



2023: stabilization and development

ARENA FOR JOURNALISM IN EUROPE – ANNUAL REPORT

Slowly changing our mindset from start-up mode to strategic thinking for an established organisation in cross-border, investigative, data and entrepreneurial journalism in Europe

Arena for Journalism in Europe is now five years old. From a turbulent start with insecurity about funding and future, with the corona virus throwing all planning overboard, we have now developed into an established organisation though still with the start-up enthusiasm and will to flexibility.

2023 has been a year of development, especially in two areas: We have established Arena as the go-to organisation for collaborative journalism in Europe, and we have internally focused on professionalizing as an organisational entity. It has also been a year with its challenges.

A few milestones:

- Dataharvest tickets sold out 7 weeks before the conference opening
- The Collaborative Desk, a tool kit for investigative teams, was launched
- We are developing the Arena Academy into an asset and income-generating part of the organisation
- We have developed the Arena Networks and are finishing a network strategy
- The Climate Arena has organised two 2 conferences on climate journalism and is coordinating its first investigation
- We have secured a higher degree of multiple-year and core funding
- We are developing a multiple-year strategy to further strengthen the organisation

In this narrative report we look back and take stock of our activities 2023 to include the lessons learnt in the development of our work in 2024 and beyond.

The Arena team and board, January 2024

Annual report - content

Arena for Journalism in Europe – Annual Report.....	1
Organisation	4
Background: Incorporation, mission, key activities.....	4
Board	4
Strategy and daily management	5
The team.....	5
Work routines and digital strategy.....	7
Finances	7
Funders and project partners.....	7
Income through activities.....	9
Arena’s Growth	9
Arena activities in 2023	10
Dataharvest – the European Investigative Journalism Conference	10
Arena Networks.....	11
The Arena Housing Project.....	12
The Arena Climate Network.....	12
The Arena Labour Network	13
Reference, the European Independent Media Circle.....	13
The Arena Collaborative Desk	14
Arena Academy	14
The European Collaborative Journalism Programme	15
The Crossborder Journalism Campus.....	15
Partnerships	15
Looking towards 2024	16

Organisation

BACKGROUND: INCORPORATION, MISSION, KEY ACTIVITIES

Arena for Journalism in Europe is a 'Stichting', a foundation under Dutch law founded in January 2019. We have the ANBI non-profit status under the Dutch tax regime, which is also recognised by supporting foundations outside of the Netherlands. We are also recognised as a Certified Public Charity under US legislation to enable us to reach out to US funders more easily. Our mission is unchanged:

"The foundation has as its purpose to stimulate and support cross-border collaborative and investigative journalism in Europe, including collaboration with other professions, proceeding from the belief that such journalism contributes to information exchange, critical thought, mutual understanding, and democracy in Europe. The foundation fulfils its goal by organising, supporting, or financing anything related or conducive to it, such as online and offline meetings and fora, presentations, publications and advisory services."

We carry out our work in the three clusters of activities:

- Dataharvest – the European Investigative Journalism Conference, the annual meeting place for in-depth journalism in Europe
- Arena Networks, initiating, running, facilitating specialised networks for journalists in Europe
- Arena Academy, teaching, training, mentoring, consulting, writing and analysis

These clusters are unchanged from the very beginning, but 2023 has brought a better balance between them. The network activities have been formalized and strengthened, and Arena Academy is being developed into a larger – and hopefully income-generating – part of our profile and activities.

BOARD

The board members in 2023 were the same as in the founding year:

- **Nils Hanson**, chairman of the board. Former editor-in-chief of the weekly investigative programme Mission Investigate (Uppdrag Granskning) at Swedish public service broadcaster SVT
- **Elisabetta Tola**, secretary of the board. Science, tech and data journalist. CEO of Italian science communication agency Formicablu and co-founder of the Italian non-profit Facta.
- **Daniel Simons**, treasurer of the board. Senior legal counsel at Greenpeace International, specialised in international media law.

All board members have actively taken part in various activities such as presentations at Dataharvest 2023, development of the Reference Network or contributions to get the day-to-day administrative work.

