A project by Thomson Foundation

Western Balkans

How media innovation is making an impact 2020–2022

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We have helped keep the flame of free media alive in the Western Balkans

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Our footprint

Thomson Foundation designed its 'architecture of support' for its programmes in the Western Balkans to encourage media outlets to test and implement innovative models of monetisation and audience engagement strategies, to improve the quality of content production and dissemination and to rationalise their operational processes. This approach is flexible, adaptive to different contexts and a variety of needs.

Thomson Foundation's programmes also contribute to mainstreaming gender and minority sensitive approaches across all its activities.

We tackled five key areas:

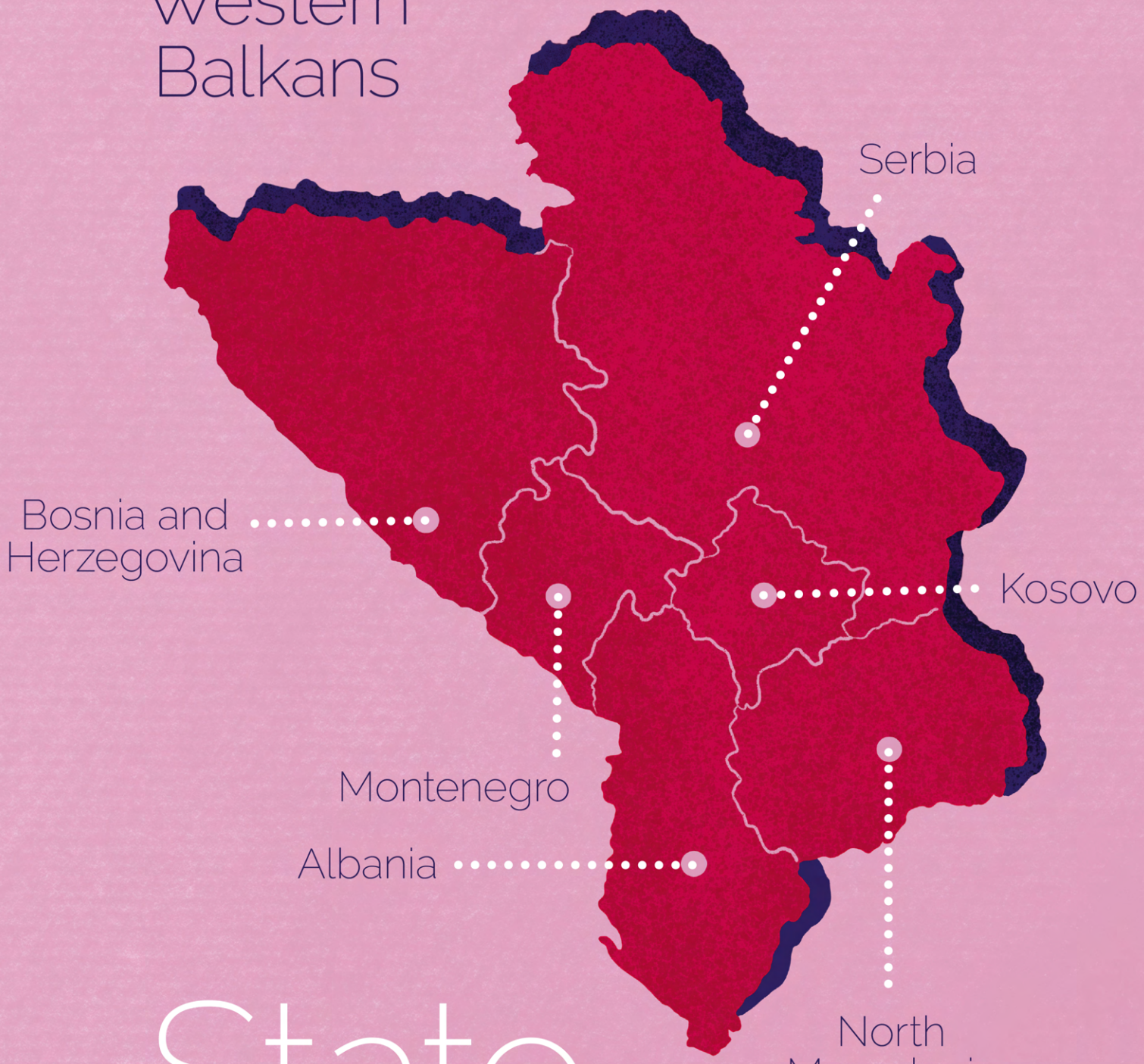
- **Digital presence**
- **Capacity building**
- **Audience engagement**
- **Diversification of content, products and services**
- **Monetisation**

