

## *Co-creating Media Innovation for Social Value: The Thai Media Lab Model*

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### **Abstract**

This research explores a collaborative approach between academia and media professionals for media innovation with social value. The data collected from the "Thai Media Lab" process (2021-2023) served as a model for this "co-creation media innovation research network." The lessons learned from the media development process between academia and media professionals were analyzed. The study found that key needs in the media industry are: fostering innovation to enhance communication capabilities and leveraging technology for process, product, and social innovation within media organizations. Promoting "Co-creation partnerships" involves three steps: 1) Expanding partnerships by identifying media organizations' specific challenges or goals. 2) Ideating and experimenting with media content and technology use. This stage involves brainstorming and testing media content and technologies with the participation of audiences, communities, and professionals. Lessons learned from this process inform the development of effective media product and content strategies. 3) Piloting and evaluating media for communication impact and further development. This involves testing the media in real-world situations, assessing its communication effectiveness, and using the feedback to refine the media for a more complete solution. This collaborative process empowers participating media to develop further, explore business opportunities, and ultimately achieve financial sustainability while delivering social value.

Keywords: Media Lab, Media Innovation, Digital Media, Social Media, Social Value

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## Introduction

The convergence of technology has revolutionized the media landscape, transforming the way information is produced, consumed, and disseminated. This convergence encompasses technological advancements in communication tools, distribution channels, and individual skillsets. Audiences have evolved into active participants in the communication process, generating content and shaping public discourse. User-generated content (UGC) has gained prominence in the media ecosystem, often incorporated by mainstream media outlets. This trend fosters a culture of participation and enables the development of niche and issue-specific communication formats.

The media industry is undergoing a significant transformation as a result of four key factors that are reshaping the value chain. Firstly, audiences are becoming increasingly segmented, demanding content that caters to their specific interests and needs. Secondly, technology plays a pivotal role in enabling media producers to develop and distribute content across multiple platforms. From social media to streaming services, media organizations must leverage the power of technology to enhance storytelling, audience engagement, and content distribution. Thirdly, effective dissemination strategies are essential for reaching target audiences and maximizing impact and social value. Finally, the changing media landscape demands innovative business models to ensure the survival and growth of media organizations. Exploring new revenue streams and adapting to evolving consumer preferences are key to sustainable growth.

However, these challenges can be turned into opportunities for media innovation. By embracing these challenges as opportunities, we can explore new directions for media innovation that address societal needs and enhance the role of media in society. This involves engaging with target audiences, building partnerships with technology developers, and employing innovative storytelling techniques. Ultimately, media organizations that can adapt to the changing landscape by creating social value alongside innovative business models will be best positioned to thrive in the evolving media ecosystem.

Lessons learned from media innovation development during 2017-2021, as evidenced by case studies of five countries (Srisaracam, 2021), reveal that the United Kingdom, Australia, the Netherlands, South Korea, and Japan prioritize the development of digital technologies that create "experiences" and "interaction with content, both online and in real life," to achieve behavioral change, promote learning about social issues, and facilitate cultural transmission.

In many countries, the emergence of "Media Labs" has dedicated to fostering media innovation with social value. These labs, often found within educational institutions and media organizations, engage in multidisciplinary research and media design experimentation.

Media Labs function as hubs for innovative media creation, focusing on four key areas. Firstly, they explore innovative ways to create engaging experiences for audiences around various social issues. (Storsul & Krumsvik, 2013; Pérez-Seijo, Melle-Goyanes, & Paniagua-Rojano, 2018). Secondly, they experiment with diverse storytelling techniques, utilizing various platforms with collaboration and creativity (Frost, 2019; Henriksson, 2019) Thirdly, some labs explore the potential of virtual reality technology, games, immersive experience in social awareness campaigns, and behavior-changing tools (Tanaka, 2011). Lastly, media labs aim to develop innovative media applications that serve as valuable tools for addressing and solving social problems (Mills & Wagemans, 2021).

Thailand established a unique initiative called the Thai Media Lab network in 2019. This network brings together communication academics, media professionals, and local communities across provinces in the country. Through collaborative efforts, they tackle social issues by developing innovative communication processes and media prototypes specifically tailored to these challenges.

The Thai Media Lab network has shifted its focus in recent years. Initially emphasizing academic and professional benefits, the network now prioritizes fostering "Co-creation Partnerships." This collaborative process aims to create socially valuable media innovations that are academically enriching and commercially viable. The network sees this as a crucial step towards ensuring media survival and continued positive social impact.

This research delves deeper into the Thai Media Lab network's journey, specifically focusing on the lessons learned from developing its "Co-creation Partnership" process. It also examines how the research methodology employs action research in media innovation development, analyzing how the network's collaborative efforts lead to innovations in content, process development, and social innovation.