The current board consists of two journalists/editors and one media lawyer. We wish to maintain a strong presence of journalists and journalism-related competences such as media law on the board, but also plan an enlargement of the board to include other competencies such as finance management and strategy

development expertise. This work has been delayed because of the management changes described in the next section.

STRATEGY AND DAILY MANAGEMENT

In 2022, Arena had taken the step to divide the management between the founding director Brigitte Alfter and an incoming managing director, Sanne Schim van der Loeff. The aim was a two-tier management similar to media organisations with an editorial and a non-editorial director. However, in July 2023, Sanne announced she had found another job and was leaving Arena by the end of the summer.

Luckily, Arena had just hired an operations manager, Mikala Rasmussen, with sound experience in organisational management and development. After deliberations in the team, with the board and with the funders, we established a new management structure: A management trio consisting of Brigitte Alfter as director, Trine Smistrup (journalist, co-founder of Arena) and Mikala Rasmussen (operations manager) as deputy directors. In the end of 2023, we further brought in a new finance manager.

In the second half of the year, resources have been dedicated to the preparation of an overall strategy for Arena. The rapid growth of team and activities make it a necessity to define our purpose and priorities, so everybody in a diverse team with diverse responsibilities feel that they are in a harmonious organisation, all working in the same direction. The strategy work is set to continue in the first half of 2024, ultimately leading us to not only a strategy and work plan, but also to further developing our management and organisational structure.

Overall and despite the change in the team lead, we have strengthened the managerial and operational side of Arena in 2023 to support the growing activities of the organisation and to secure a sound management.

THE TEAM

As Arena is maturing, we also experience the normalities of an organisation: People get new jobs, get children, get sick – and HR questions have taken their part of the working hours.

2023 started with 13 team members, equalling 6,5 full time positions. Few team members worked full time for Arena, many combine with other work, for example in journalism teaching or in investigative teams. When the year ended, the number of team members was 15, filling 9 full-time positions, two new team members were coming in, and we were recruiting for one position.

Arena has a highly committed team. It is deliberately European in itself - from east, west, south, and north of Europe. We take into consideration the geographical representation, aiming to avoid concentrations of few nationalities as well as concentration in one place where possible. Six of 15 team members live in another country than the one they were born in. Among us, we speak German, French, Spanish, Italian, Slovak, Dutch, Croatian, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, and Turkish. And of course, English, which is our working language. The 2023 team consisted of (in alphabetical order):

- **Brigitte Alfter**, founding director of Arena, Danish/German journalist based Copenhagen, Denmark.
- **Lucas Batt**, coordinator for the Reference Circle, British and based in Bristol, UK.
- **Ruben Brugnera**, project manager for the Dataharvest conference, award winning Belgian freelance investigative journalist based in Brussels.

- **Marlies Geyskens**, Belgium-based freelance journalist. At Arena, she is responsible for the event coordination and logistics, joined Arena in December 2023.
- **Benedikt Hebeisen**, IT, tech and digital security manager, German, based in Berlin. Benedikt was on paternal leave for two months in 2023.
- **Dumitrița Holdiș**, coordinator for the Reference Circle, Romanian sociologist and researcher, based in Budapest, Hungary. Dumitrița left Arena on Dec 31 to work with the International Press Institute.
- **Adriana Homolova**, data skills coordinator and data journalism teacher, Slovak/Dutch journalist based in Utrecht, the Netherlands.
- **Lorenz Matzat**, Arena Climate Network coordinator, German journalist and tech expert based in Zurich, Switzerland. Lorenz left Arena on Dec 31 to form his own company, Jetzt Studios.
- **Cora Moyano**, finance manager, industrial engineer from Argentina, holding an MA in International Economics and Business, joined Arena in December 2023.
- **Maike Olij**, coordinator and strategist of the Reference Circle, Dutch media consultant based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Maike left Arena in the autumn of 2023.
- **Sarah Pilz**, Arena Food & Water Network coordinator, German investigative journalist based near Munich. Sarah also worked with the Arena Climate Network and the Collaborative Desk.
- **Jelena Prtoric**, project director, Croatian journalist, based in Berlin. Jelena was deputy director of the Dataharvest conference, becoming director on January 1st, 2024.
- **Mikala Rasmussen**, deputy director and operations manager. Mikala is Danish and joined Arena in June 2023.
- **Zeynep Sentek**, Arena Climate Network editor, Turkish journalist, based in Portugal.
- **Hazel Sheffield**, project coordinator, British journalist, developing Arena Networks and trainings.
- **Trine Smistrup**, deputy director of Arena, program director for Dataharvest, Danish journalist living in Copenhagen, also involved in the general management of Arena.
- **Jonathan Stoneman**, Arena Climate Network training lead, British journalism trainer and coach living in England.

