

# Media Viability in East Africa

Navigating Repression  
and Resistance





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## Acknowledgments

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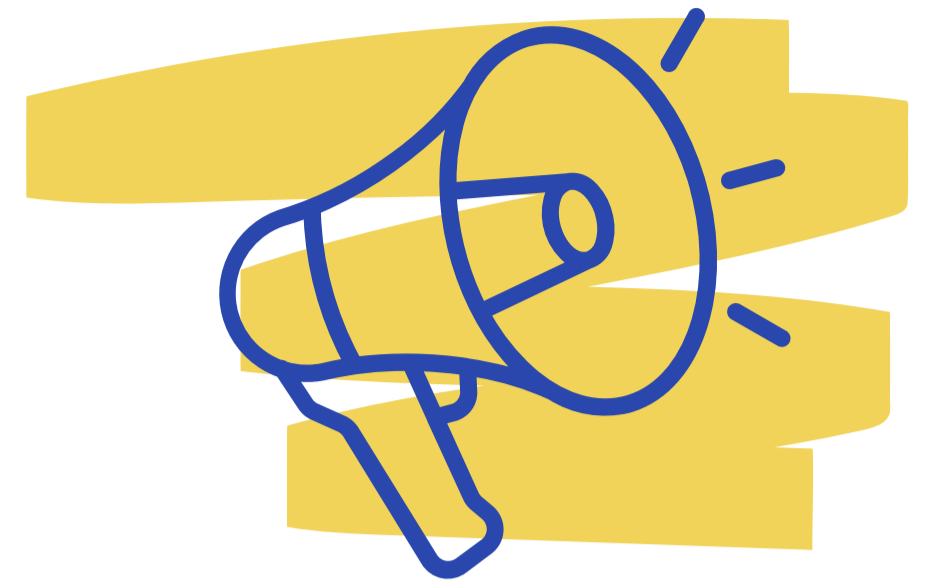
The research design and interviews were conducted by Sana Naqvi and Sam Moseti at RNW Media, and the report was written by Sarah Pelham. We also extend our thanks to Surabhi Srivastava for her feedback on the report.

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# Introduction



Public interest media in East Africa continues to uphold human rights and serve the public good while operating in a rapidly evolving media landscape. This is shaped by rapid digitalisation and the integration of AI, and shifting media consumption patterns and concerns about information integrity, all within a wider context of declining international funding and restricted civic space. Yet in Uganda, Ethiopia, and Kenya, media makers and journalists are reimagining how to survive and remain relevant in these conditions.

In 2025, RNW Media's report *Media Viability in an Era of Repression and Resistance* examined how structural factors shape the sustainability of public interest media in the Global South. The research sought to unpack the leading factors influencing the growth of media viability in restrictive settings, revealing that viability is shaped by numerous interrelated elements, including financial independence, trust and credibility, language, structural and legal environments, innovation and technology, and organisational capacity.

This research seeks to localise that inquiry by assessing regional and country-level realities across three East African countries. It does so by exploring three critical and interlinked themes of media viability: income diversification and sustainability, audience engagement and trust, and strategic AI integration. These themes are prioritised because of their urgency in the present day and intersectionality. Global funding is decreasing, making diversified revenue streams central to media viability; AI is a rapidly expanding force at the intersection of innovation, efficiency, and risk that will shape long-term viability; and audience trust remains a foundational pillar underpinning both financial sustainability and the responsible use of AI, with all three dimensions deeply interconnected.

Based on interviews with media leaders from the region, this report identifies regional trends, challenges, and opportunities relevant to media viability. The research, further, presents five case studies from public interest media organisations in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, examining how these organisations are approaching the three critical themes of viability, recognising differences in prioritisation and approach. The case studies aim to showcase how some are making strides in this work, highlight emerging best practices, and 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.

**The report is structured into five sections.** The introduction unpacks the concept of media viability and the three critical themes addressed in this report. Section Two outlines the methodology and limitations. Section Three provides a regional overview based on interviews with media leaders and the organisations featured in the case studies. Section Four presents five case studies, offering an overview of each organisation, the challenges they face, and their key strategies and best practices. Section Five concludes the report, setting out recommendations for media organisations, funders, media support organisations, governments, and technology and social media companies seeking to strengthen media viability.