## **Methodology**

This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a combination of methods for data collection. Participatory observation allows the researcher to immerse themselves within the Thai Media Lab process across three projects. Through interviews with key participants and analysis of the resulting media products, the research aims to examine the media lab process itself, the collaboration model employed, and the implications of media innovation fostered within the network.

The first project, undertaken in 2021, involved collaboration between four universities and four local communities. The project focused on utilizing transmedia storytelling to reach and engage diverse audiences with specific community issues. The ultimate goal was to test the effectiveness of media as a participatory communication tool, empowering communities to raise their voices on matters of importance.

The second project, conducted in 2022, built upon the success of the first by expanding the network to include ten universities. This project aimed to test the efficacy of media design and production processes as tools for behavioral and attitudinal change in junior high school students regarding bullying. The project emphasized that media innovation goes beyond simply raising awareness. By actively participating in the media design and production process, participants themselves learn and develop new attitudes and behaviors towards social issues.

The most recent project, launched in 2023, sees the Thai Media Lab partnering with a funding organization to provide media organizations with the resources necessary to integrate the media lab process within their own organizations. This project specifically focuses on developing engaging digital media narratives that foster audience participation. By overcoming initial obstacles and integrating a media lab process, media organizations are empowered to develop innovative media products and explore new opportunities for social and business value creation.

The qualitative case study methodology serves as a well-suited research tool in this context. As Gerring (2006) highlights, this approach allows for a deep dive into the journey of developing "co-creative media innovation research and development," including the analysis of its structures and management processes. Data collection relies on participant observation within the three chosen projects, supplemented by interviews and media analysis focusing on three key aspects: 1) collaboration strategies, 2) the media lab process for developing media prototypes and implementing innovation for target audiences, and 3) the model by which the Thai Media Lab supports the media industry and the broader media ecosystem.

### Result: Co-creating Media Lab Model

Based on an analysis of three Thai Media Lab projects from 2021 to 2023, we have developed a collaborative framework known as the "Co-Creating Media Lab Model." This model fosters an integrated approach that brings together academia, industry, government, communities, and the public to create media innovations that address real-world societal challenges. The model emphasizes research, human resource development, and audience-centric design, utilizing collaborative processes within field labs and co-production environments. The ultimate goal is to develop media innovations with a positive social impact and to establish a sustainable media ecosystem that benefits all stakeholders.