Further recruitments are ongoing in the first quarter of 2024.

2023 was a year of stabilisation also when it comes to the team and HR. In the start-up years of Arena, team members worked in a “we make it happen” spirit with ad-hoc decisions on income to the team members – largely project and activity related and thus with great variation and great insecurity. Sometimes team members shared their planned income with others where project related allocations had run out to keep them in the organisation. In 2023, we started to introduce agreements to offer security, and in the 2nd half of 2023 we started a process to develop a fair income structure aligned with Arena’s vision of a flat hierarchy and large (though not total) transparency. 2024 thus will be a transition year towards such a general income structure based upon experience, responsibility and possibly also some geographic indicators. The parameters for income levels will be discussed in the team and made transparent. They will not only give clarity to the team but also allow for better budgeting and project planning.

The team works remotely, connected through a combination of digital set-ups, online and offline work routines. In 2023, the team gathered for multiple-day team meetings in April in Berlin, in September in Gothenburg and in November in Vienna. And we of course met for the Dataharvest conference in Mechelen in May!

WORK ROUTINES AND DIGITAL STRATEGY

Our daily work reflects our distributed team, located in many countries and several time zones. We have decided not to have a main office to avoid inner/outer circle synergies. With a growing team, engaged in many different activities, this puts emphasis on the need to work on creating a common team spirit and make sure that all feel part of the overall organisation.

To manage this way of working, we have weekly video calls and regular in-person team meetings. In the day-to-day, we stay in touch via a chat system for individuals and groups, video meetings and a shared documents system. This set-up reflects our strategy to focus on secure but straightforward collaboration tools.

We maintain and develop our ambition to ‘walk the talk’: We use open-source software where possible and reasonable to stay in control of our data and try to develop the set-up according to the needs of the team. We use a secure and mostly open-source software work environment based on Nextcloud with an integrated online office for file sharing and editing, shared calendar, project management tools etc., and we use Big Blue Button as our video and conference software.

We also launched the project “The Collaborative Desk” to share this way of working with other organisations and provide digital infrastructure for investigative teams. More on this can be found under Collaborative Desk under Arena Networks.

Finances

Arena's financial health is strong, evidenced by a significant milestone: the operational budget has surpassed one million Euros for the first time, more than doubling the previous year's budget.

Arena's 2023 original operating budget was set at €1,111,117. Throughout the year, we secured additional funding commitments, resulting in an even stronger position to stabilize the organization, grow capacity and engage with new projects and ideas.

Arena's diverse income streams predominantly stem from foundations, project funding through the EU, and to a smaller extent, revenue from conference tickets, strategic partnerships, trainings and consultancies.

With a focus on securing more multiple-year funding and transitioning towards core funding, our approach in 2023 set the groundwork for ongoing efforts. Looking ahead to 2024, we are committed to further increasing the income generation from Arena's core activities while diligently managing costs and ensuring sustainability.

A detailed financial breakdown will be presented in May, following the closure and audit of the accounts.

FUNDERS AND PROJECT PARTNERS

We work with over two dozen foundations and partners from across Europe and the US, following our goal of diversifying revenue sources, in quantitative, geographic, and thematic terms. We work with operative as well as with grant giving foundations, our income from funders thus comes in different models: Core

funding as well as earmarked funding or indeed partnerships. Many of our funders are specialised in supporting journalism or journalism structures. However in recent years we also have started to work with foundations specialising in a particular topic where support to journalism on that topic is part of a larger portfolio.