Davor Marko
Central Europe and South East Europe Programme Manager,
Thomson Foundation

HOW

- Capacity building through group trainings and dedicated 1-on-1 consulting and training sessions in multiple areas;
- Direct technical support through grant scheme, website redesign and use of audience engagement tools;
- Dedicated mentorship, which is a flagship vehicle for acquiring a business mindset and skills and for steady growth;
- E-learning through online courses and other resources available on the journalift.org platform.

Western Balkans



State of play

23,000

Hours of mentoring and capacity building trainings

59

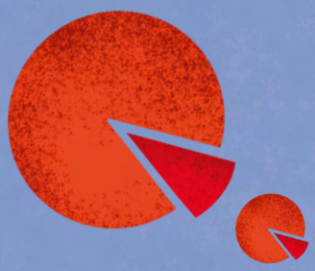
Media outlets supported

29

mentors from 12 countries (WB, EU and UK)

"Work with the mentors was extraordinary. The combination of local and international experience proved to be the winning combination" – **Mamer Fusha, TV Besa, Prizreni, Kosovo**

89%



of supported media increased their digital presence

Digital presence

HTTPS://WWW
%

WHO: RTV Teuta, Ulcinj, Montenegro

RTV Teuta based in the city of Ulcinj in Montenegro used to be a traditional media outlet primarily focused on television and radio broadcasting.

After joining the Thomson Foundation programme, they started live streaming and updating their website and social media channels with quality content on a daily basis with a special focus on the needs of the diaspora.

Due to their multi-platform strategy, they managed to increase audiences:

- Website users up by 150%
- YouTube subscribers by 37%
- Facebook follower increase of 75%
- Instagram followers up by 500%

Besides daily news, RTV Teuta now creates documentaries and special reports for the diaspora. Thanks to the newly introduced live streaming service, the diaspora can watch the outlet regardless of their location.

"Before the implementation of the project we didn't have a clear and strategic vision regarding our social media channels," said Ilmira Lika, executive director of RTV Teuta.

"Thanks to the close cooperation with the experts, we managed to boost our visibility and attract a larger audience. Statistical data shows significant increase in the visibility, viewership, and audience engagement on all digital channels."

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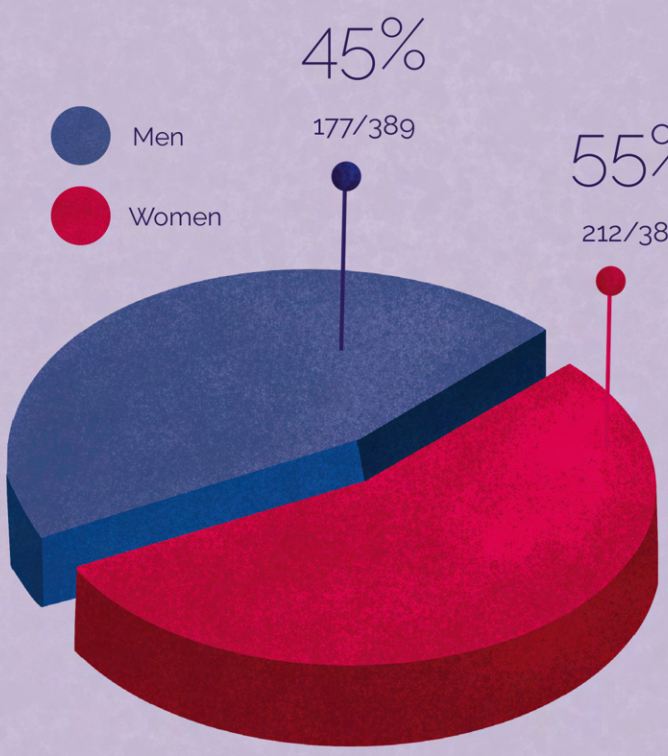
Capacity building

