CONCEPTUALISATION OF A HUB: WHAT DID WE LEARN?

In December 2023, Fondation Hirondelle commissioned a learning review, to learn from the experience of setting up an editorial support hub for media partners across the world during the Covid 19 pandemic (2020-2021). The hub aimed to support its media partners in 17 countries (7 Fondation Hirondelle media plus 10 external media partners) provide reliable, verified information to their audiences about Covid-19. It consisted of two editorial experts, one English-speaking, one French-speaking, who provided advice and support in fact-checking and production to participating media partners.

This infographic shows what we learnt from this exercise, through 8 key questions which should be taken into consideration when developing a support hub in the future.

1 IS A SUPPORT HUB NEEDED?

We learnt that a support hub can be useful when:

- Media partners are facing similar challenges and **have similar needs**

- A hub can help achieve **economies of scale**

During the Covid-19 pandemic, media partners were faced with a vast amount of new information. As the **needs were similar** for all partners, the hub was able to play a key role in filtering this information, verifying what was true and false and useful to audiences, thereby saving the media partners **time and resources**, and resulting in credible and verified information reaching audiences.

A support hub can also have strategic objectives such as developing expertise, growing audiences, sharing experiences and increasing visibility.

2 WHAT TYPE OF HUB DO WE NEED?

We learnt that there can be different kind of editorial support hubs, shown in the examples below. One hub may also play multiple functions. A hub can operate on an international, national, or local level.

Thematic hub
Supporting partners' content development on a global theme, such as climate change or migration.

Transformational hub
Strengthening capacity to support a change in partners' activity, for example transitioning to digital production.

Hub for developing partnerships / a network
This could be on an international, national or local level.

Emergency hub
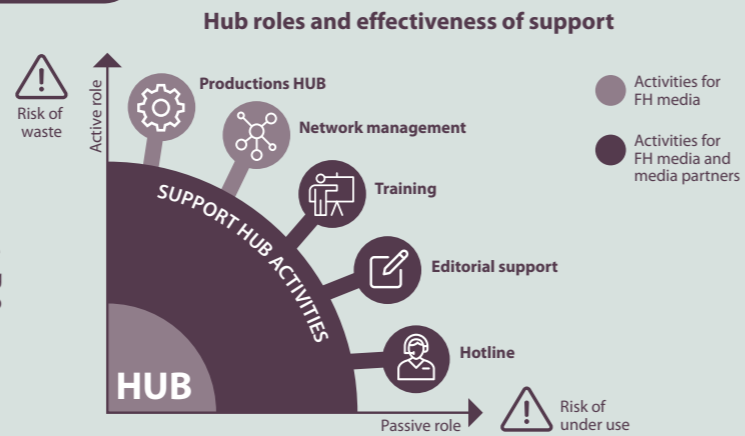A support hub which is dormant but activates in times of crisis or sudden needs.

3 WHAT SUPPORT SHOULD THE HUB PROVIDE?

We learnt that is it important for the hub to:

- Be **flexible** and **adapt to the needs of partners** which might be quite different.

- Include both common services and **individual support**

- **Communicate** effectively about what support the hub offers and how to access it.

We learnt that a hub can play both an active and a passive role. The graph shows the services provided by the Covid-19 hub. We found if the hub plays too much of an active role (e.g. producing a lot of common content) there was a risk of waste. If it plays too much of a passive role (e.g. waiting for partners to contact the hotline), there was risk of underutilisation by partners.

The boxes show what we learnt about the types of support a hub can provide.

Hub roles and effectiveness of support

Risk of waste

Active role

SUPPORT HUB ACTIVITIES

Productions HUB
Network management
Training
Editorial support
Hotline

HUB

Passive role — Risk of under use

● Activities for FH media
● Activities for FH media and media partners

Producing content
We learnt this can be of added value to media partners if the content is good quality and original. However, there needs to be the option to **localise** the content to ensure it is relevant and engaging for their audiences, otherwise it won't be used.

Capacity building
We found media partners learnt skills through training provided by the hub which they are still using, notably **fact checking** and **designing infographics**.

Providing individualised advice
Media partners had direct access to hub 'experts' via a hotline, for individualised support. This service was appreciated by those who used it, but underused as many did not know they could ask for individualised support.