## What is media viability?

RNW Media defines media viability as “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.” It focuses on how financial models, editorial integrity, efforts to overcome structural barriers, and technological innovation intersect, advancing resilient journalism, and enabling it to thrive.

**This report examines three critical and interlinked themes of media viability: income diversification and sustainability, audience engagement and trust, and strategic AI integration.**

## Income Diversification & Sustainability

Income diversification encompasses operational models and innovative, ethical revenue-generation strategies, ranging from service-based models and audience memberships to creative collaborations, that enable public interest media to move beyond donor dependency without compromising editorial integrity, audience trust, organisational values, or credibility. RNW Media’s global report on media viability identifies financial dependence as a core constraint: 81% of survey respondents<sup>1</sup> rely primarily on short-term, project-based donor grants, limiting long-term planning and fostering dependency<sup>2</sup>. The issue has become especially salient as Official Development Assistance (ODA) from governments, multilateral bodies and philanthropy used to support public interest media declines, intensifying competition for resources and making ethical dilemmas about receiving funding from corporations and Big Tech more pressing. Moreover, 60% of respondents also link financial precarity with editorial compromises and self-censorship, making this a crucial issue to consider as survival becomes harder.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The survey was conducted with 28 professionally-engaged media workers from RNW Media’s Vine network. <https://www.rnw.media/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/RNW-Media-Media-Viability.pdf>, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 6

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 6

## Audience Trust and Engagement

It is important for public interest media to cultivate meaningful engagement and invest in the relationship with their audiences to foster long-term reliability and trust. Trust is a core asset, underpinning the delivery of accurate information and the effectiveness of efforts to combat fake news and misinformation. Audience engagement and trust are vital for public interest media to sustain operations, influence policy, and fulfill their democratic role. Indeed, RNW Media's global report finds that editorial integrity and trust are strategic assets: credibility enables audience engagement, which in turn may facilitate audience-based funding. On the other hand, trust is undermined by financial precarity, self-censorship, and scandals, such as cases where editorial integrity is compromised due to political pressure. This erodes confidence among audiences in the broader information ecosystem.<sup>4</sup>

## Strategic AI Adoption

According to research by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, over 81% of surveyed journalists across various regions are currently using generative AI tools in their professional tasks. This widespread adoption includes daily use by nearly half of journalists surveyed in the Global South and emerging economies, though only about 13% of newsrooms have established formal AI policies<sup>5</sup>. Many are using AI to streamline newsroom workflows, generate audience insights, bolster financial viability, and support translation and content creation in ways that strengthen, rather than undermine, local voices and editorial integrity. RNW Media's global report illustrates similar findings, with 86% of respondents reporting that they use AI, especially generative AI, in their work. Despite this uptake, respondents also expressed several concerns. These include issues related to copyright and the loss of income for small-scale creators competing with AI-generated content, as well as depersonalisation and bias. AI-generated outputs risk diluting editorial voice and reinforcing gender and racial stereotypes, while algorithmic biases tend to favour English-language content. Other concerns include unequal access, as AI tools often reach media practitioners in the Global Majority later and with fewer resources and training opportunities.<sup>6</sup>

