

EU Funding in the Media

An Analysis of Journalism Projects
Financed by the European Union

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About Media and Journalism Research Center

The Media and Journalism Research Center is a media research and policy think tank that seeks to improve the quality of media policymaking and the state of independent media and journalism through research, knowledge sharing and financial support.

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) is one of the largest sources of funding for media in Europe, providing financial support for a wide range of media-related activities such as content production projects, journalism initiatives, research, policy projects, and literacy programs. European taxpayer money is channeled into these projects, its support playing a crucial role in the overall media ecosystem. Without the EU's funding, many major journalistic and academic projects would not have been possible.

Despite some criticism of the bureaucratic processes involved in receiving EU grants, overall, the experience with EU funding has been thus far positive. Unlike philanthropic organizations, EU grants provide recipients with substantial amounts of funding, enabling them to carry out large-scale projects that would not be possible otherwise. Additionally, EU grants require recipients to thoroughly assess their work and maintain transparency in how the funds are used. One difficulty with receiving EU grants, however, is the auditing process, which can be unnecessarily complex, particularly for small organizations with limited resources.

While there is a wealth of information available on EU funding and the assessment of EU interventions in the media is encouraged, there is less non-EU-funded research to measure the impact of these grants. The EU does publish overall evaluations of some programs, but there is no public repository of evaluations for individual EU projects. This lack of transparency can be justified in cases where grants are sensitive, such as when funding goes to media outlets that are critical of certain national governments. However, a significant amount of evaluation knowledge gathered by EU recipients that could be used to more systematically measure the impact of EU funding in various media-related areas remains unpublished.

On the other hand, navigating the vast amount of grant-related data published by the EU can be a daunting task, especially when trying to understand the extent of support provided to specific sectors. Media- and journalism-related projects, for example, can theoretically receive funds from at least six major EU funding schemes. The most important are Creative Europe and Horizon Europe, but avenues of support also include Erasmus+, Digital Europe, InvestEU Program, and the Single Market Program.

Hence, identifying the EU support allocated specifically to independent journalism is an extremely challenging task as funding is often allocated across different categories and sectors. Additionally, tracking these projects over time can be complex, as implementation timelines may extend beyond the EU budget periods.

In the 2014–2020 budget period, for example, Creative Europe was allocated a budget of €1.46bn, with a significant portion of €820m earmarked for media-related activities. This funding supported a wide range of initiatives, but not all are directly relevant to journalism. In the upcoming budget period, Creative Europe is set to receive a substantial increase in funding, a total budget of €2.4bn, a significant portion of which, over €1bn, is slated to finance media-related activities.

Another major scheme is Horizon Europe, the European Union’s flagship scientific research initiative, which in the 2014–2020 period was allocated a budget of €80bn. This funding has supported a wide range of projects and topics, with media and journalism research being just a very small part of the overall program. Yet, some organizations, especially universities and research institutions across Europe receive large grants as part of this scheme, some of which in excess of €7m.

The complexity of accessing and deciphering all this information to map out the support that has gone specifically into the journalism sector highlights the need for more granular research on this topic. Over the past year, a series of interviews with recipients of EU grants that we conducted revealed a wide range of impacts from high to nonexistent. However, there is a clear need for a more systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of EU funds in the media.

The Mapping of EU Spending on Media Project, initiated by the Media and Journalism Research Center (MJRC) in 2023, endeavors to tackle this complex question (how does EU funding contribute to the evolution of the European news media landscape?) through interviews with EU grantees as well as empirical research anchored in data on the specific areas where EU funds have been allocated.

The current study provides an overview of the first phase of the project, which focused on collecting data to better understand the allocation of EU funding for media-related activities. It examines the financial support provided by the EU over the period 2018–2024, including statistics on the amount of funding allocated, the topics and themes covered by the grants, the average grant size, the distribution of funds among recipient countries, the EU bodies responsible for disbursing the finances, target countries and type of activities most funded.

The primary objective of this initial study is **not** to evaluate funding decisions or analyze the strategies behind fund allocation. Instead, its purpose is to provide a description of how EU funding is distributed to media-related projects. The empirical data collected for this study will serve as the foundation for the next phase of the project, which will focus on assessing the impact of financial support in each specific area and in a series of case studies of EU-funded programs.

Methodology and research limitations

While the EU is known for being transparent and providing information about its spending and operations, the way this information is presented can be unnecessarily complex and difficult to navigate. Additionally, the terminology used and the data points available vary depending on the platform being used, making it challenging to find consistent descriptions for the different categories of funding.

There are several areas where the EU lacks sufficient information or, in some cases, provides no information at all. Project evaluations and their findings are often kept internal, with only limited information about policy impact being released. It is thus difficult to determine the success or value of a project from just the details that are being published, as the only visible indicator is whether a project is continued or abandoned the following year, without clear criteria for decision-making.

Obtaining specific information on the countries or regions where a funded project was implemented proved to be challenging, too, as the databases published by the EU either lack detailed operational areas or list projects as being implemented across the entire EU. To overcome this limitation, we shifted the focus to identifying the locations of the majority of organizations that received funding. This approach provided a general overview of the countries that benefited the most from EU media funding.

To operationalize the research question and delve deeper into the media projects funded by the EU, the lead author of this study crafted a database comprising 34 distinct categories. They encompass various aspects such as the project's "Main Theme," "Funding Amount," "Type of Recipient," and "Policy Impact." However, out of the 34 categories, 16 either resulted in insufficient data for meaningful analysis or were deemed irrelevant for the purposes of this study.

The database created for this project covers 94 projects that offer financial support for media- and journalism-related initiatives, spanning from content production assistance to scholarly research in the media domain. The search for projects spanned from the onset of 2018, the earliest year for which data was available, to upcoming projects that were slated to commence in early 2024. Data collection for this project was conducted between June and August of 2023 followed by project analysis and fact-checking between September 2023 and March 2024.

The categories were selected based on the assumptions made by the lead author regarding the EU's funding approach and thematic focus, as well as the availability of data. Additionally, existing research on EU support for media and journalism also influenced the selection of categories.

The database was built through an in-depth qualitative search of key EU databases such as Cordis Europe and the Funding & Tenders Portal, as well as press releases and project calls published on the European Commission's website. The initial stage of database development involved defining categories and their corresponding criteria. It was essential to not only identify relevant information but also ensure that the data was accessible through the selected databases. Additionally, supplementary categories were added to facilitate data analysis.

Therefore, the primary criterion for a project's inclusion in the database was the availability of relevant information necessary to address the research question. This limitation highlights that the database created for this study may not be exhaustive. The study did, however, capture almost all projects within the field of journalism that were publicly promoted on the commission's website or could be found through the Funding and Tenders portal or Cordis Europe. For programs like Creative Europe, only overarching tenders such as the annual Journalism Partnerships were included, excluding individual projects funded through larger schemes within the Creative Europe program. The database contains information on 14 Creative Europe projects totaling €43.5m. It should be noted that many Creative Europe projects are not necessarily related to journalism.

