

Media innovation labs are under fire in some front-running companies for not delivering the expected results, while other publishers dismiss the concept of a laboratory altogether. But two years of media innovation mapping reveal these structures as valuable tools that should accompany the media industry into the future.



The 'lab' – just another fleeting trend in media innovation?

Two years ago, WAN-IFRA's Global Alliance for Media Innovation started mapping the innovation labs that were emerging in media companies. Collaborating in the research were the Media Innovation Studio at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) in the UK and PUCRS in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Support was given by NxtMedia and the Stibo Accelerator.

The project set out to understand innovation and the organisational structures that exist at news publishers, other content producers, research institutions, clusters, and technology providers.

Commenting on the mapping project, John Mills, lecturer and researcher at UCLan, said, "Media labs have emerged as a structure throughout the industry to catalyse innovation, and in their many guises they promise to be a rich area of

research and allow us to understand how journalism may look in the coming years."

Interviews with more than 45 laboratories around the world have provided detailed examples of their structures, the reasons behind their creation, the methods they use to innovate, their products and services, and stories of their successes and failures.

The project also sheds a slightly different light on the 'kill the lab' argument. The labs in our network are finding solutions to both their own and the industry's challenges. Re-inventing their work on a daily basis, they have adopted a 'learning by doing' mindset rather than executing a blueprint. As a result, the labs are constantly in development, bringing innovation into their organisations as they go along.

Developing products, processes – and skills

In addition to product development, the labs in our network are developing skills, training their employees and changing the company's processes, mindset and culture. As Gordon Edall of the Globe and Mail in Canada explains: "Increasingly... we really need people to come in tomorrow and do something different. And they need to do something that's more valuable than what they did." Lab351 helps the Globe and Mail find "a sustainable identity that carries us into the future," Edall says.

As such, media innovation labs are not aimed solely at development of profitable products. They're also about developing more flexibility and the ability to improvise in uncertain situations, as Clemens Prerovski of the APA-medialab in



Lab351 helps Canada's Globe and Mail find "a sustainable identity that carries us into the future," says Director of Globe Labs Gordon Edall. Image by booleadozer via Wikimedia Commons.

Exploration at minimal risk

At the same time, a media innovation lab is generally not a very high-risk investment. It could be a simple reallocation of resources. Nordjyske Startup opened up its extra office space, existing expertise and network to startups, which bring new ideas, a fresh mindset, and different ways of working into the company. With its Adobe Kickbox process (see kickbox.adobe.com for details), Lab351 can explore 1,000 ideas for \$1,000 each instead of spending \$1 million on a single idea from top management.

Media innovation labs are not necessarily funded by their companies, other than paying the salaries of the people involved in the lab. Moreover, lab staff often are actively looking for funding to finance their projects. AFP Media Lab in France works together with funded research programs, the EPFL-ECAL Lab in Switzerland does commissioned work for clients to cover 50% of their costs, Ger-

tinuations of, rather than replacements for, the lab – which may exist in a variety of forms and is not always confined to a physical space. At the Associated Press, for example, a networked lab suits the nature of the international press agency: "It's almost like an innovation lab in the cloud. It doesn't physically exist, but you know you can go there and you have all of these online resources, the activities, the talks, and the partnerships. So that's how I would describe it – it's an intangible innovation hub," says Francesco Marconi, former Manager of Corporate Strategy at AP Lab/AP Insights.

The many forms we've encountered during our research suggest that every media company develops its lab in a way that best suits the specifics of its structure and strategy. Whatever the actual shape of the 'media lab', the concept serves across the line to make innovation concrete, and give it a place in the organisation and its strategy.

Judging the lab on its merits

It might help to go back to why the labs were created in the first place, and why the lab structure was thought to be most suitable. If media labs are judged according to unfair or unfit criteria, and quick fixes and profits are expected from them, they may indeed prove to be just another fleeting trend in media innovation.

However, if we appreciate media labs for what they are – spaces dedicated to perpetual experimentation, changing the company culture and employee development – they might prove valuable tools to sustainably accompany the media industry into the future where adaptability and resilience are not just nice-to-have but must-have qualities.

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Keep an eye out for the upcoming Media Innovation Mapping report or discover the growing database of media innovation labs around the globe at media-innovation.news/media-labs.

Austria discovered when trying to find out what 'smart home' technology could mean for news: "Although Alexa failed all the time, the cool thing is that the 'design sprint' method allows you to accommodate the situation, even when things go really wrong. We were not stuck with the Google device. We were able to work around it and still do the sprint."

Similarly, Chani Guyot of RED/ACCION in Argentina emphasises that even 'failed' experiments are useful as preparation for as-yet unknown future projects: "Like when you're doing sports and suddenly discover you hurt in places you didn't even know you had muscles," he says.

many's dpa raises money to run the Next Media Accelerator, and France's Sud Ouest and Roularta Media Group of Belgium have media-for-equity deals with their startups.

Beyond the lab

Rather than 'kill the lab', participants in the Media Lab Days in Munich earlier this year proposed three possible scenarios 'beyond the lab':

1. The lab continues but with new functions,
2. The lab dissolves but its functions are integrated into the company, or
3. The lab opens up externally, seeking collaboration and open research.

Those expected transformations are con-

At the Expo, GAMI is organising the session on blockchain and news media (DCX Conference Stage, Wednesday, 10 October, at 11:00), as well as an exhibit of a selection of European Commission H2020 R&I projects.