"By receiving in-house training in journalism and video production, our staff has improved the quality of scriptwriting and visual storytelling, making our video products more influential and attractive to watch. All this resulted in an income increase of around 14%" – Visar Hoti, founder and director, RTV Tema, Ferizaj, Kosovo



HOW

Increasing and upgrading business and journalism-related skills in the following three quite broadly clustered areas:

- Content and audience;
- Revenue generation;
- Internal processes and policies

Support has been provided through:
- Group training sessions on particular topics;
- 1-on-1 capacity building sessions on specific topics (for individual media outlets) such as mobile journalism, visual storytelling, data visualisation, podcasting, web analytics, etc.
- E-learning courses and other resources on Journalift.org platform.

RESULT

Overall key facts from this category:

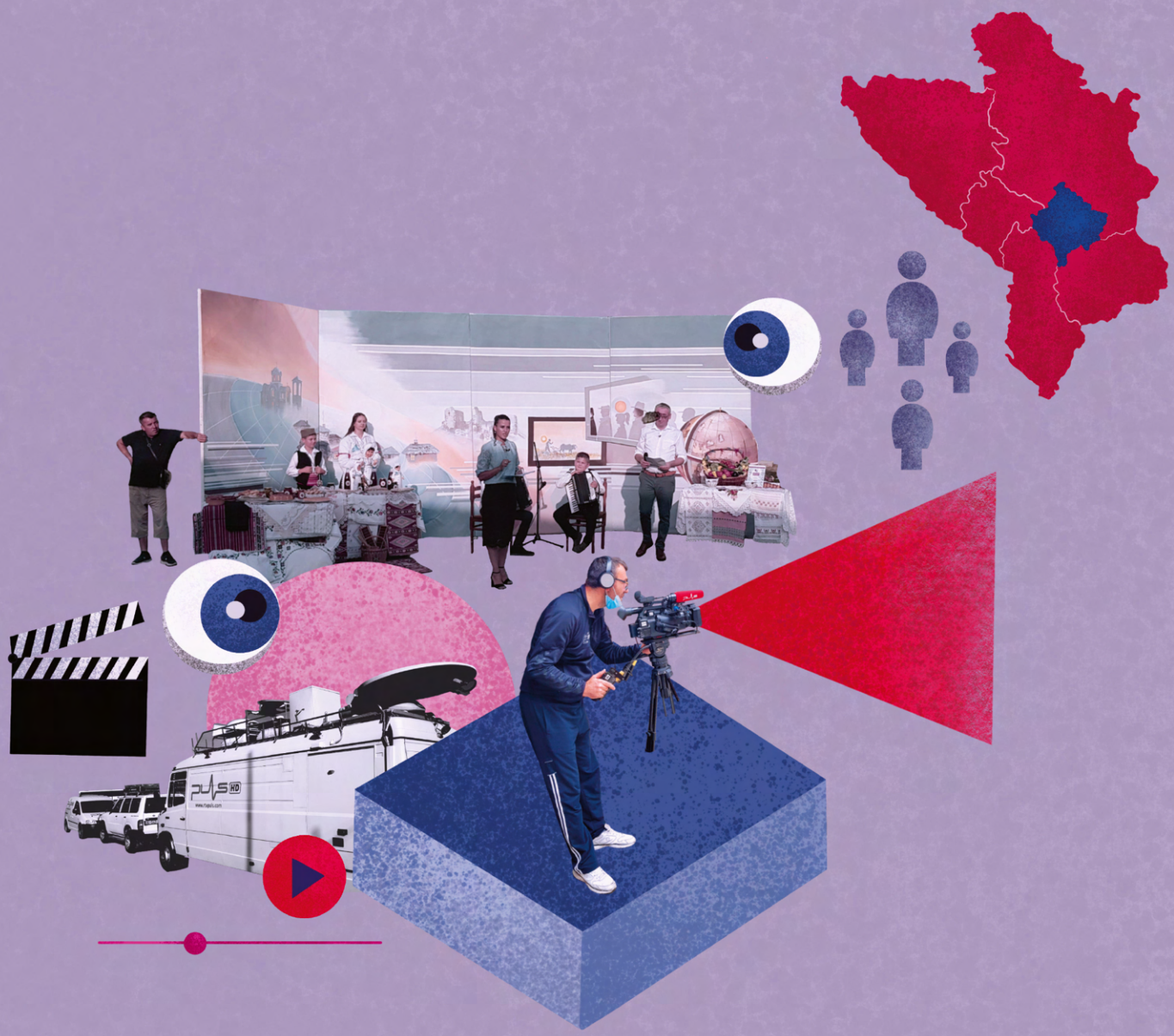
Media outlets increased their knowledge and skills by an average of 35%, compared to the level before they started to work with Thomson Foundation's experts.