Executive summary

After analyzing publicly available data on EU-funded projects, we identified 94 projects focused on journalism that received a total combined of €295.1 million in funding between 2018 and 2024. While our selection may not encompass all major projects, we believe it provides a comprehensive overview of the EU's grants aimed at supporting the journalism field (see Methodology and research limitations in this study).

Some of the key findings in this study include:

- Funding allocated by the EU for media and journalism projects has risen steeply in the past five years and is expected to continue its growth
- The average project budget stood at €3.14m, some 28% of the projects receiving funding between €1m and €2m.
- Projects launched in 2022 are expected to be awarded over €99.3m for their duration, which is a major increase compared to the projects launched in the previous years of the period analyzed in this study.
- The largest portion of funding, exceeding a quarter of the combined amount of all projects, was given to projects falling under the theme of “Collaboration and Innovation,” which includes research and development projects, as well as cross-border initiatives and collaborations of journalists and newsrooms.
- The “Security” theme seems to be a priority for the EU: projects under this theme only received 8% of total funding, but two projects attracted a total of €12m combined. They indicate that combating disinformation using new technologies seems to be one of the top priorities on the EU's agenda.
- When it comes to “Areas”, the EU's strategy is clearly favoring “Digital Transition” and “Journalism and Content Production,” the two areas accounting together for more than 70% of the funds mapped in this research.
- Horizon Europe is leading in our sample with a total of €105.5 million awarded to research projects. “Universities and Research Facilities” received nearly 46% of all funding.
- German organizations lead among the top recipients of EU funding for media and journalism projects mapped in this research, accounting for some 16% of the total funding, followed by Spain with 10%.
- Finally, when it comes to the actual deliverables, which tend to be vaguely described, projects in “Technical Improvements/Digital Transition” covering development of new media platforms, building digital infrastructure, or integrating technical innovations into traditional forms of media have led with 32% of all funding awarded, followed by research studies with 20%.

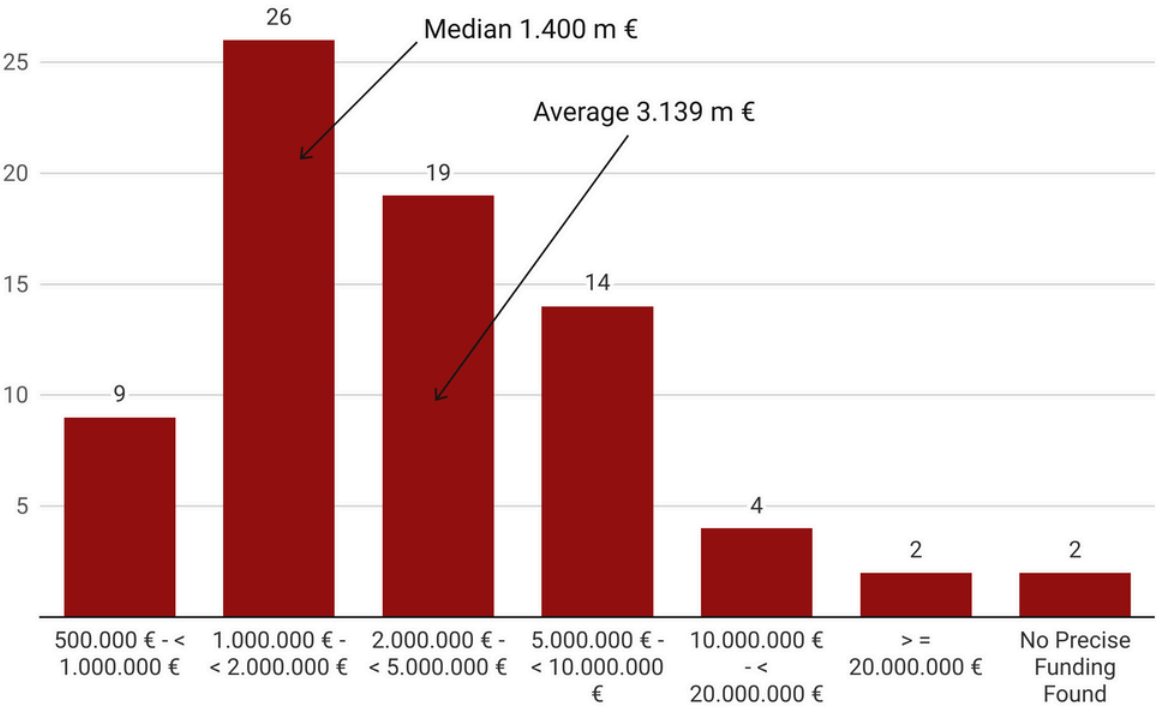
Analysis

Size matters

In total, EU-funded projects during the analyzed period received €295.1 million from various EU funds and bodies, such as the Directorate General for Communications, Networks, Content, and Technology, and the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation.

The average project budget hovered around €3.14m, with a median funding per project of €1.4m. A significant portion of projects, 26 out of 94 (almost 28%), received funding between €1m and €2m, while 19 projects (around 20%) received between €2m and €5m. Only six projects (6.4%) received more than €10m. While these funds are considered generous in the media and journalism field, particularly for small media outlets and research institutions, our analysis shows that the majority of funded projects were relatively small in scale and size for EU standards.

Number of projects by categorized funding amounts



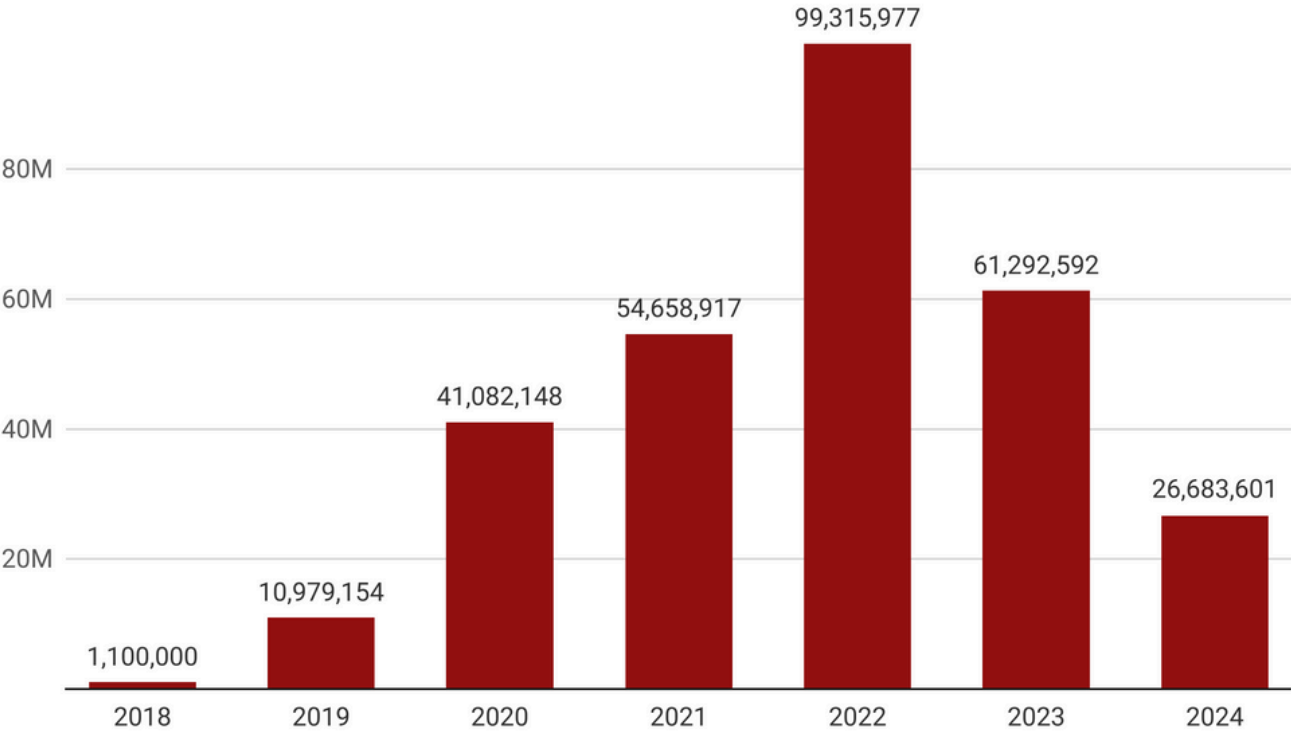
Source: MJRC EU Funding for Media Database • Created with Datawrapper