Creating a network (within / between countries)
Fondation Hirondelle media in different countries valued feeling part of a network where they could share ideas and resources. The editorial teams continue to feel connected and share information and ideas, as they have other opportunities to work together.

The external media partners were supported as individual entities, but some felt they would have benefited from being connected with other partners to share ideas, techniques and experiences. The Covid-19 pandemic made it difficult to meet in person, but meeting face to face would have made it easier to build relationships than only meeting virtually.

The media partner in Pakistan created a local network of media partners, who continue to share information and ideas.

4 WHO ARE THE KEY ACTORS?

Beneficiaries: Who will the hub support? Who will benefit?
Required actors: Who does the hub need to function effectively? Who will do what? Does this capacity exist internally, or do we need to seek it externally? If externally, how will the hub staff integrate with the wider organisation?

Key beneficiaries
Audiences were the ultimate beneficiaries.
The project aimed to increase access to verified, reliable information for audiences through supporting:
Fondation Hirondelle radios & studios (7)
External media partners (10)
We learnt it is important to **integrate partners in the hub conception** to ensure it is effective and relevant to their reality.

Required actors
Editorial experts: the experts were respected by the media partners due to their **experience** and ability to adapt to support partners' needs.
We learnt the experts need **autonomy** to adapt the project to what will work. It is also important to think about how to **integrate** the hub staff within the wider organisation so they feel supported and interconnected.

5 HOW WILL THE HUB EVOLVE?

We learnt that **flexibility** is important, to develop according to the needs of the partners, but that it is useful to think about the different phases the hub might go through. Also, how long the hub is likely to be needed, and what will happen to it afterwards: will it transform into a different type of hub? Will it lie dormant until another crisis arises? Or will it close when it is no longer needed? The boxes describe the phases the Covid-19 support hub went through, and what was learnt.

Beginning
If time had allowed, it would have been useful to take more time with partners at the beginning to understand each other and develop a communal vision for the hub.

Phase 1
Intense support was required to answer partners questions. Limited time available to produce.

Phase 2
Partners required less intense support, more production was possible.

Phase 3
More work was possible on fundamental aspects like coaching and production.

End
The hub closed when project funding ran out, but there was no strategy in place for what would happen at the end of the project.

6 WHAT WILL REMAIN AFTER THE HUB?

What do we want the lasting impact of the Hub to be? What will remain once the project is finished? The boxes provide some ideas.
We learnt that **integration** of the project within the wider organisation is important. At the end of the Covid-19 hub, when the experts left, they took a lot of the experience and learning with them. Its important to think about how to **store tools and products**, and **continue relationships** with partners once the project is complete.

New tools?
Most tools and products produced by and for the Hub were not preserved, as there was no central storage point.

New skills?
Fondation Hirondelle editorial teams explained that they still use skills they learned during the project, like creating infographics and fact checking.

Strengthened organisations?
Some of the external media partners strengthened their organisational policies as a result of the project.

A dynamic network?
The network of Fondation Hirondelle media was strengthened, but little was done at the end of the project to preserve the relationships with external media partners.

7 HOW WILL WE MEASURE THE HUB'S PROGRESS?

We learnt that project objectives and indicators should be developed **in collaboration** with partners to ensure they are useful, relevant and realistic, and that everyone understands what the project is aiming to achieve.

An **internal evaluation** mid-way through the project could have helped inform adaptations to ensure the support was well adapted to partner's needs.

8 WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF CREATING A SUPPORT HUB AND HOW WILL WE MITIGATE THEM?

The risks of creating a support hub which emerged from this exercise were:

Underutilisation: If partners have not been involved in the conceptualisation of the hub and understand what services are available, they risk not using the hub to its full potential. MITIGATION: Include partners in set up; constant communication about services available; meet in person if possible

Over production: The hub may feel the need to overproduce, leading to waste as products are not used. MITIGATION: Produce ahead when possible, and in consultation with partners; ensure content is localisable

Over-utilisation: Partners may become reliant on the products produced by the hub and not develop their own capacity. MITIGATION: Provide training and mentoring alongside production

Partners' needs are too diverse so it becomes difficult to develop training and products which help everyone. MITIGATION: Revise / reassess the purpose of the hub