WHAT WE LEARNT

Capacity building should be seen and implemented as a much wider long term strategic plan with pre-defined goals and key performance indicators to measure individual and organisational progress.

Small and local media organisations capitalised more on capacity building, especially when it comes to practical skills and those that target individuals rather than organisations.

However, improving the skills of individuals is a risk for small and local media outlets' sustainability, because they may pursue better opportunities.



WHO: RTV Puls, Šilovo, Kosovo

RTV Puls from Šilovo, Kosovo used to be a traditional television station primarily focused on reporting daily news. It broadcasts in the Serbian language in Kosovo where 5% of the population are ethnic Serbs.

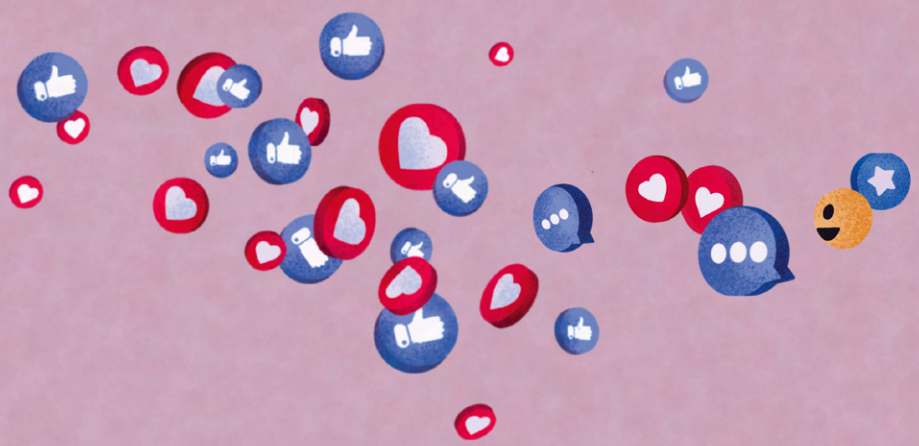
Thomson Foundation supported them in understanding how to use their Outdoor Broadcasting Van (OBV) to its full potential.

RTV Puls recruited and trained a new crew for live production and broadcasting via the OBV. Initially they produced a series of five live TV shows titled Eto nas kod vas / Closer to You broadcast on TV and Facebook.

The five shows had 160,000 views, which is ten times the number of views of previous series.

"We didn't wait too long for feedback from the audience," said Stanko Pevac, programme director at RTV Puls.

"Following the second show we received a series of positive comments with a special emphasis on our technological and human capacity to perfectly produce live shows that last around 60 to 70 minutes each."



Audience engagement

"The opportunity to use the editorial analytics system, Smartocto, gave us options for analysing the audience behaviour and the way it consumes our content. We have information about the topics that are attractive to our audiences, the reception to our content, the structure of the audience and the place it comes from" – **Slobodanka Blazhevska, Kanal 77, Shtip, North Macedonia**

HOW

Supporting media outlets to adopt new or improve existing audience engagement practices and strategies through capacity building training and mentoring support in a wide variety of topics from web and content analytics, community management, up to crowdfunding in order to:

- increase readership/engagement;
- establish a community of trusty and loyal readers;
- follow content performance and readers behaviour; and
- increase the outlet's revenue.