One clear conclusion drawn from our analysis is the substantial increase in funding allocated by the EU towards media projects. This highlights the growing importance placed on supporting and maintaining Europe’s media industry in recent years.

Funding for new projects has been steadily increasing since the start of the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) in 2021, with the first three years showing the highest levels of spending on new initiatives. Projects initiated in 2022 are set to receive a total of approximately €99.3m over their duration, marking a significant increase compared to previous years. In addition, projects that began in 2021 and 2023 respectively have also received substantial funding, with over €50m and €60m allocated to them. The period from 2018 to 2019 saw a tenfold increase in funding for new projects, with a further quadrupling of funds in the subsequent year.

Development of project start years 2018-2024

Amounts in €



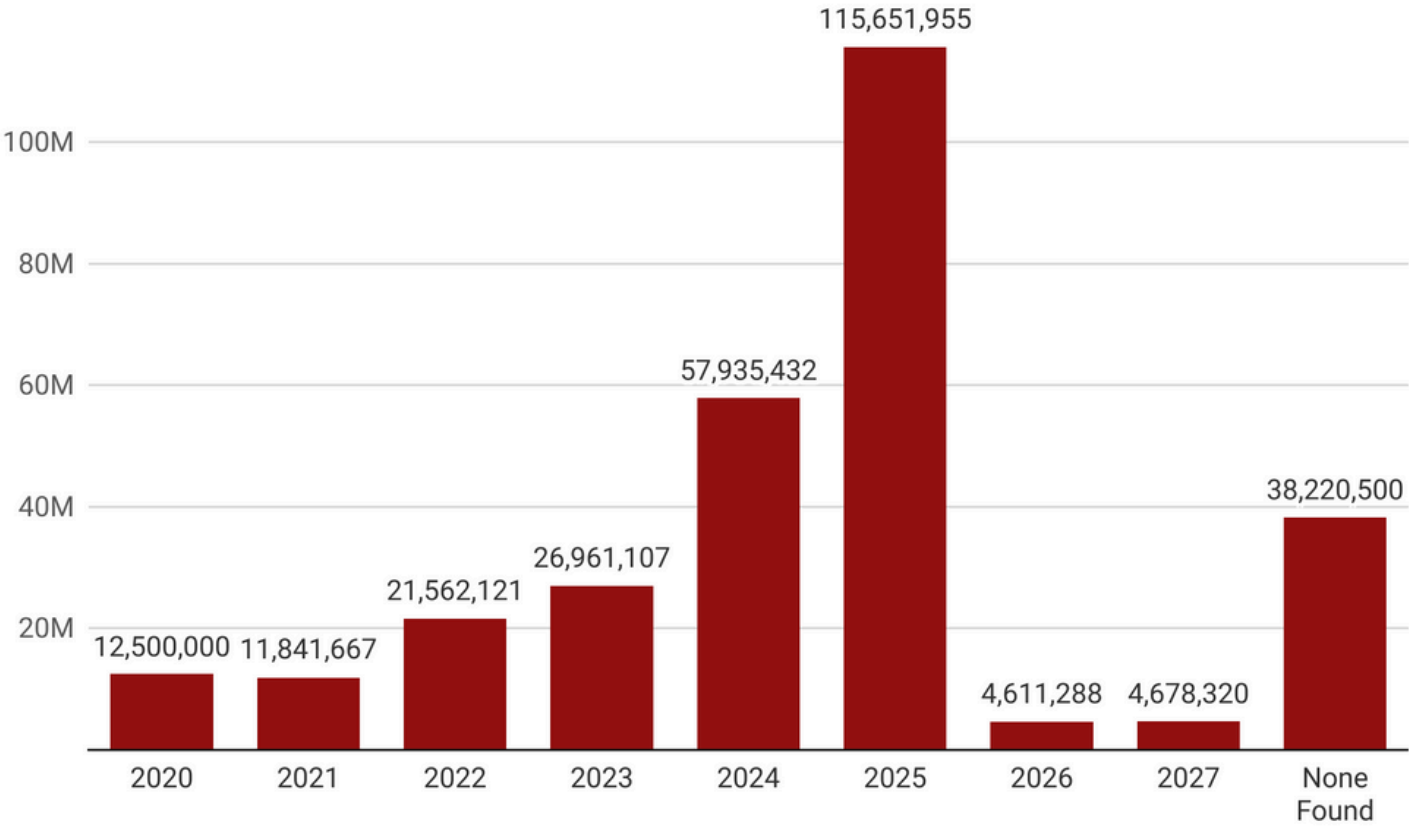
Source: MJRC EU Funding for Media Database • Created with Datawrapper

Another significant finding is that the majority of projects, both in terms of absolute numbers and relative to the total amount of funding, are still ongoing and are not scheduled to be completed until 2025. This partially explains the limited data available in the “Evaluation,” “Findings and Learnings,” and “Policy Impact” categories, as the potential impact of unfinished projects cannot be accurately predicted at this time.

The fact that projects accounting for nearly 40% of the EU’s total spending in this particular field are scheduled to conclude in 2025 underscores the trend of increased investment in media projects by the EU. These projects typically have longer durations, indicating a strategic approach to funding and supporting media initiatives.