With Arena's particular specialisation in collaborative, investigative, data and entrepreneurial journalism, we are involved as partners or indeed lead in a number of projects. This includes the Journalism Value project, where Arena is the lead in a multiple year project under the Creative Europe EU grants, and where Reference – the European Independent Media Circle plays a key role. Other examples of EU grants include the Crossborder Journalism Campus, where Gothenburg University is the lead applicant in a three year project to develop a networked journalism education at master level along with the University of Leipzig and the CFJ journalism school in Paris/Lyon. In late 2023, Arena joined the IJ4EU consortium, also under the Creative Europe programme to offer Collaborative Desk, Dataharvest participation and trainings.

A longstanding partnership is with the operative Töpfer Foundation to develop and run the European Collaborative Journalism Programme, continued in 2023 and is lined up to continue in 2024.

We are grateful for the support from:

- Adessium Foundation (The Netherlands)
- Augstein Stiftung (Germany)
- Civitates (Europe)
- Erste Stiftung (Austria)
- European Climate Foundation (The Netherlands)
- European Commission, Creative Europe (Europe)
- European Commission (lead partner Dortmund University)
- European Commission (lead partner International Press Institute)
- Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer pour le progrès de l'homme (Switzerland/ France)
- Fred Foundation (The Netherlands)
- Fritt Ord (Norway)
- Gothenburg University (Sweden)
- Isocrates (formerly Püech) Foundation (Switzerland)
- Journalism Funders Forum / Philea
- Laudes (The Netherlands)
- Limelight Foundation (The Netherlands)
- Logan Foundation (USA)
- OAK Foundation (Switzerland)
- Open Society Foundation (USA)
- Porticus (Belgium)
- Schöpflin Stiftung (Germany)
- European Commission, regranting via Stars4Media (Europe)
- Stichting Democratie en Media (The Netherlands)
- Töpfer Stiftung (Germany)

We were happy to organise another Funders & Friends meeting, bringing together Arena funders – existing, former and potential - in connection with the Dataharvest conference in May/June. These meetings allow us to not only share with our funders what, why and how we do things, it also allows funders to exchange

among them, and – most importantly – to share valuable input for Arena’s further development. The funders we work with usually have an excellent overview over the field of journalism funding and we value their contributions.

INCOME THROUGH ACTIVITIES

Due to the successful funding opportunities received throughout the year, only less than 10% of Arena’s income was generated through its own activities. However, this amount increased substantially in absolute terms, when comparing to 2022. Dataharvest participation was strong and ticket sales accounted for over €90,000, while trainings and consultancies doubled from 2022. The first ever Climate Arena Conference also generated revenue, showing there is potential and interest for this type of initiative.

Training and workshops are organised as part of the Arena Academy, an area that we have developed through the year, which will continue in 2024. We already offer consulting and will consider doing so on a more regular basis, in addition to workshops, training and mentoring opportunities. We are partners and sub-contractors for training on several future projects, we have made an internal overview of training competences, a pilot for mentoring training, and we will offer mentoring for teams for example in the coming IJ4EU project.

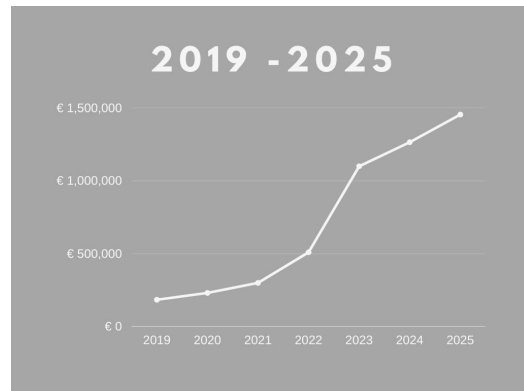
A detailed financial breakdown will be presented in May, following the closure and audit of the accounts.

ARENA’S GROWTH

Since Arena’s foundation, the organisation has experienced continuous growth despite difficult circumstances, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

In 2023, the budget for the first time exceeded one million Euro. This had several reasons: We were able to allocate more manpower to fundraising, we focused on active core fundraising combined with outreach to new funders for earmarked funds for specific topics.