To make stories more relevant, impactful and profitable, special focus was put on the use of smart editorial analytics systems.

RESULT

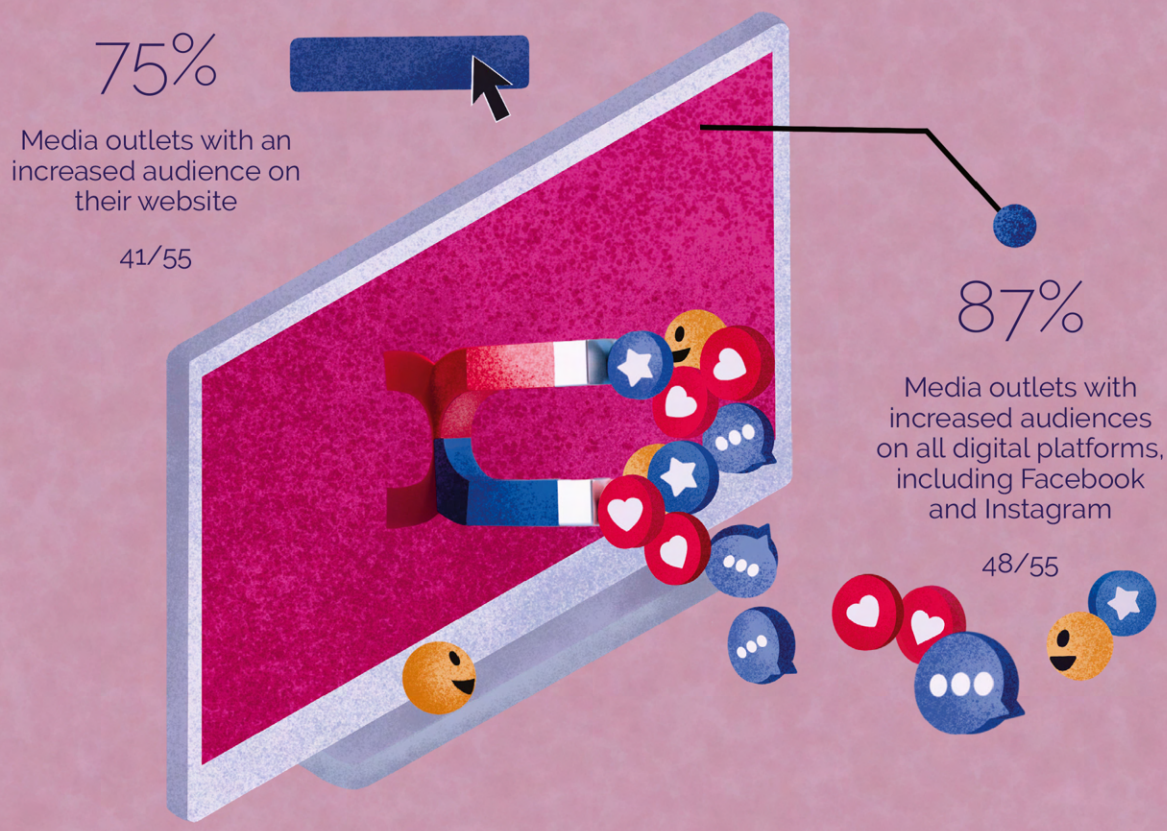
Overall key facts from this category:

WHAT WE LEARNT

The key problem is the insufficient number of staff in news organisations specifically allocated to the role of exclusively monitoring the performance of content, such as data analysts, audience editors, or audience insights managers.

By dividing the media organisations into small and large media organisations, Thomson Foundation trainers were able to pay more attention and invest more resources into outlets that had enough resources, and were interested in data and working with analytics, which brought more success than focusing on all media outlets at the same time.

This, however, does not mean that smaller media outlets should be left out of the equation, but that resources can be optimised if a selection is made from the beginning of the project.