Development of project end years 2019-2027

Amounts in €



Source: MJRC EU Funding for Media Database • Created with Datawrapper

Winning topics

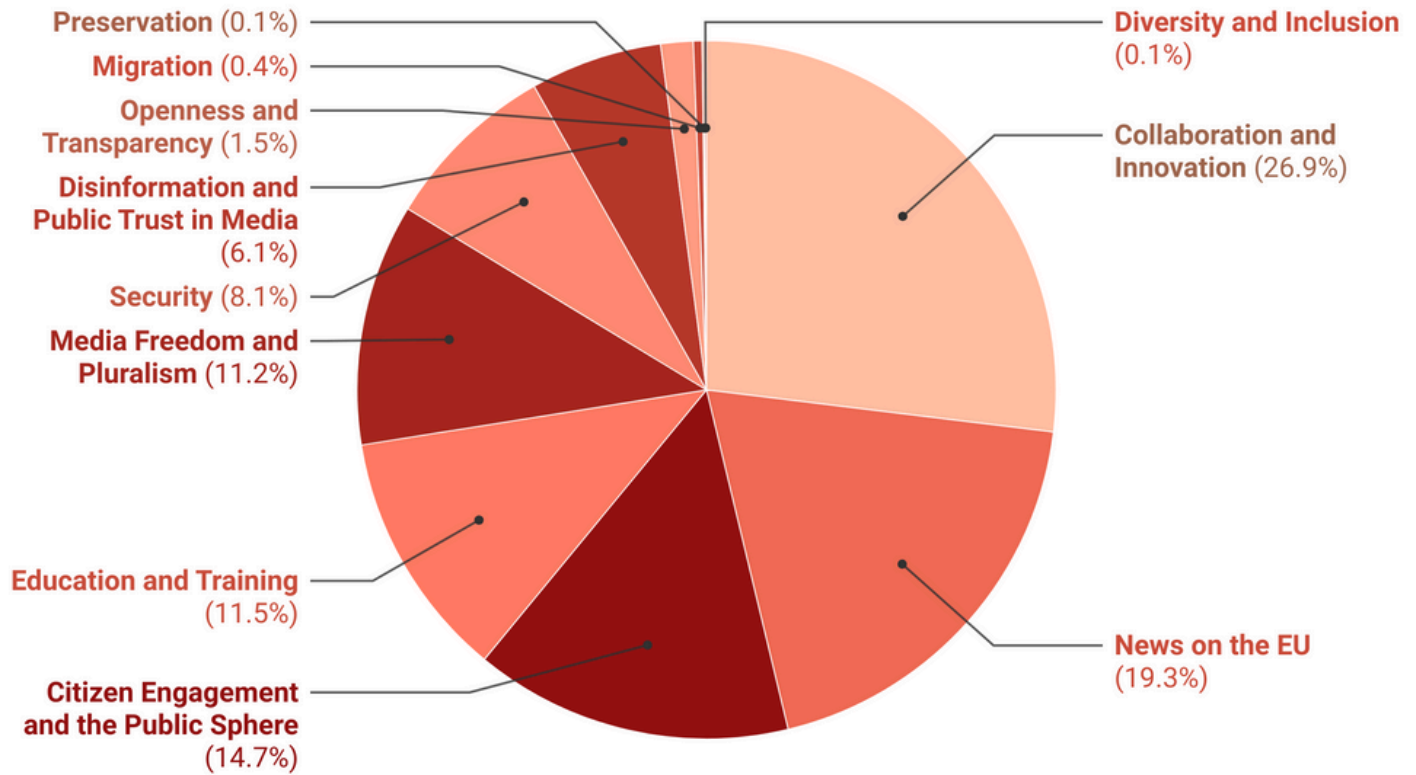
When analyzing the primary focus of a project, it becomes evident that there are numerous topics within the broad category of media, and the EU is supporting various initiatives in this field. The largest portion of funding, accounting for over a quarter of the total amount, was allocated to projects falling under the theme of “Collaboration and Innovation.” This category mainly consists of research and development projects, as well as cross-border initiatives and collaborations that bring together journalists and newsrooms from across the EU to collaborate and exchange knowledge.

A little under one-fifth of the total funding was allocated to projects within the theme “News on the EU”. These projects, such as Euronews, aim to inform EU citizens about the activities and legislation of the EU. This trend is closely related to the third most funded theme, “Citizen Engagement and the Public Sphere,” which refers to projects that aim to involve ordinary citizens in EU political processes, encourage participation in public debates on policy issues, and increase transparency in EU decision-making.

Other important themes include projects focused on “Education and Training” for journalists, addressing issues related to “Media Freedom and Pluralism” in countries where these rights are threatened, and offering secure IT infrastructure to media organizations. Additionally, there are initiatives aimed at developing tools and training materials that use advanced digital technologies to combat the spread of disinformation, all falling under the overarching theme of “Security.”

Composition by 'main project theme' in %

Categories as defined by the EU. Total funding mapped: €295m



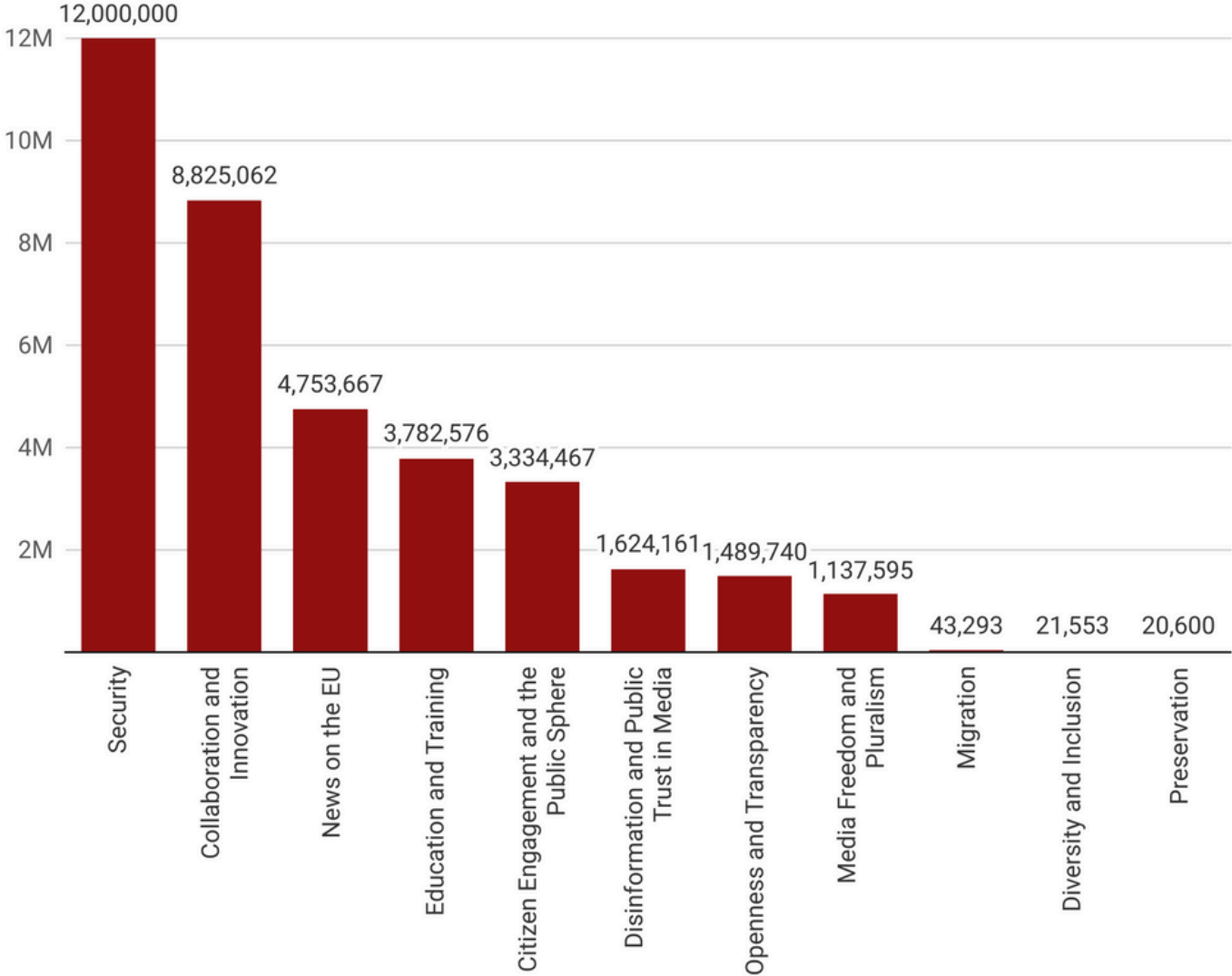
Source: MJRC EU Funding for Media Database • Created with Datawrapper