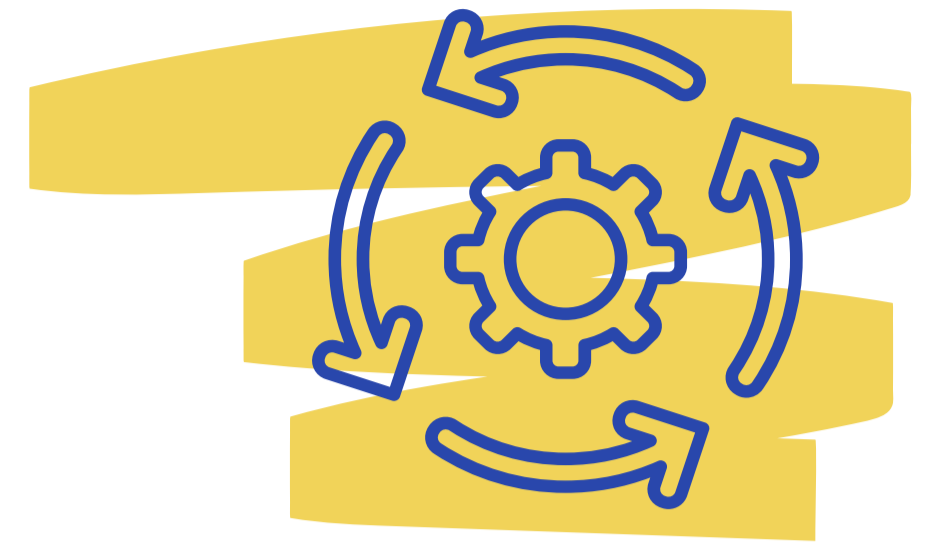
**These three themes of media viability are inseparable:** Income diversification, audience engagement, and strategic AI integration function as a system which individually and together, either anchor or erode trust, and subsequently the sustainability of media organisations. Ethical, sustainable revenue strategies and intentional and human-centred use of AI can influence audience engagement and thereby trust, while financial precarity or poorly governed AI use can undermine reliability of information, and thus weaken engagement, and hinder and negatively impact revenue generation.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp. 6 - 7.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.trust.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/TRF-Insights-Journalism-in-the-AI-Era.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.rnw.media/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/RNW-Media-Media-Viability.pdf>, p. 6. See also: <https://www.rnw.media/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/AI-Adoption-by-Global-Change-makers.pdf>

# Methodology



This report draws on primary and secondary research. Primary research comprised of eight key informant interviews with media organisations and industry leaders exploring the three critical themes of media viability and the broader regional context. Secondary research included a desk review, anchored in RNW Media's report *Media Viability in an Era of Repression and Resistance (2025)*.

Case study participants were selected via an open call for nominations to identify public media organisations in the region demonstrating notable innovation in at least one of the critical themes. The call was circulated through the Vine<sup>7</sup>, RNW Media's global community which consists of media makers mainly based in the Global South, as well as other experts, alumni of RNW Media's training center, RNTC, and partners in the region. The call for nominations received over 70 responses, and all nominees were invited to complete a survey on their background and relevant experience. The final selection balanced geographic diversity and excellence in the critical themes. Snowball sampling was also used, with selected organisations recommending others with relevant experience. Experts were selected by purposive sampling for their experiences and expertise on media viability in the region.

Semi-structured interviews (approximately one hour each) were conducted with all participants, who also reviewed their respective case study for accuracy and transparency. Recommendations were derived from interviewee insights and analysis of patterns, trends, and challenges in the data.

## Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the survey was distributed within the Vine network and other RNW Media channels, so the sample largely reflects practitioners connected to RNW Media's training and community initiatives, limiting representativeness. Conducting the survey in English may have reduced accessibility for non-English speakers and introduced response bias. Finally, scope constraints limited the number of case studies, reducing opportunities for comparative analysis across national and regional contexts.

<sup>7</sup> The Vine is RNW Media's community with 12,000 members, which include partners, RNTC (Training Center of RNW Media) alumni and independent media makers and professionals.

# The Public Interest Media Landscape in East Africa



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. This section provides a snapshot of key trends, with a particular focus on the three critical themes of media viability and the contribution of public interest media to building safe, inclusive and reliable digital media ecosystems.

Public interest digital media organisations are helping to ensure **plurality** within regional and national media ecosystems by bringing to light under-reported social and political concerns, and by broadening the range of voices, topics and perspectives in public debate. This involves, at times, challenging dominant state and commercial narratives, speaking truth to power, and demanding and strengthening accountability.