WHO: RTV Forum, Prijepolje, Serbia

TV Forum is a typical local media organisation from the Balkans with two distinctive elements. First of all, it is led by women and secondly, following the support of the foundation, it has grown into a more youth-oriented outlet.

Now TV Forum focuses significantly on young people as potential content producers, emerging audiences and future supporters.

As a result of their business plan and the grant support, 48 high school students, 25 girls and 23 boys, have participated in media content production trainings.

Four high school students stayed on, working as summer interns focusing on youth related topics and as a result:

- 17 video clips were produced;
- 16 TV reports were delivered;
- and 16 articles were written.

A serial aimed at young people titled "Mladi kažu" is broadcast during school term time.

"Through expanding our community and our outreach to young people, we want to strengthen the existing business models, said Sanja Malešić, producer at TV Forum. "With growing content and better connections with the community we will gain much more traffic and better engagement with our content."

Diversification of content, products and services

"Vajdica.be is an online shop selling T-shirts with illustrations that are characteristic and recognisable for the city of Niš. Developed to support our core media business, it will completely rely on the local community with the aim to educate and promote local business, local artists and culture. So far we have earned more than £1.300" – Vitomir Ognjanović, Južne vesti, Niš, Serbia

HOW

Introducing a digital-first approach to media outlets by:

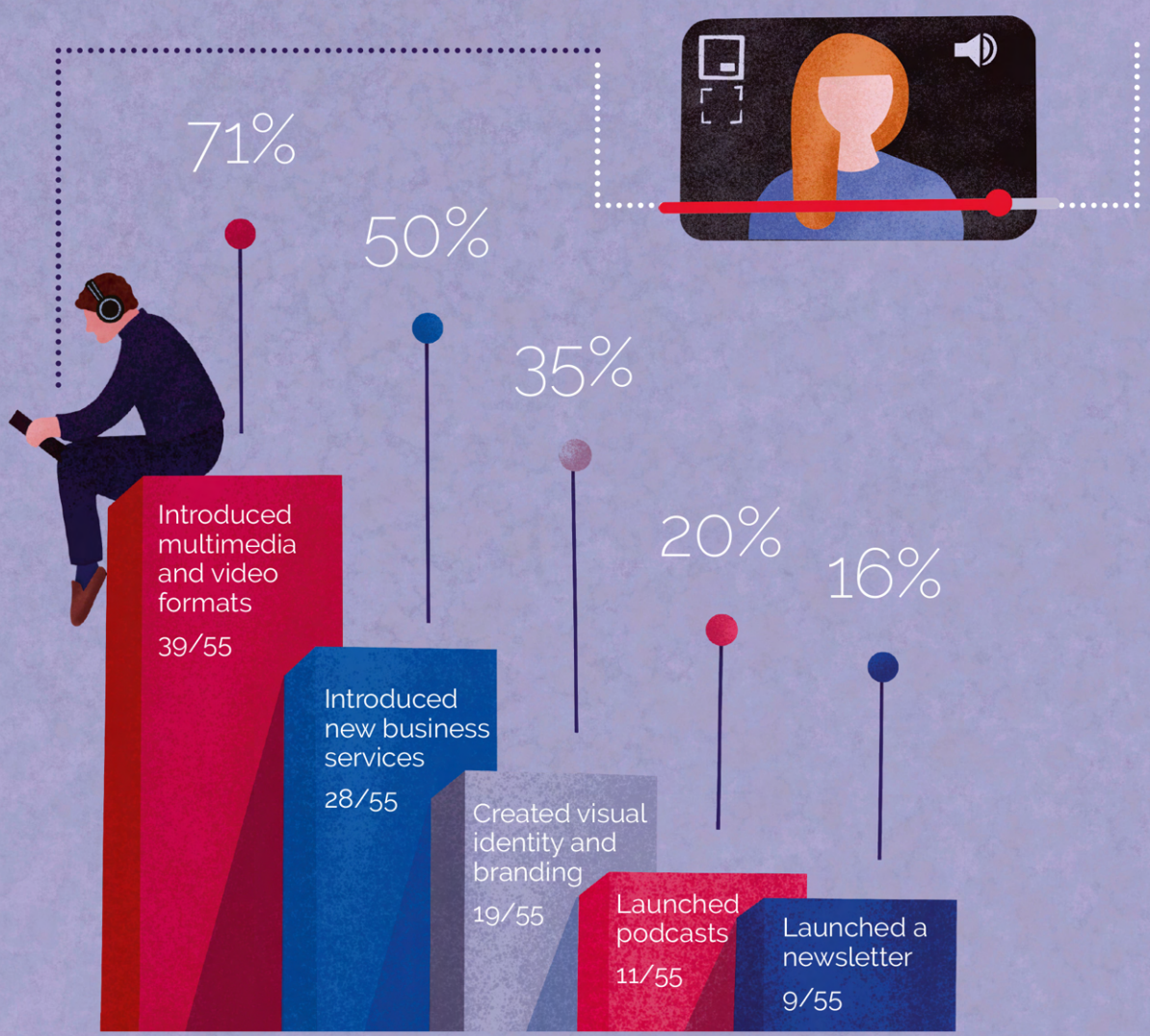
- Giving priority to the new media channels;
- Diversifying their content, formats, products and services; and
- Introducing skills, knowledge, and tools that are needed for digital content production.