While the percentage of funding allocated to projects with a specific theme can give us insight into the EU's priorities, analyzing the average funding per project under each theme provides a clearer picture. Despite "Security" projects only receiving 8% of total funding, the fact that €12m is allocated to just two projects suggests that the EU considers cybersecurity and combating disinformation using new technologies to be high priorities.

Projects within the "Collaboration and Innovation" theme received the second highest average funding of €8.8m, showcasing the significant importance and generous funding allocated to research projects. Following closely behind, projects providing "News on the EU" received an average of €4.7m, which is just over half of the funding received by projects under the "Collaboration and Innovation" theme. In fourth place, projects under the theme "Education and Training" received an average of €3.78m in funding.

Average funding by 'main project theme'

Categories as defined by the EU. Amounts in €



Source: MJRC EU Funding for Media Database • Created with Datawrapper

Priority areas

When looking at the specific “Areas” (per EU terminology) where funding was allocated, just over 70% of the funds were directed towards projects covered by the areas of “Digital Transition” and “Journalism and Content Production.”

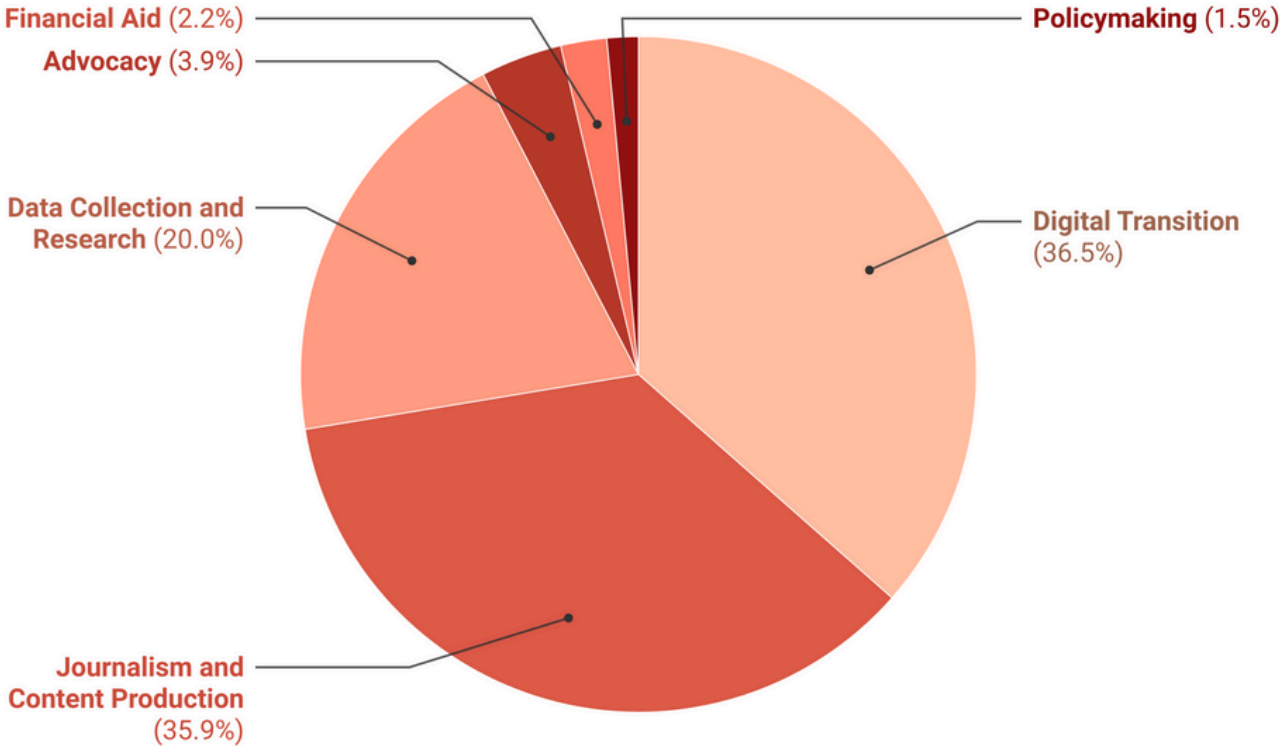
Projects falling under the category of “Digital Transition”, which make up 36.5% of total funding, comprise initiatives focused on developing innovative platforms for citizens to access news and live-streams, incorporating new technologies into the media landscape to enhance its flexibility, transitioning media self-regulatory bodies to the digital world, and digitizing archival materials.

Projects in the area of “Journalism and Content Production” encompass initiatives that seek to foster collaboration among journalists throughout the EU, support the creation and financing of news content related to EU issues and investigative reporting within Member States, and provide training and funding opportunities for journalists across the EU.

The third largest area of funding is “Data Collection and Research,” receiving 20% of the total funding. This category includes research projects that do not fall under the “Digital Transition” umbrella. This includes projects analyzing extremist discourse and misinformation, as well as conducting feasibility studies for future project stages. These three areas, “Digital Transition,” “Capacity Building,” and “Data Collection and Research,” collectively make up over 90% of the total funding. The remaining funding is allocated to areas such as “Advocacy,” “Financial Aid,” and “Policymaking.”