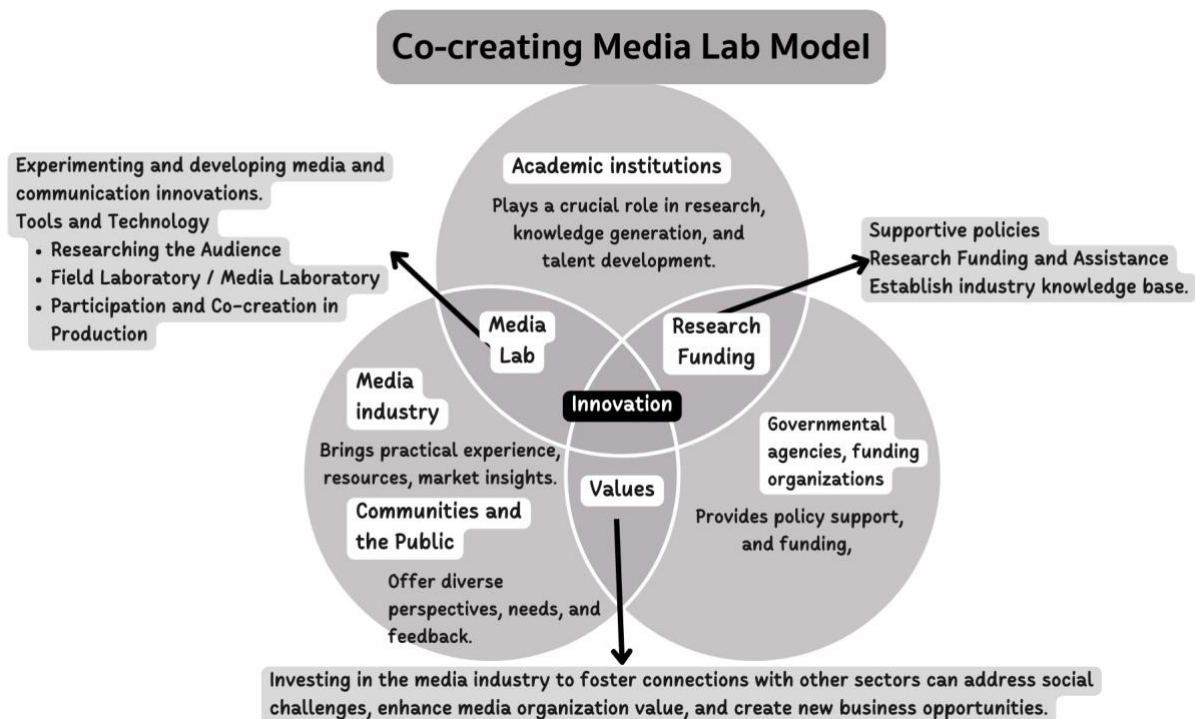


Figure 1: Co-creating Media Lab Model

This framework is a collaborative effort involving three key stakeholder groups: academia, the media industry and communities, and government agencies and funding organizations. Central to this model is the concept of co-creation, which brings together diverse perspectives to drive media innovation. Academic institutions play a pivotal role in research, knowledge generation, and talent development. The media industry contributes practical experience, resources, and market insights. Communities and the public offer invaluable perspectives,

needs, and feedback. Government agencies and funding organizations provide essential policy support and financial resources.

The model emphasizes collaboration among all stakeholders to address real-world challenges. The media lab process, a partnership between academia, the media industry, and communities, is a core component, fostering experimentation and development in media and communication innovations, tools, and technologies. Concurrently, government agencies and funding organizations collaborate to provide research funding and supportive policies aimed at building a robust industry knowledge base.

A shared belief in the value-creation potential of media collaboration is essential for government and funding agencies to effectively engage with the media industry and communities. By investing in the media industry and fostering connections with other sectors, these entities can contribute to addressing social challenges, enhancing media organization value, and creating new business opportunities.

The convergence of the media lab process, research funding, and a shared focus on value creation presents significant opportunities for innovation. This framework aims to stimulate innovation across media content, technology, communication tools, and process.

### **Media Lab Expanding Partnerships: Building Partnerships for Media Innovation**

The foundational step in constructing a robust media innovation partnership involves the identification and understanding of key stakeholders. Media organizations represent a critical component, necessitating a comprehensive analysis of their challenges, aspirations, and strategic objectives. This includes a detailed assessment of their pain points and an exploration of potential growth opportunities. Simultaneously, academic institutions offer a wealth of expertise and resources that can significantly contribute to the partnership. Their research capabilities, intellectual capital, and available resources must be thoroughly evaluated. A broader societal perspective is equally important, requiring an examination of pressing social issues and the potential role of media in addressing them.

A convergence of media organizational objectives and academic research expertise, aligned with societal needs, is essential for identifying optimal partnership opportunities. A collaborative media laboratory emerges as a suitable platform for fostering such collaborations. Clearly defined shared goals and motivations are crucial for building a cooperative alliance focused on media development. By creating a shared vision and establishing a collaborative environment, partners can effectively identify and capitalize on opportunities to generate new value through innovation.

Implementing this process, The Thai Media Lab has experienced significant growth in its partnership network over a three-year period, expanding from collaborations with three to thirteen academic institutions. Concurrently, the initiative has engaged with over twenty media organizations and local communities as participants in the media lab process. This expansion is directly linked to the identification of pressing social issues and the pursuit of innovative approaches to address them. By focusing on news opportunities and value creation through process and product innovation within media organizations, the Thai Media Lab has successfully cultivated a robust ecosystem for media development and social impact.

## **The Thai Media Lab's Evolutionary Journey: Innovation Development Process**

In 2021, the Thai Media Lab embarked on a series of social experiments, engaging with communities and target audiences through the innovative lens of transmedia storytelling. The findings revealed that while the implementation of media lab processes varied across different contexts and development challenges, three core elements consistently emerged: audience research, innovative media design based on research findings, and rigorous evaluation through pilot testing. A key outcome was the development of change agents capable of communicating effectively across diverse platforms.

Building on this success, the 2022 project involved a consortium of ten research teams, each exploring a unique social issue and developing corresponding media products. The overarching theme emphasized audience co-creation, with a focus on harnessing media production as a tool for behavioral change. The project highlighted three key stages:

- 1) **Design Thinking and Shared Experience:** A design thinking approach facilitated diverse perspectives on shared issues, empowering participants to contribute their personal narratives. This process fostered a sense of shared experience and empathy.
- 2) **Story Worldbuilding:** Collaborative brainstorming sessions encouraged participants to explore various perspectives and experiences, creating rich and multifaceted narratives.
- 3) **Iterative Media Production and Evaluation:** A rigorous iterative process was employed, involving research, design, production, and evaluation. Continuous feedback from target audiences informed the refinement of media products.

The collaborative nature of the project enabled researchers to observe how different teams addressed similar issues within unique contexts. By focusing on in-depth exploration rather than the quantity of media produced, the project fostered a deeper understanding of the media production process and its impact on participants.