The recent growth of the organisation’s budget confirms that Arena is developing a niche in the journalism community that is both welcome and necessary. We are very conscious of the challenges that come with such fast growth, though. As cited above under team, we have made significant progress on strengthening the management, finance and operations side in 2023. We must have team members to carry out the work and add team members to support the organisation and ensure stability. While we have welcomed the growth until now, we aim to grow more modestly in the coming years to secure an organic growth of activities and organisation.



Arena activities in 2023

Arena's goal is to develop and facilitate an open networking infrastructure for investigative collaborative journalism in Europe. We do this across three connected activities – all in the field of collaborative, investigative and data journalism:

1. Dataharvest – the European Investigative Journalism Conference, the annual meeting place for in-depth journalism in Europe
2. Arena Networks, initiating, running, facilitating specialised networks for journalists in Europe
3. Arena Academy, teaching, training, mentoring, consulting, writing and analysis

DATAHARVEST – THE EUROPEAN INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM CONFERENCE

Dataharvest – the European Investigative Journalism Conference again took place in Mechelen, Belgium, in 2023 on June 1-4. After the two years of Covid-19 isolation in 2020 and 2021, people were still more than keen to get together in person, and the tickets were sold out 7 weeks before the conference!

We take pride in participants feeling that Dataharvest is “their own” conference, and that they can be part of the program via pitches and suggestions. In 2023, we were quite overwhelmed, when we received more than 200 pitches for the 100 time slots! We have found a good and efficient way of preparing this, though, by deciding early in the planning how many sessions go into each track, thus making sorting and prioritizing easier.

A total of 524 journalists from 40 nationalities got together for the conference, participating in 130 sessions, divided in 11 tracks:

- Investigative method (19 sessions)
- Cross-border (15 sessions)
- Labour track (8 sessions)
- Data buffet (5 sessions)
- Data journalism (8 sessions)
- Safety (10 sessions + individual consultations)
- Entrepreneurial (8 sessions)
- Freedom of Information (FOI) (5 sessions)
- Instant inspiration (9 sessions)
- Telling the story (6 sessions)
- Data skills training (27 sessions)

We also had 3 full-day master classes preceding the conference:

- “Researching the EU”, Sigrid Melchior (Swedish), focusing on the intricacies of the reporting on different EU institutions;
- “Coordinating cross-border data investigations”, Jose Miguel Calatayud (Spanish) and Sotiris Sideris (Greek), focusing on the methodologies and skills needed coordination of a cross-border (data) investigations;
- “Investigating lobbying” with Stéphane Horel (French), focusing on the methods and tricks to explore and expose the tactics of the lobbyists.

The theme of the year was “Labour conditions in Europe”, which was as usual also the focus of the Hackday before the conference. Around 30 journalists took part in this and analyzed European labour data from the statistical office of the European Union, Eurostat. The journalists worked with three types of datasets: Labour Force Survey, Health and Safety at Work and Structure of Earnings Survey.

The collaboration with the Thomas More Hogeschool journalism department continued and will continue also in 2024. Because of renovation of the school, we will in 2024 move the conference to the neighbouring campus, which will pose some challenges, but also open for new formats. We have a very good collaboration and communication with the school, and it is good to have a host that shares both the rooms and the vision of journalism.

Crafting a conference like the Dataharvest is a complex professional endeavour, and we’re happy that we are well on the way to hand over these competences to a wider group of colleagues within the Arena team. This includes a smooth, multiple-year transition from previous’ years Dataharvest director Trine Smistrup to incoming director Jelena Prtoric.

ARENA NETWORKS

As professional journalists, we see countless topics that need more in-depth and more transnational media coverage – from climate over migration to abusive labour markets. It is a priority for Arena to select topics that matter to people, societies, and future – and topics that are usually covered from a national angle and on a day-to-day basis. We believe that cross-border collaboration is the way to bring a wider perspective into the coverage and the political agenda.