Composition by 'project areas' in %

Project areas as defined by the EU



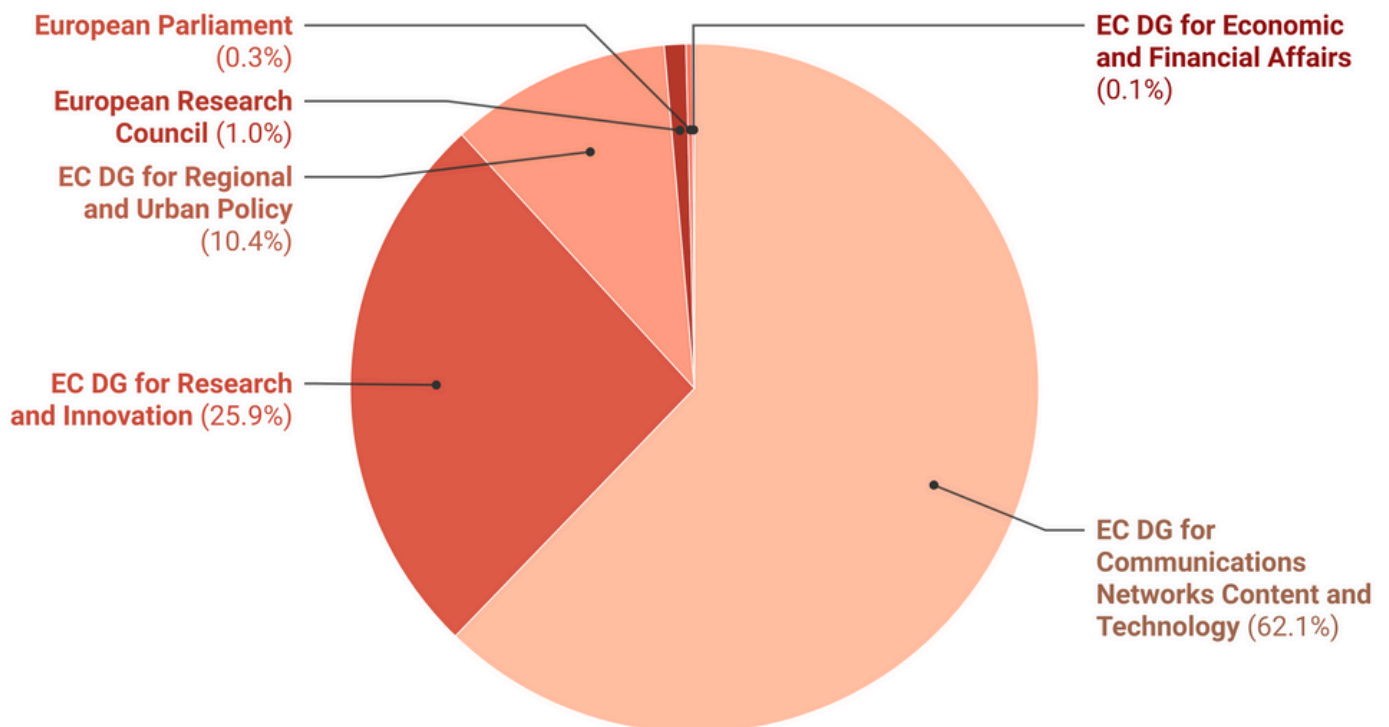
Source: MJRC EU Funding for Media Database • Created with Datawrapper

Source of funds

After reviewing the projects, the next step is to examine the sources of funding. The majority of funding, over 60%, was provided by the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Communications, Networks, Content, and Technology. An additional 25% came from the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, with the remaining 10% being provided by the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy.

The program that provided the largest portion of funding, totaling €105.5 million, is Horizon Europe, the EU’s scientific research initiative. This program operates under the current Multiannual Financial Framework, which has a total budget of €95.5 billion. Following closely behind is the Commission’s own budget, which contributed €47.7 million.

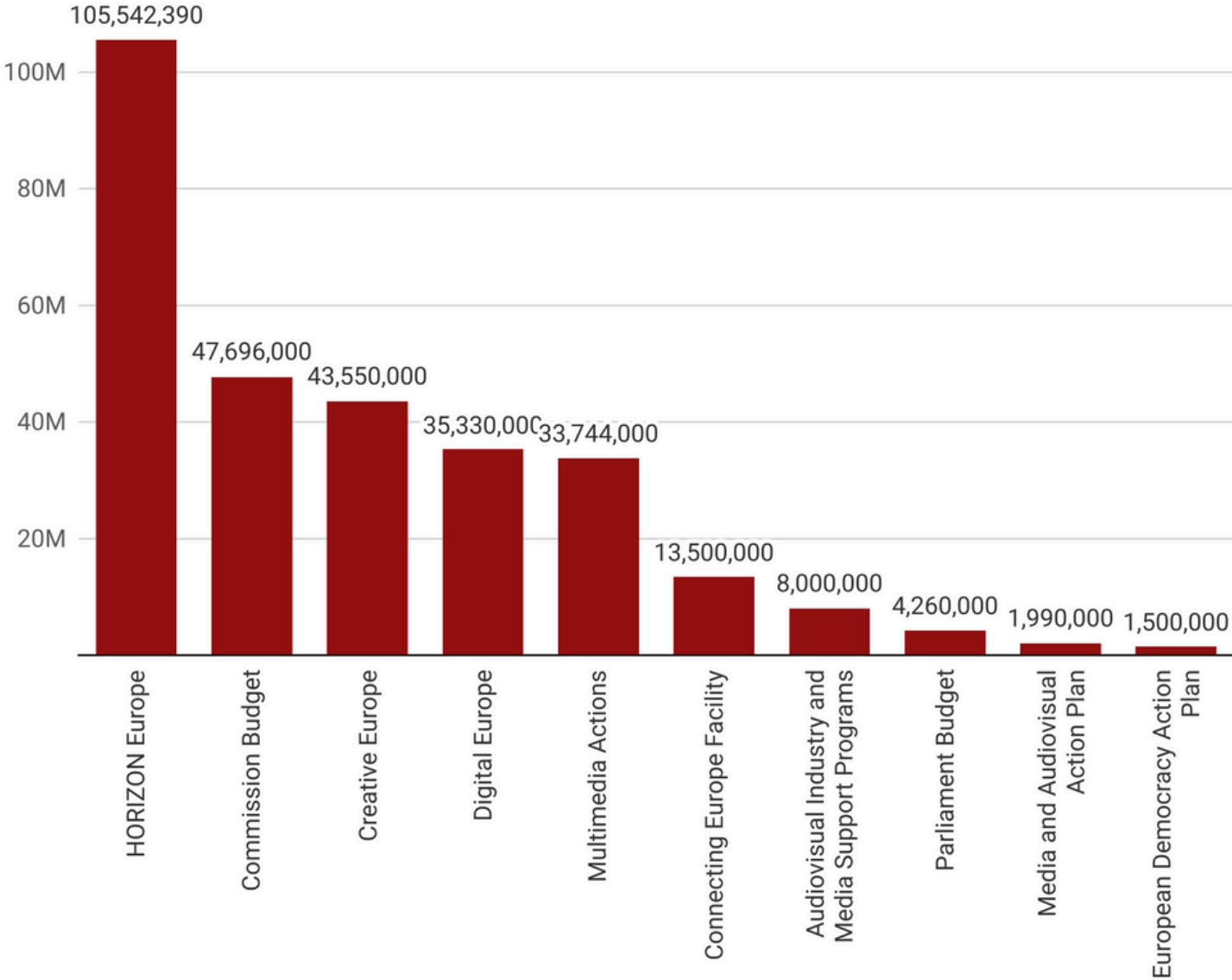
Composition by funding body in %



Source: MJRC EU Funding for Media Database • Created with Datawrapper

Funding breakdown by 'funding program'