**Reach a Hand Uganda**, for instance, uses media to empower young people and advance their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). It collaborates with **Sauti Plus**, a legally separate but mission-aligned media production agency, to create state-of-the-art content. Public interest media are also increasing diversity, for example, **Addis Standard** does so through local language and national and sub national reporting, while other outlets address issues affecting often invisible and marginalised groups such as LGBTIQ+ communities. Despite commercial and political pressures, organisations such as **Parliament Watch Uganda** provide high-quality, verified and contextual information, allowing citizens to scrutinise those in power and participate meaningfully in public life. In Kenya, **The Elephant** plays a crucial role in giving issues like corruption, governance, education and health “context, background and history” enabling citizens to place daily news within a broader context. Organisations such as **Africa Uncensored** continue to safeguard their independence, providing high-quality investigative journalism underpinned by robust editorial policies, in the face of the threat of SLAPP (strategic lawsuits against public participation) suits.

## Civic Engagement and Repression

Across East Africa, shrinking civic space and restrictive regulations are constraining media freedom. In Kenya, civic space has deteriorated from “obstructed” to “repressed” since 2024, with the country placed on the CIVICUS Monitor Watchlist in 2025 amid a sweeping crackdown on perceived digital dissent.<sup>8</sup> Uganda’s civic space remains “repressed,” with journalists and media facing assaults, exclusion, and access denials, such as revoked parliamentary accreditation, that fuel self-censorship and hinder oversight.<sup>9</sup> In Ethiopia, the situation is rapidly deteriorating, with escalating threats to media freedom. Civic space has been “closed” since 2024. Rights groups already warned in 2025 of intensifying repression of journalists and proposed legal changes that threaten NGO independence, as official rhetoric increasingly frames critical reporting as a threat to national cohesion.<sup>10</sup> Reporters are facing arbitrary arrests, prolonged pretrial detention, and the threat of being prosecuted under laws such as the anti-terrorism and hate-speech statutes and outlets are having their media registrations revoked.<sup>11</sup>

Across the region, restrictions on civic space are shrinking the room for public interest journalism. Growing censorship and threats to press freedom make reporters more cautious about pursuing critical or investigative stories, while high legal risks, especially libel and politically motivated cases, are not matched by accessible, regionally grounded legal support. Together, these factors risk weakening the media’s ability to hold power to account. As one expert reflected, restrictions on media freedom narrow editorial scope and deter investment, making it difficult to build a sustainable media ecosystem.

## Legal, Regulatory and Policy environment

The three countries have dedicated regulatory bodies to oversee media standards: Ethiopia (Ethiopia Media Authority), Kenya (Media Council of Kenya), and Uganda (Media Council of Uganda).<sup>12</sup> While national legal frameworks formally safeguard media freedom and, by extension, its viability, in practice these laws are often applied in ways that threaten the very freedom they are supposed to protect and leave media actors on legally precarious ground. Recent legislative developments underscore this tension. Ethiopia’s Computer Crime Proclamation No. 958/2016, Uganda’s Computer Misuse (Amendment) Act 2022, and Kenya’s Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes (Amendment) Act 2024/2025 have all been introduced as safeguards against digital harm and cybercrime. Yet, in application, these laws have expanded the scope of liability for journalists and digital publishers.

Civil society organisations argue that the broad and ambiguously defined provisions of such laws enable selective enforcement, encouraging self-censorship and increasing legal exposure for media practitioners. Evidence shows this risk is already playing out. In 2024, Kenya’s Court of Appeal struck down provisions criminalising the publication of “false news,” finding the definition “so broad, wide, untargeted... and likely to net innocent citizens.” The ruling highlights how loosely framed legal standards can be used to curtail legitimate expression. Against this backdrop, media experts describe operating in regulatory environments marked by limited clarity.

<sup>8</sup> <https://monitor.civicus.org/watchlist-july-2025/kenya/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/uganda/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/ethiopia/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-journalism-under-pressure-new-report-documents-escalating-threats-to-media-freedom-in-ethiopia/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://mediacouncil.or.ke>, <https://www.ema.gov.et/en>, <https://mediacouncil.ug/#>

## Income Diversification & Sustainability

In East Africa, public interest media have historically relied on donor and philanthropic funding, with relatively few established pathways for generating their own revenue. However, as funding shrinks, income diversification is of increasing importance for the viability of the media organisation, both in the short- and long-term.