New products and services offer media outlets additional streams of revenue in order to make them financially resilient.

WHAT WE LEARNT

Support received from the experts brought significant change on a personal, rather than on the organisational level, and combining it with daily tasks and activities was the most challenging aspect.

The opportunity to acquire new skills and knowledge for personal development, and the practical application of knowledge and skills, were emphasised as the most useful aspects of the one-to-one work. The majority of media workers think they will use their newly acquired skills and knowledge in the future.



RESULT

Overall key facts from this category:

WHO: Amfora, Durrës, Albania

Amfora is an online media organisation based in Durrës, which is dedicated to publishing stories about the history and cultural heritage of Albania's second largest city.

Previous to working with Thomson Foundation, it published only written news stories on their website. They now work in multimedia, storytelling on video and audio as well as text.

Their 20 video-episode series 'Culture in 1 Minute' highlights the history of the Durrës region in the classical period. The podcast series Voice of Culture focuses on socio-cultural and economic topics.

Episodes are distributed on platforms such as: Soundcloud, Mixcloud, YouTube, Google Podcasts, Apple Podcasts and Spotify.

"The number of our website users during the project implementation period has increased by 516% compared to the same period a year ago"
– Geri Emiri, Amfora

Monetisation

"We have improved the quality of our broadcasting and created a new marketing offer and price list. Thanks to that, new local businesses became our clients and started advertising with our media outlet" – **Fatmira Prodani, Durrës Lajm, Durrës, Albania**

HOW

Increase the financial resilience of media by encouraging them to introduce and pilot innovative business ideas; diversify incomes by introducing new and alternative revenue streams; monetisation of various formats, services and products.

WHAT WE LEARNT

For media organisations working on new digital product development, reserving more time to discuss the actual product they are intending to build and its features would be beneficial.

Business ideas need to be validated before significant resources are invested in developing them.