Amounts in €

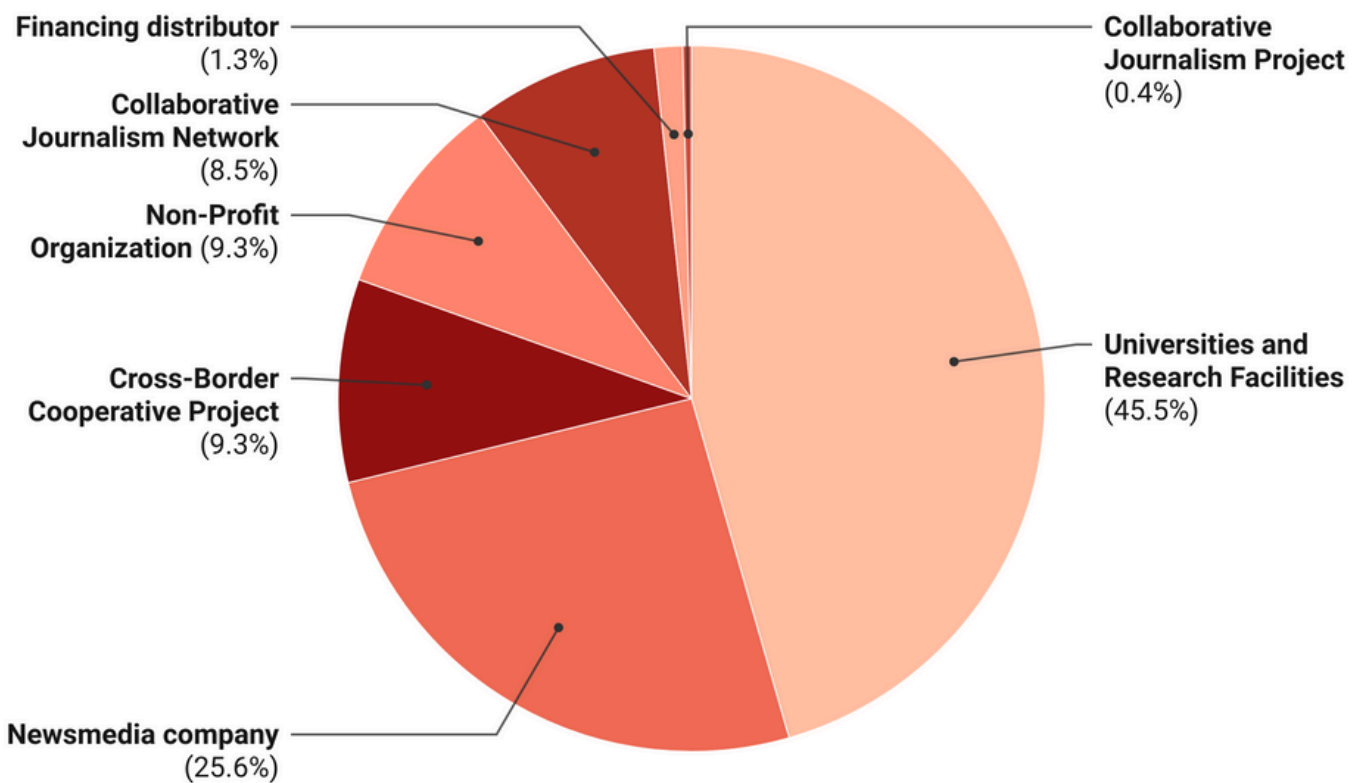


Source: MJRC EU Funding for Media Database • Created with Datawrapper

Type of recipients

The largest group of recipients of project funding by far were Universities and Research Facilities, which received nearly 46% of all funding. Another quarter of funding went to various Media Companies, with Cross-Border Cooperative Projects, Non-Profit Organizations, and Collaborative Journalism Networks each receiving just under 10%.