The impact of global cuts in governmental and philanthropic funding can not be underestimated, however, experts stress that this funding model already had significant limitations. Across the region, international support has rarely operated at an ecosystem level; instead, it has largely been project- and theme-based, leaving many organisations vulnerable to shifting donor priorities. Thematic funding is highly valuable when it aligns with an outlet's mission, underwriting high-quality, issue-specific journalism on areas such as gender equality, climate change, or public health.<sup>13</sup> Yet it also carries the risk of pulling organisations away from their core focus. One expert notes that donor money is both “a lifeline” and a source of distortion, and the healthiest newsrooms are those that deliberately balance donor support with other income streams. In response, some organisations are deliberately structuring donor contracts to protect editorial independence by agreeing on thematic priorities while retaining full editorial control. They also work to avoid being fully absorbed into donor project cycles, thereby balancing the need for funding with the preservation of their core priorities and integrity.

Given financial pressure, public interest media organisations in the region are experimenting with new income diversification models, and layering multiple revenue streams. These include moving beyond website only publishing to develop multimedia strategies and engage audiences on platforms such as YouTube, X, TikTok and podcasts, helping them both to grow their reach, especially among young people, and to earn revenue from advertising and monetised content. As audiences turn to digital platforms and podcasts, advertisers have followed, creating opportunities for public interest media to generate income across platforms. Some organisations are also expanding to produce content in multiple languages, providing vital news for often under-served audiences and helping them build a larger audience base that can strengthen their financial stability.

Outlets are also testing paywalls, although with mixed success. As one expert notes in relation to Kenya, user-based paid subscriptions and paywalls modelled on outlets like the New York Times or Washington Post have largely failed because *“Kenyans are the number one citizen journalists, so when you try to charge them for information they're already feeding you or tipping you off to, it just doesn't work culturally.”*

<sup>13</sup> For example, between 2022 and 2025 the Gates Foundation funded Nation Media Group to support data-driven coverage of gender equality, climate change, and public health in Kenya. <https://www.gatesfoundation.org/about/committed-grants/2022/10/inv-042972>

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, event management, campaigns or training, with the intention of channeling revenue back into their core journalism work.

The research finds limited documented evidence on the impact of global funding cuts on public interest media particularly in terms of the scale of funding losses and their operational consequences. However, there are clear indications of mounting financial pressure across the sector, underscoring the need for further research to understand, at both country and regional levels, which organisations are most affected and how. Similarly, due attention should be paid to how public interest media are innovating and experimenting with income diversification and revenue generation strategies. These efforts are closely tied to building wider and more diverse audience bases, and to cultivating relationships underpinned by trust and information integrity.

## Audience Engagement & Trust

The ways in which audiences, especially younger audiences, consume and engage with news and media are changing, driven in part by increasing internet penetration across the region.<sup>14</sup> Audiences are online more than ever, with growing expectations for faster, more engaging and interactive formats. As one expert reflected, in an increasingly crowded media market, audiences are now “spoiled for choice” and “[are] more transient, so building loyalty is taking much longer than it did before.”

In a global context marked by increasing erosion of trust in public institutions, the concept of trust in media is changing as well, especially among young audiences. Many in East Africa are losing trust in legacy and traditional institutions and rejecting mainstream media platforms, which they experience as elite, self-serving, or inaccessible. Instead, they are gravitating towards social media personalities and voices they regard as authentic, relatable and relevant. More and more, “social media creator or influencer content is no longer seen as less serious” and increasingly shapes what becomes news. Public interest media in the region are adapting to meet and shape this changing landscape and to expand their audience base. Reflecting global trends, they are moving online and beyond news websites alone, using social media platforms and mobile apps to create immediate, compelling, interactive content, while carefully upholding core values to maintain and strengthen audience trust.

