the participants felt like their expectations had been satisfied or even surpassed, which is a great result in itself, in addition to the participants' learnings and achievements.

“ It was a very intense experience, we learned and experimented much more than we expected. When I look back in a few years, this program will be one of the highlights in my learning experience as a small media entrepreneur.

Zoltán Sipos
Co-founder, Átlátszó Erdély

Startup knowledge increase — self assessment

At the end of the program, participants assessed themselves on their knowledge level before and after the Startups Lab on a scale from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high) in specific areas that were covered in the curriculum and resident coaching.

After participating in the GNI Startups Lab Europe:

123% ↑	65% ↑	68% ↑	76% ↑	76% ↑
Lean Startup methodology	Entrepreneurial skills	Business modeling	Pitching skills	Business financial

Not all achievements can be mapped in simple figures. Some successes remain below the surface, paying off only at a later point in time, because coaching is an experiential asset and its effectiveness unfolds at different times for each team.

Insights for the industry

Many young media companies in Europe face similar challenges and think about possible solutions in a similar way. But the heterogeneity of this continent is what lets them all explore their own paths to success.

Working with 10 media startups from all around Europe over the course of the GNI Startups Lab has been insightful in many ways. It taught us some things about the media industry as a whole, some things that seem to apply to many of those trying to reach underserved communities, and some things about ecosystems and how they influence paths forward for media founders. It's this last aspect that points to the specific challenges news startups face in the European context. What we found is that a mix of factors outside the founders' control, for example the economical, political and social situations in their respective countries, ultimately influences their success.

We have also seen how the focus on underserved communities attracted a lot of nonprofit newsrooms to the program, most of which have little experience with entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial thinking. The curriculum enabled huge learnings in that area for the participating startups. We saw them profit immensely from this know-how and from taking on the entrepreneurial mindset.

Reader revenue and underserved audiences

That's not to say the road ahead will be easy. The explicit goal of this GNI Startups Lab was to support young media companies addressing underserved communities. And that is reflected in the participants: The teams produce journalism for the deaf and hard-of-hearing community in France, for children in Slovenia, and Arabic-language refugees in Spain — just to name a few. All these groups of people have a right to participate in democratic society, and they have a right to good journalism that is made for them.

Sometimes though, these groups are very insular, or in no situation to be able to pay for this kind of journalism in the long term. The big shift in western journalism away from traditional ad-based revenue towards reader revenue is also affecting the teams in the GNI Startups Lab. And while many of them are pillars of their communities, not all of them can finance themselves from their community alone. In addition, media founders are idealists — and paywalling of their content their community needs is a no go for most of them. In the specific case of the Startups Lab, many participants are also nonprofit organisations, further limiting their prospects for monetisation.

For many of the teams, one possible solution that emerged during the Lab was to experiment with paid content in addition to the free content they already provide — sometimes for a different but adjacent target audience. For example, shado mag, is a UK-based platform for young people, especially those with a history of migration, to tell their stories on social justice. They tested a paid newsletter aimed at companies with an interest in equal opportunity employment — not simply creating content for them, but using the knowledge gained from serving their audience to help these businesses establish better, more equitable hiring processes, thus helping their audiences in turn.

All this has taught us one thing: For many media companies, especially young ones and especially those speaking to underserved audiences, reader revenue alone will not create financial stability in an increasingly difficult market. For many media startups, reader revenue can only be one revenue stream amongst many. An important one, both materially and idealistically, for sure — but in itself not enough to generate sustainable funding. A diversification of revenue streams remains as important as ever. Thus out-of-the-box thinking when it comes to business models becomes even more important the smaller a media company (and its audience) is.

Philanthropy as a powerful tool

There is a way for startups to get sizable funding from readers, albeit from the tiniest share of those: philanthropy, from individual donors and institutions. There is a broad spectrum of this kind of funding available, from Patreon supporters that provide a two-figure sum every month, to single or recurring donations of thousands of Euros.

There is a discussion to be had if this kind of funding threatens a medium's editorial independence. That was not a problem we encountered during the GNI Startups Lab Europe, though. Paying for a service — and not just for one's self, but also to enable access to that service for those that can't afford — it is a powerful motivator. And in cases like Média Pi, where paying subscribers were skeptical at first on why their formerly exclusive content should now be partly free, it showed that it could also be convincing, too. Média Pi wants to be there for their whole community, not just for their subscribers. And they found many of their subscribers share that goal.

We have also seen that teams who are creating independent, trustworthy local journalism are attractive for charitable foundations, as they are a crucial pillar supporting democracy. This pattern repeated in Europe, after being identified initially in previous Startups Labs on other continents. The challenge for publications like those in the GNI Startups Lab Europe is to convince people that what they're doing is trustworthy, truthful and of democratic value.

Different ecosystems, different approaches

The biggest differences we saw between the teams weren't actually their ideas or their ways of thinking about the business of journalism. Take, for example, the participating teams Mensagem de Lisboa and Átlátszó Erdély. Both focus on a rather small, geographically defined audience (citizens of Lisbon and Hungarians in Romanian Transylvania), both have a strong focus on community and both want to diversify their revenue streams with memberships and direct payments from their readers. Prior to the Lab, both tried to fund their work through grants.

The distinction becomes apparent when looking at the differences between Portugal, where the risk of poverty, according to eurostat, is a high, but sub-average 20%; whereas in Romania, more than 35% of inhabitants are at risk of poverty. Then there is also a matter of audiences: Lisbon's city dwellers are, on average, more affluent and more willing to pay for journalism. Hungarian migrants in Romania include highly skilled work migrants with good salaries, but also a huge Romani population, who are amongst the very poorest in Europe. According to the founders of Átlátszó Erdély, their audience is also rather conservative and skeptical towards the critical, investigative journalism the site produces.

All that, taken together, means that both companies are using grants to fund their work. Mensagem relies on philanthropic donors, while most of Átlátszó Erdély's grants come from sources outside of Romania. This has enabled Átlátszó Erdély to develop an impressive skill in grant writing and has been able to attract high-profile grants since their founding in 2015 — an eternity of success in startup terms.

It is one of the privileges we have in running the GNI Startups Lab that we get to support these startups not just with knowledge from the Lab, but also with funding. These kinds of funding are one way to alleviate these ecosystem differences and enable founders to make time for experiments outside the confines of their contexts.

Átlátszó Erdély used the time in the program to test online events and an open newsroom concept, while at the same time streamlining a new process for donation campaigning. We believe that all of the participants will have the skills necessary to pursue these kinds of experiments in the future — and become a little more independent from their ecosystem.

None of these challenges and complexities proved insurmountable. And in the end it was a privilege and a wonderful experience not just for the startups, but for their coaches and the teams at Google, the EJC and Media Lab Bayern as well. Because all those differences between European markets, countries and startups are not just a challenge. They are also an opportunity to learn and to grow together — and the participants in the first GNI Startups Lab Europe have shown that this is the path to success.

7 Thank Yous

Thank you to the team of people who made the GNI Startups Lab possible.

Publishers

Átlátszó Erdély
Baynana
Časoris
Girlhood
Média'Pi
Mensagem de Lisboa
Radar magazine
Recorder
Shado Mag
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