Type of recipients, in %

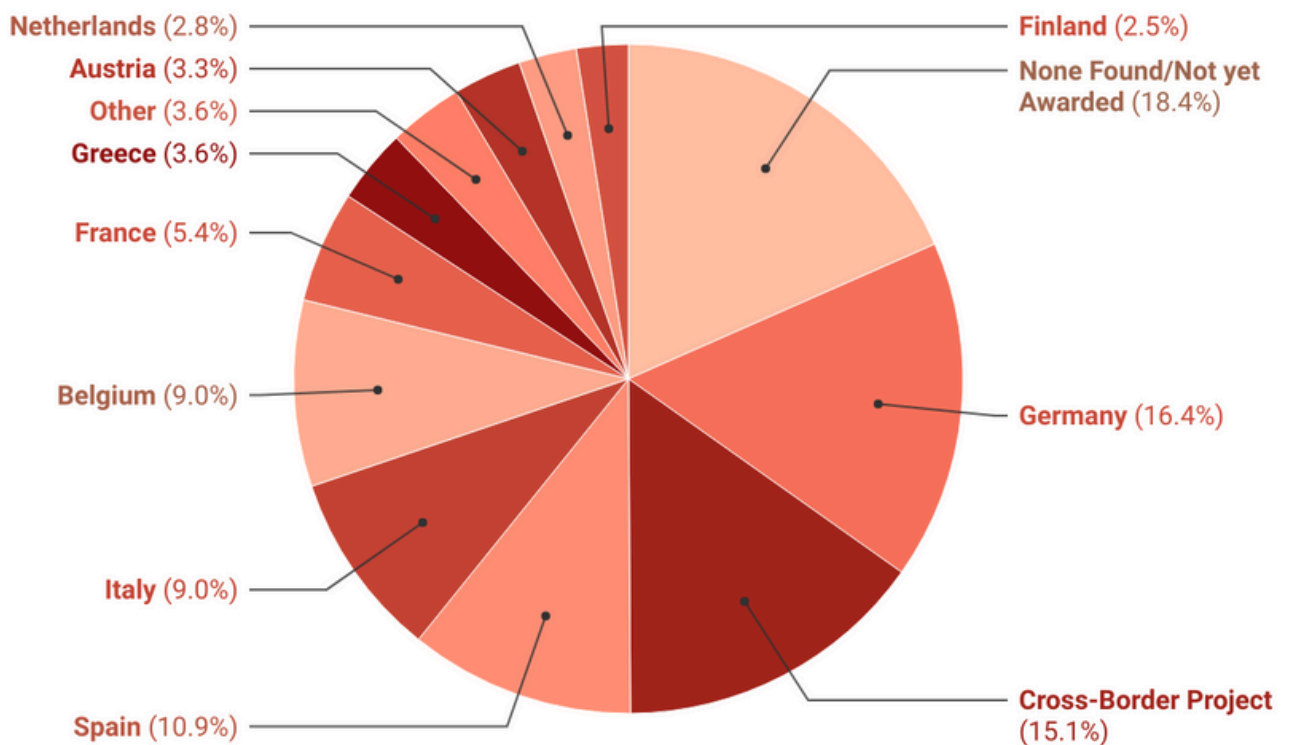


Source: MJRC EU Funding for Media Database • Created with Datawrapper

Target countries

Approximately 18% of the funds awarded by the EU went to projects that did not disclose which organization the money went to, either because funding had not yet been officially awarded at time of data collection, or the primary organization that received the money is not listed on the project’s website. After counting that out, German organizations emerged as the top recipient of EU funding for media and journalism projects, securing 16% of the total funding, followed by Spain with 10%. It is noteworthy that cross-border projects coordinated in several different countries received over 15% of the funds, indicating a rather, diversity-wise, positive trend towards promoting pan-European collaboration.

Composition by recipient country

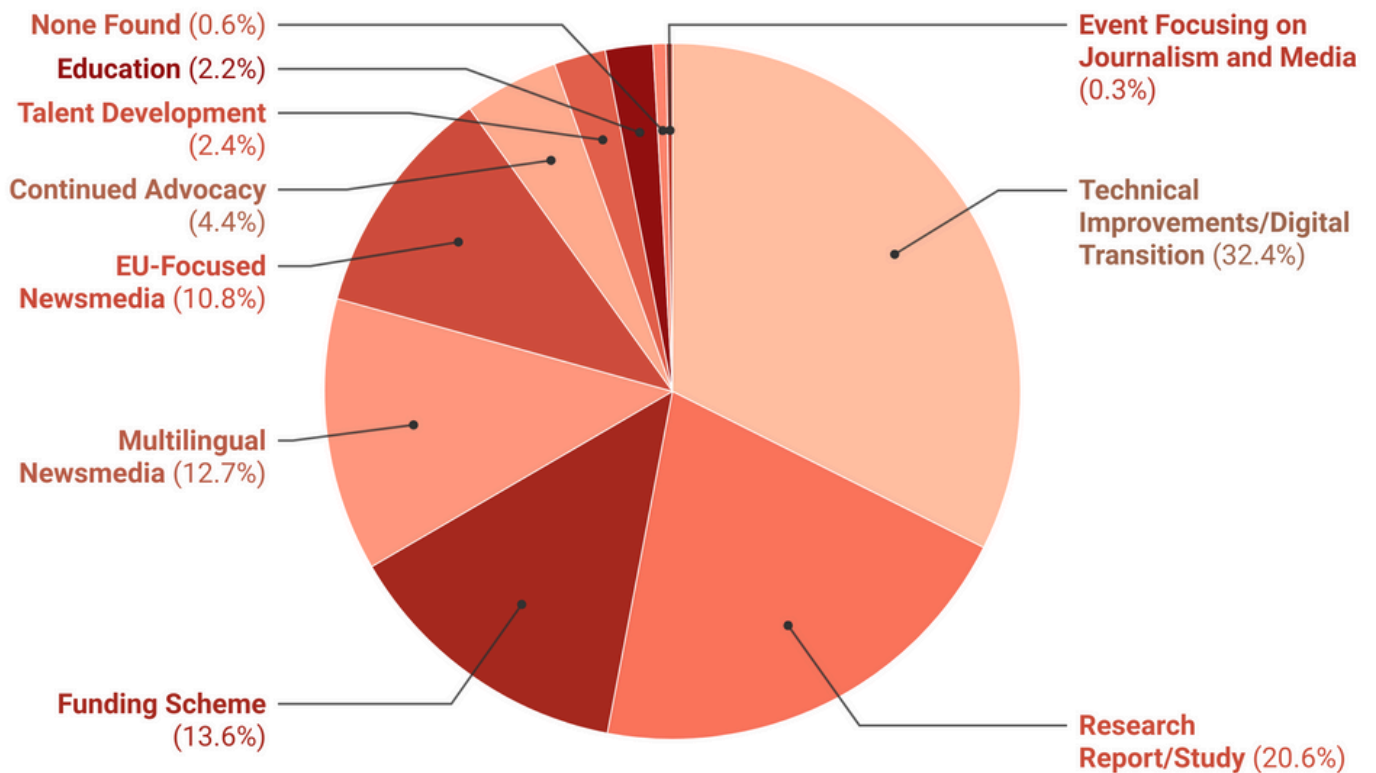


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Made in the EU: final product

When it comes to the final product that a project ends up producing, the largest amount of EU funds is allocated to projects in the area of “Technical Improvements/Digital Transition”. This includes all projects that are developing new media platforms, building digital infrastructure, or integrating technical innovations into traditional forms of media. Following closely behind is academic research, with over 20% of the total funds dedicated to activities and projects that result in a research report or study.

Composition by 'final product' in %



Source: MJRC EU Funding for Media Database • Created with Datawrapper

Conclusions

Debates surrounding the future of journalism are honing in on the viability of independent media. With media capture becoming a growing concern in numerous European countries and the changing landscape of advertising expenditures favoring tech giants, the challenges facing independent media outlets are becoming more pronounced. As a result, there is a heightened focus on finding sustainable business models to ensure the continued existence of independent journalism.

As media landscapes evolve, larger corporations are solidifying their dominance, while smaller independent outlets in less affluent markets or highly controlled media environments are facing significant challenges. Operating on limited budgets, these outlets are often pressured by governments and their cronies, forcing them to turn to their audience for support as a last resort. Local publications, news portals, and investigative journalism organizations are increasingly reliant on donors, including private foundations and government-funded media development programs, to ensure their survival.

Amidst the ongoing struggle, the European Union has intensified its support for Europe's media industry by allocating funds to media outlets, journalistic initiatives, media literacy programs, and research projects that examine trends in the field.

But there are many questions regarding the impact of the European Union in the media and journalism landscape. How significant has the EU's influence been in shaping European media? Has its financial support resulted in a decrease of disinformation, a key focus of the EU in recent years? Have the EU's efforts led to an increase in independent media outlets? Has the EU effectively addressed the structural issues that allow governments to control media and use them as propaganda tools, ultimately undermining the EU's interests? At the end of the day, are citizens truly benefiting from better media content funded by the EU, which is essentially funded by citizens themselves?

An examination of the size, target audience, and thematic focus of a diverse selection of grants, this study is the first installment in a research series that sets out to find answers to at least some of these questions to better understand the complexities of the EU's role in shaping Europe's media ecology.



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