In 2023, the Thai Media Lab shifted its focus to collaborating with media organizations, aiming to foster process and product innovation within the industry. By applying the same co-creation principles used with community partners, the lab successfully developed seven media prototypes that not only addressed social issues but also generated new revenue streams for the participating organizations. This demonstrated the potential of media labs to drive both social impact and organizational sustainability.

## **The Impact of Media Labs on Society and Industry**

A strategic approach to fostering social communication involves leveraging networks of collaborators to address shared challenges and opportunities. By focusing on issues of significance to the community, media innovation projects can develop effective communication tools that provide solutions, raise awareness, and promote understanding. When selecting communication themes, it is essential to identify issues that are both relevant and amenable to collective action.

Media labs offer more than just media production; they serve as platforms for knowledge transfer, empowering participants to apply the acquired skills to future communication endeavors. Through active engagement, participants gain firsthand experience and contribute to the creation of meaningful and impactful communications.

The impact of co-creating media through media labs is twofold. First, it positions media as a powerful tool for addressing social issues, promoting positive behaviors, and disseminating information to the public. Second, it offers new business opportunities for media practitioners, enabling them to create targeted content, explore diverse distribution channels, and develop innovative products and services.

By designing experimental processes that foster the development of individuals, methodologies, and media content, media labs can generate diverse and innovative solutions. Collaborative research involving individuals from various disciplines and local communities can lead to the creation of specialized media labs, each with unique strengths and areas of expertise. Rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach, funding agencies should support the development of these specialized labs to cultivate deeper knowledge and create replicable models.

## **Conclusion**

The implementation of media labs aligns with the principles of user-centered design, emphasizing the importance of understanding and responding to user needs. Additionally, the iterative nature of media lab processes resonates with design thinking methodologies, as articulated by Richard Buchanan (2019). These frameworks underscore the importance of user involvement throughout the design and development process.

Stakeholder engagement is paramount to the success of media labs. Informed by social network analysis and collaboration theories, media labs harness diverse perspectives to generate innovative solutions. This approach aligns with the concept of co-creation, which Nambisan (2002) posits as a catalyst for organizational innovation. Drawing on insights from living labs, as explored by Følstad (2008), media labs can evolve into dynamic spaces for experimentation and knowledge exchange. Romero-Frías and Robinson-García (2017) emphasize the transformation of traditional research centers into collaborative ecosystems. By adopting these principles, media labs can foster user involvement and drive innovation.

By examining the relationship between media, culture, and technology, media labs can contribute to a deeper understanding of the social implications of their work. By fostering partnerships and leveraging the expertise of diverse stakeholders, media labs can address complex societal challenges and drive meaningful social change.

When considering the broader implications of media labs, it is essential to delve into the concept of media innovation. Media innovation refers to novel ideas, practices, or artifacts that are either entirely new or represent significant improvements upon existing ones. These innovations drive efficiency, effectiveness, and progress.

Scholars have proposed various frameworks for categorizing media innovation. Bessant and Tidd (2007), Storsul and Krumsvik (2013), and Dogruel (2014) identify four primary types: product innovation, process innovation, position innovation, and content innovation. While product innovation focuses on new media products, services, and technologies, process innovation pertains to changes in production, distribution, and organizational processes. Position innovation involves altering the context of media or services, such as rebranding or targeting new audiences. Content innovation, as highlighted by Dogruel (2014), emphasizes novelty, risk, and the potential for both commercial and social impact.

The Thai Media Lab's focus on user-centric design, iterative development, and stakeholder engagement aligns closely with the principles of media innovation. By creating opportunities for experimentation and co-creation, the lab has not only produced innovative media products but also contributed to broader social and cultural changes. The projects undertaken by the lab can be classified as both product and process innovations, as they involve the development of new media formats and novel approaches to media production. Moreover, the emphasis on social impact aligns with the broader goals of media innovation, as outlined by scholars such as Reca (2006), Napoli (2009), and Mulgan (2012) that media innovations can shape public opinion, influence behaviors, and drive broader societal transformations. Media innovations can empower individuals, foster community engagement, and address pressing social issues.

In conclusion, the Thai Media Lab serves as a valuable model for fostering media innovation and social change. By embracing user-centered design, iterative development, and stakeholder engagement, the lab has demonstrated the potential of media to address complex societal challenges.

Future research should explore the long-term impacts of these initiatives and the potential for scaling up media labs in other contexts. Furthermore, a significant challenge lies in securing sustainable funding for media labs. The long-term viability of these collaborative spaces is contingent upon the development of robust funding models. Identifying strategies to increase financial support for media organizations participating in media lab initiatives is essential to ensure their continued operation and growth. Further research is necessary to explore sustainable funding mechanisms that can support the ongoing evolution of media labs.



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