The very purpose of Arena is to help journalists connect and to facilitate collaboration. The developments in media and journalism over the last decade has clearly shown the need for this in several aspects: There is a need for

- Insights into and knowledge sharing about the processes of carrying out and/or coordinating cross-border and cross-cultural investigations
- Secure digital work spaces for ad hoc investigative groups in order to be able to focus on the content
- Overview of developments and competencies in the field of cross-border investigative journalism

Since 2018, the Dataharvest conference has had an annual topical focus, resulting in a European network. We have seen how these networks, though different in their formats, are attractive meeting places between journalists, but also in some cases including some NGOs and academics. Here, ideas are developed for investigations with a wide relevance to the European public, as we proudly saw in the “Cities for Rent” project, which grew out of the Arena Housing Network and won the European Press Prize for Innovation.

With multiple networks and network infrastructures provided by Arena, in 2022 we decided to work on a conceptualisation of an Arena Networks: A hub to gather and share knowledge about collaborative journalism and the necessary infrastructure to support it. The Collaborative Desk (see further down) is an important element of this infrastructure, as are our conferences and digital meeting spaces. The conceptualisation was ongoing in 2023 and continues into the spring of 2024.

The thematic networks are different in character as well as activity level, this depends on editorial decisions as well as available funding. Part of the ongoing conceptualisation work is to address the question of thematic networks' life cycle.

The Arena Housing Project

The Arena Housing Project started as an open access network providing meeting spaces and knowledge sharing in 2019. Built upon the careful overview of obvious research questions and committed journalists active in the field across Europe, then Arena Housing Network coordinator Jose Calatayud composed a team of 20+ journalists for the Cities For Rent investigation on corporate landlords, which won the European Press Prize 2022.

As funding had run out, Arena activities for the open access network as well as investigative and data work were halted, however a smaller group of journalists from the Cities For Rent team, now coordinated by Hendrik Lehmann at Tagesspiegel Berlin continued work on urban topics in collaboration with Arena with several publications by the partner media also in 2023. This work is ongoing and will continue in 2024.

The Arena Climate Network

The Arena Climate Network took a big leap forward in 2023, due to funding from the European Climate Foundation and the Laudes Foundation, and it has worked as a full-fledged network with numerous activities in 2023.

The work got off to a flying start, because the groundwork was already done: In 2020, Climate & Energy was the topic of the Dataharvest conference, with at least 19 sessions dedicated to this. After this, we launched the Arena Climate Network and set up several digital communication channels. We also developed the Arena Climate Learning-by-Doing model to support journalists in cross-border journalism on climate subjects. Arena invited journalists wishing to join, assisted in the matchmaking process of creating crossborder teams and provided training and mentoring on the way towards publication.

In 2023, 3 team members worked to continue and enlarge the network: Zeynep Sentek as main coordinator, Lorenz Matzat on the tech side, and Jonathan Stoneman as the main trainer. Further, Jelena Prtoric joined in the 2nd half of 2023 for investigative work.

The Climate team has coordinated two fellowship cohorts, various trainings and mentorships, a special investigative project and two climate conferences:

- In late April 2023, 55 journalists, scientists and civic tech researchers got together in Prague for a Climate Arena Conference pilot. This conference served to test our adaptation of the Dataharvest working conference model to the current cross-disciplinary conference model.
- In November, 168 people got together in Vienna for a 2-day conference of 30 sessions and topics ranging from greenwashing, lobbying, EU policies, carbon-offsetting, to innovative ways of telling climate stories. The participants' group was diverse in age, experience and geography, coming from both small independent newsrooms and legacy media and with speakers us from Portugal to Norway, from Ukraine to Turkey.

The Arena Food & Water Network

In 2022, the presentation of the Arena Food & Water Network was launched at Dataharvest with its dedicated Food & Water track, featuring panels, workshops, and the traditional Dataharvest Hackday. The 2022 Hackday under the theme of Food & Water went back to the roots of the conference, echoing the initial collaboration that birthed Dataharvest—a cross-border team unravelling the EU’s farm subsidies since 2009. Following the tradition, participants delved into the [farmsubsidy.org database](https://farmsubsidy.org), updating the data and facilitating access for journalists. Over the course of the year a cross-border team of journalists investigated the European subsidies with the help of the database leading to [various publications across Europe in late 2022](#).

