

Executive Summary

Media Viability in East Africa

Navigating Repression
and Resistance





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Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary



In 2025, RNW Media’s report *Media Viability in an Era of Repression and Resistance* examined how structural factors shape media viability in the Global South. This research localises that inquiry by assessing regional and country-level realities in Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda.

It does this through three critical and interlinked themes of media viability: income diversification and sustainability, audience engagement and trust, and strategic AI integration. Media viability, as defined by RNW Media, is “the ability of public interest media to sustainably operate in a way that ensures financial health, editorial independence, and capacity to facilitate mutually beneficial partnerships and movements that serve pluralistic and diverse media and promote democracy in fragile and under-resourced contexts.”

Based on interviews with media leaders from the region and five case studies from public interest media organisations, this report identifies regional trends, challenges, and opportunities relevant to media viability. The case studies showcase how some organisations are making strides in this work. They highlight emerging best practices, and hope to inspire other public interest media by presenting approaches that can be adapted to similar contexts.

Ultimately, the report amplifies the insights of media organisations and leaders working at the intersection of economic precarity, legal constraints, and digital experimentation. Their experiences show how trust, creativity, and adaptability can anchor quality and ethical journalism in East Africa, not only as a profession, but as a cornerstone of democracy and access to pluralistic information.

Methodology

This report draws on mixed-methods research, combining eight semi-structured key informant interviews with media organisations and industry experts, alongside a desk review. Case study organisations were identified through an open call for nominations (over 70 responses) disseminated via the Vine community and regional networks, followed by surveys, purposive and snowball sampling to ensure geographic diversity and demonstrated innovation across the three critical themes.

Key findings

Public interest media in East Africa plays a critical role in addressing human rights, gender equality, corruption, climate change, and in strengthening transparency and governance. These outlets provide timely, accurate, reliable and accessible information to the public, civil society, and officials, delivering news and analysis from digital daily content, to long form investigative journalism. In doing so, they are both responding to and shaping the rapidly evolving media and socio-political landscapes. They are operating in contexts of shrinking civic space and restrictive regulations constraining media freedom.

Income Diversification & Sustainability

Public interest media have historically relied on donor and philanthropic funding, with relatively few established pathways for generating their own revenue. There is concern about the impact of global funding cuts on the capacity of public interest media to fulfill their mandates and meet the needs of their audiences, whilst also a recognition that donor money can be both “a lifeline” and a source of distortion. In this context, income diversification is of increasing importance, with public interest media organisations experimenting with new income diversification models, and layering multiple revenue streams. Many are moving beyond website only publishing to multimedia strategies and multilingual engagement across platforms such as YouTube, X, and TikTok, broadening their audience base, serving diverse audiences, and increasing opportunities to earn revenue from advertising and monetised content. In some cases, public interest media outlets are creating legally separate but mission aligned agencies that operate on service earning models, selling services such as content production, campaigns or training, with the intention of channeling revenue back into their core journalism work.

Audience Engagement & Trust

The ways in which audiences, especially younger audiences, consume and engage with news and media are changing. Audiences are online more than ever, with growing expectations for faster, more engaging and interactive formats. Audiences are now “spoiled for choice,” more eager to understand “why this matters to you” rather than “here are the facts.” Further, “social media creator or influencer content is no longer seen as less serious” by some audiences,

creating greater competition for audiences. With the rise of mis- and disinformation, including deepfakes and AI-generated content that is not fact-checked, audiences expect real-time and instant reporting alongside unwavering editorial integrity and credibility from media providers. This is pushing public interest media to adapt their tone and modes of engagement accordingly. At the same time, media organisations in East Africa and the Global South more broadly face structural obstacles in reaching and growing their audiences because discoverability gaps limit their ability to attract new audiences, deepen engagement beyond existing circles and build sustainable business models.

Strategic AI Integration

In a competitive environment, with audiences demanding faster news and information, media houses are under growing pressure to break stories quickly and keep pace with content creators on social media. Audiences are also increasingly questioning whether content is AI-generated and are struggling to distinguish genuine content from artificial material. In this context, public interest media are increasingly experimenting with the ethical integration of generative and, in some cases, agentic AI to speed up their workflows and to produce multimedia, multilingual, and accessible content, whilst recognising that editorial integrity is becoming a market differentiator for audiences, as well as for funders. Central to AI integration is the localization of AI-generated content to enhance audience engagement; however, concerns such as reproduction of bias for instance, image generation that defaults to Global North representations or reinforces gender stereotypes still persist. Across the region, regulatory frameworks are progressing at varying stages of development and implementation, and public interest media are as such, adopting AI cautiously guided by internal norms and supported by human-in-the-loop safeguards.



Case studies in the report

➤ **Parliament Watch Uganda (case study 1)**, a media house and civic tech platform, is a regional frontrunner in strategic AI integration. It has leveraged AI to address its core problems of working with large volumes of labour intensive parliamentary data, creating innovative tools such as AI-powered parliamentary performance trackers and AI-powered “Insights” sections to drive audience engagement and civic education. Key components of its success include building on a strong digital and editorial foundation, co-designing its tools with users to build relevance and trust, and centering a human-in-the-loop approach, positioning AI as an assistant, not an author.



- **Reach a Hand Uganda & Sauti Plus (case study 2)** provide a compelling example of an innovative income diversification strategy. In response to growing uncertainty in the donor space and the impact of the high cost of audio-visual content on RAHU's production of edutainment to empower young people, the organisation's founder developed an innovative approach: the creation of Sauti Plus, a legally separate but mission-aligned Social Behaviour Change Communication agency and audio-visual production house. The organisations actively seek opportunities to collaborate in ways that mutually reinforce each other's work, with Sauti Plus offering a service-earning model that could, over time, generate surplus income to be channeled back into RAHU's youth-focused programmes.
- **Addis Standard (case study 3) in Ethiopia** is making considerable gains by diversifying its income, advancing strategic AI integration, and strengthening audience engagement and trust. It has weathered intense political turmoil, including conflict, insecurity, and shrinking civic space, which has severely affected its financial stability. Yet, by prioritising digital engagement and cross-platform reach, experimenting with diverse digital revenue streams (such as website and platform monetisation, sponsored content, YouTube, and podcasts), and integrating AI to make multilingual production more efficient, it has expanded its audience and remains on the frontlines of public interest reporting.
- **The Elephant (case study 4) in Kenya** has successfully explored digital innovation and experimentation to diversify its income and broaden audience engagement. In the face of dwindling donor funding, the organisation has successfully established multiple, interlinked digital platforms that can each carry part of the financial load, while keeping its core journalism freely accessible. The Elephant's experience and research highlight platform organising, namely how a newsroom structures and manages its platforms, and contributes to strengthening the broader ecosystem, as the most important vehicle for media sustainability. Its approach is human-centred, building trust-based relationships with journalists and contributors, who in turn bring their own credibility and communities.
- **Africa Uncensored (case study 5) in Kenya** has also made strides in income diversification and sustainability and audience engagement. The organisation's strategy responds to financial challenges including substantial resource investment necessary for investigative journalism, and the changing audience habits. Through working across digital media platforms to share both long-form investigations with shorter, more accessible formats, Africa Uncensored is engaging diverse news audiences, and further strengthening its financial viability through taking on work commissioned by aligned organisations. Rigorous editorial processes underpin resilience and trust.

Finally, the report offers various recommendations to media organisations, funders, media support organisations, governments, and technology companies and social media platforms across the three interlinked themes to strengthen the viability of public interest media.



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