RESULT

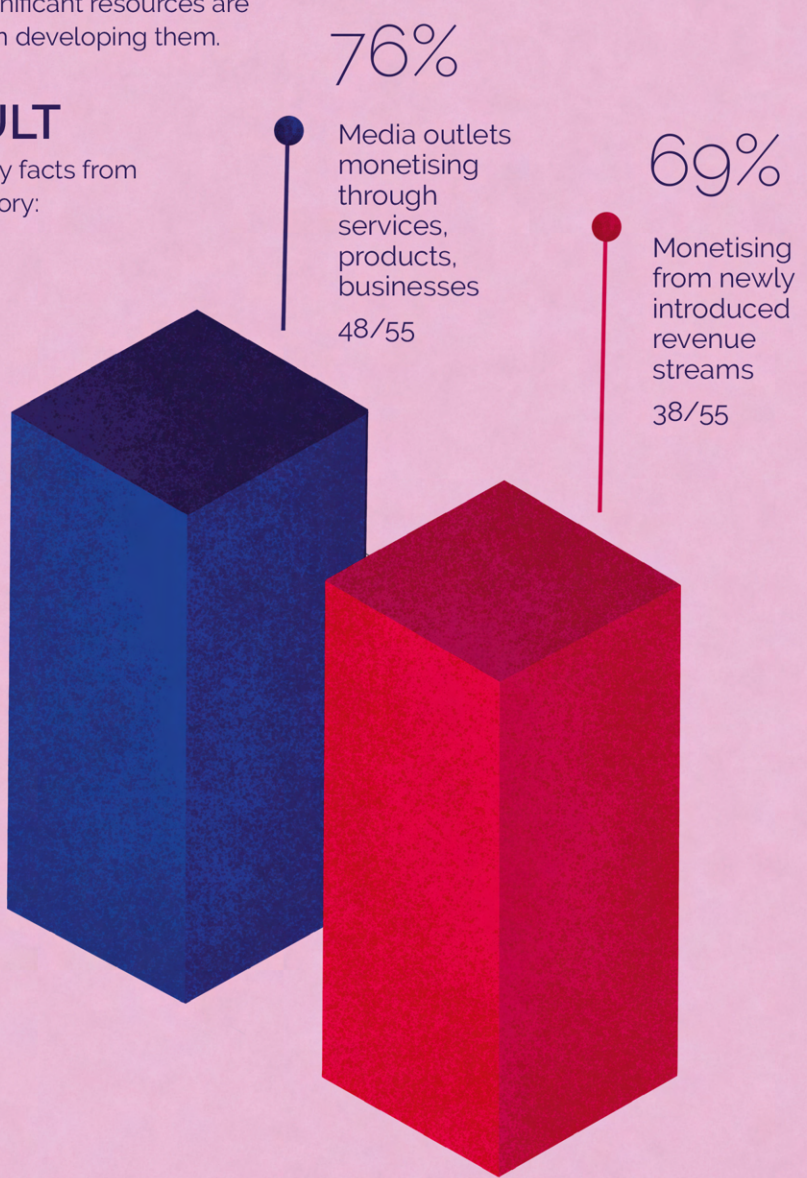
Overall key facts from this category:

WHO: Vidi Vaka, North Macedonia

Vidi Vaka is a well-established and well-known digital media organisation primarily known for engaging video stories that are published on social media channels.

Thanks to Thomson Foundation support, Vidi Vaka set up a separate storytelling studio to produce branded video stories for companies. This additional business is already successful and making a profit.

Key sources of funding: advertising, merchandise, subscription, donation and membership.



“The average percentage of the audience that interacts with content on Facebook is 5%. For Vidi Vaka, that percentage is 54% or 10 times more. There is only one reason for that: our art of telling stories” – **Mite Kuzevski, founder, Vidi Vaka, Skopje, North Macedonia**

Looking ahead

Thomson Foundation has always prided itself on getting underneath the skin of how media business work, addressing the real problems they face, in real time, in the real world.

And the three-year, multi-country programme in the Western Balkans has been no different. Our task was to seek out the opportunities and threats that independent media in the region face, across six countries, analyse the challenges to media sustainability and provide actionable, fast and bespoke answers.

Working with over 50 media outlets, from Saranda in the South to Subotica in the North, we have worked to give business support grants that make a real difference to local media, widening their audience knowledge, their sources of revenue, their diaspora reach and their subscription base.

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, a tsunami of disinformation, market collapse and concerted attacks against independent media in the region, we have helped keep the flame of free media alive in the Western Balkans by making sure grants are allied to audience and innovation.

The region is a hotbed of media talent, forever inventive and consistently adapting to change, often way ahead of many other media markets.

Going forward our task at the foundation is to help these media innovators take their skills and export them, to media businesses large and small in central and eastern Europe and beyond. So we're currently developing a range of programmes that are taking the ever evolving, highly sophisticated, market ready media skills we see in the Western Balkans and gearing them for a wide and diverse set of issues, in places like Moldova, Ukraine and Central Asia, taking the lessons learned to where they are most needed."

David Quin
Managing Director – Development
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