In 2023, the database was updated again and presented at the [Climate Arena conference in November 2023](#) in Vienna, an introduction and knowledge-sharing to a wider group of journalists. Ongoing improvements promise richer data for future investigative stories on EU farm subsidies.

The F&W conference track as well as the first F&W network meeting at Dataharvest 2022 provided the starting point to our [network infrastructure](#), boasting an interactive mailing list and Signal group, each with currently 125 members. These forums serve as open spaces for sharing recent investigations and reports, seeking potential partners, and disseminating relevant press releases or events.

Since food production and water are intrinsically connected to climate questions, in 2023 we decided to bring the two networks closer to each other both when it comes to conference and journalism. In 2023 the F&W Network thus collaborated with the Arena Climate Network in organising the Climate Arena conferences in Prague and Vienna featuring Food & Water sessions.

In February 2023, Arena was part of the publication of the Forever Pollution Project, a network of dedicated and specialised journalists covering toxic chemicals of the PFAS family. For this publication, Arena had chipped in to help scale the network from 5 to 18 countries of publication and from five to 29 journalists.

The Arena Labour Network

The Arena Labour Network developed a dedicated track for the Dataharvest 2023 including a full [Hackday](#) where data were gathered and cleaned, and later presented in the [Data Buffet](#) format. The [track](#) crafted by Arena coordinator Sarah Pilz and director Brigitte Alfter, included a broad selection of aspects of in-depth journalism on labour topics, an inspiration panel by a lawyer working for a workers’ aid group and – importantly – an open-access round table, where experienced and newly interested colleagues exchanged notes and contacts for potential future collaboration. A Signal chat group with currently 75 members exists but activity is low since there is no coordinator. This network will be revisited in 2024.

Reference, the European Independent Media Circle

[Reference](#), the European Independent Media Circle, celebrated its second anniversary in November 2023 with the biggest meet-up of the network to-date in Budapest. This meeting is one of the twice-yearly meet-ups of this network of 26 independent media from across Europe, who come together with the purpose of strengthening each other and the independent, public-interest media sector through knowledge exchange and other activities on non-editorial aspects.

The network is building the foundation for this, focusing on sharing knowledge on business and operational challenges, providing mutual support, and sharing their collective voice.

In 2022 Reference obtained funding to support the work of the network, strengthening its financial sustainability and capacity to deliver activities as well as to work towards a well-functioning network for the independent public interest media. Further, Reference secured a two-year grant from the European Commission, under its Creative Europe scheme, to deliver [The Journalism Value Project](#). This collaboration sharing €520,000 with several Reference members and Netzwirk Recherche aims to support European public-interest media to become financially more sustainable. The project involves research with a large-scale survey into the state of independent media in Europe, peer-to-peer exchange sharing best practices including launching [a new podcast series interviewing Reference members](#), and leading conversations which change the political-economic consensus on public interest journalism's social value, and how it should be supported.

Reference has been visible at international conferences. Four members presented Reference and the context for the Journalism Value Project on a panel at the International Journalism Festival in Perugia in April 2023. Reference was also highly visible at Dataharvest in May/June 2023, where Reference helped curate the entrepreneurial journalism track, and prominently featured Reference members in panels and talks. Further, at the Global Investigative Journalism Conference in Gothenburg in September 2023, Netzwirk Recherche and Reference organised an informal meet-up for non-profit media to do a soft launch of the Journalism Value project.

The Arena Collaborative Desk

Collaborative teams need a secure digital workspace. In 2022, we thus obtained funding to develop Arena Collaborative Desk, which we launched in 2023. The Collaborative Desk offers an easily accessible, secure, digital workspace combined with guidance in using it, so the cross-border journalism teams can collaborate smoothly.

The digital workspace is tailor-made for journalists who want to collaborate across borders. The Collaborative Desk includes three elements:

- the secure tech structure for file sharing, secure communication, information/knowledge management, networking and
- the accompanying advice/mentoring/training to the journalists, and finally
- the necessary management structure including legal set-up, external communication, selection process, income generation, administration, and further development of the structure.

The Collaborative Desk is offered (for a modest fee or in some cases for free) to journalism teams without own capacities to build an infrastructure, small and medium size, ad-hoc cross-border collaborations and Arena's own networks. It will also be offered to 7 teams per call in the IJ4EU program, in which Arena is now a partner.

ARENA ACADEMY

The Arena team and the members of our community are highly specialised in new journalism methods such as cross-border collaborative journalism, various aspects of data journalism and various aspects of

investigative journalism. Also, we have experience in the field of entrepreneurial journalism, and we have team members with extensive practice in teaching and training and educational planning.

In 2023 – as in earlier years – Arena has offered teaching, training, mentoring and consulting, however – also as in earlier years - we are still mainly reacting to requests but are also working to develop Arena Academy as the third pillar of Arena activities. Towards the end of 2023, we decided to document our expertise and bring it into play as a resource in teaching, mentoring and advising capabilities and also have our knowledge contribute to the income-generating activities. The Arena Academy strategy work continues over the winter and into the first months of 2024.

We are currently involved in several training endeavours, both on student and mid-career level:

The European Collaborative Journalism Programme

Since the autumn of 2019, the German Alfred Töpfer Foundation (an operative foundation based in Hamburg, Germany) has partnered with Arena to set up the European Collaborative Journalism Programme. Once a year, a cohort of 15-18 journalists from all over Europe are invited to the Foundation's seminar centre Siggen near the Baltic Sea coast to learn about cross-border collaborative journalism, connect and possibly develop story ideas and work plans. The entire group then participates in the Dataharvest conference and can get individual support from the Töpfer/Arena team. This has led to numerous publications, one [project was nominated for the European Press Prize](#) and another project – in a slightly altered version published under the title of [Forever Pollution Project](#) has already achieved nominations and awards. The cooperation between Arena and the Töpfer Foundation continues in 2024.

The Crossborder Journalism Campus

This is a collaboration between the universities of Gothenburg, Leipzig, Amsterdam, the CFJ journalism school in Paris/Lyon, OsloMet and Arena, funded by the Erasmus+ program. The purpose is to give students of journalism a real life cross-border collaboration experience while they are working in the protected framework of the university. In 2023, the first cohort of about [75 students published in their respective countries](#), the overall topic was the EUs Green Deal programme. A 2nd cohort started in the autumn of 2023 and continue into 2024.

The concept of networked educations allows to integrate collaborative journalism into existing educations and thus avoids labourious changes of syllabi or entire educations, instead the concept enriches existing educations. In 2024, the 2nd cohort is set to publish, and the team of lecturers will conclude the programme by compiling experiences and publishing a practice oriented summary of the process in order to allow other journalism educations to pick up and further develop the idea. Further cooperation with the University of Gothenburg is planned for 2024.

Partnerships

During 2023, we have expanded our partnerships with other organisations in the cross-border journalism field. We are now a partner in the IJ4EU project, led by the International Press Institute, where we were previously a sub-contractor. Arena will provide master classes, access to the Collaborative Desk, participation in the Dataharvest conference as part of the project. Other partners are the European Journalism Center and the European Center for Press and Media Freedom.

We have also been involved in the preparations of the PULSE project, a European cross-border project for newsrooms to enhance coverage of European affairs. The project will be launched in 2024.

LOOKING TOWARDS 2024

In January 2024, Arena turns 5 years. Time to take stock after the turbulent start-up and growth years, to reconsider work and position and develop clear priorities for the years to come. In other words: Arena is embarking on a strategy process to be clearly aware of our editorial and organisational priorities in the years to come, of the communities we serve and of cultivating a good work place for our team and partners.

The stocktaking and strategy work concerns all aspects of Arena and a view to our context, the bigger picture as well as the detail. For the detail, we address the individual activities as well as our work routines and team structures. Taking the big leap from start-up to established organisation allows us to move from a spirit of “we’ll make it happen” (combined with a fair share of self-exploitation, insecurity and long work hours) to a more established organisation with longer term perspective to keep our competent team members and to implement more smooth planning and sound reporting. For the bigger picture, in late 2023 and into 2024, we discuss the context we act within, the editorial needs we observe, and how Arena best can contribute to support this European professional journalism community.