Politicians are also responding to these trends by bypassing traditional media institutions and journalists to reach younger audiences that perceive influencers on platforms such as TikTok as more trustworthy than traditional journalists. In Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni held a session with TikTokers and influencers, effectively a press conference for young people conducted entirely via social media creators rather than journalists ahead of the January 2026 elections.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in Kenya, following the 2024 widespread Gen Z protests against tax hikes and governance issues, the President William Ruto held a historic, “#EngageThePresident” X Space session with Kenyan youth, peaking at over 163,000 participants.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> <https://africachinareporting.com/african-media-landscape-regional-study-report-the-case-of-east-africa/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://statehouse.go.ug/president-museveni-holds-talks-with-digital-influencers-in-jazz-with-jajja-conversation/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ce58y8ngdk5o>

With the rise of mis- and disinformation, including deepfakes and AI-generated content that is not fact-checked, audiences expect more from media providers: real-time and instant reporting alongside unwavering editorial integrity and credibility. This is pushing public interest media to adapt their tone and modes of engagement as they seek to build trust with fact-checked and reliable information.

As a foundation, there is long-standing recognition that “good journalism drives audience engagement”: producing high quality journalism that ensures information accuracy and reliability attracts and retains audiences. This in turn is a core revenue strategy, because engaged and dependable audiences create conditions for advertising, partnerships and other income streams, including audience-driven revenue through subscriptions and donations. Despite often being small organisations with limited resources, these outlets are experimenting with diverse multimedia content across online platforms. Africa Uncensored, for example, uses YouTube to screen its longform investigative documentaries alongside short social media reels, catering to different audience preferences while driving traffic towards its more substantive offerings. Other outlets are developing interactive formats that are both informative and engaging, and creating locally relevant content in multiple languages to ensure diverse communities are served by public interest media.

Across the region, there is a growing recognition that public interest media must move beyond reporting news to explaining events in ways that highlight their personal relevance, i.e. shifting from “here are the facts” to “here is why this matters to you.” This reflects increasing audience demand for journalism that informs and interprets. Yet mainstream media often falls short. As one expert notes, *“At the local level, the public interest niche we cover is that the media doesn’t explain things. Mainstream media in East Africa doesn’t really take the time to explain.”* Mainstream coverage often focuses on the immediacy of headlines, such as announcing national elections, without unpacking the historical, structural, and political dynamics that shape those events.

Public interest media are increasingly filling the context and explanatory gap. In the context of elections, for example, this entails providing reliable information on patterns of incumbency, recurrent electoral practices, histories of state violence or repression, and the deeper governance and socio-economic conditions that underpin day-to-day news. Such analytical, historically grounded coverage is equipping citizens to understand why their politics and societies look the way they do, and to engage in a more informed manner to contribute to and shape a substantive and democratic public discourse. In this sense, explanatory, contextual journalism is emerging as a core public interest function in the region.

In parallel, some experts report that media organisations in East Africa and the Global South more broadly face structural obstacles in reaching and growing their audiences because their content is systematically harder to discover on major online platforms and search engines. Even when newsrooms invest in tagging, basic Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and high-quality public interest reporting, their stories often rank low or remain effectively invisible to users who do not already know about the outlet. This discoverability gap limits their ability to attract new audiences, deepen engagement beyond existing circles and build sustainable business models,

reinforcing existing information inequalities between well-resourced global outlets and smaller regional publishers.

Taken together, these trends point to a rapidly changing audience landscape in East Africa. Public interest media organisations are adapting impressively, despite several challenges, to provide crucial voices that engage diverse groups, including young people and communities across different languages and regions, while working to uphold integrity and trust through contextual, reliable and trustworthy journalism.

## ✓ Strategic AI Integration

Public interest media are increasingly experimenting with the ethical integration of generative and, in some cases, agentic AI into their workflow. They are using it to speed up workflows and to produce multimedia, multilingual, and accessible content, while ensuring that clear editorial policies and human oversight maintain information integrity. However, for some organisations, the financial and technical resources required to integrate AI, staff and audience skepticism toward AI and AI-generated content, as well as pending regulatory AI frameworks, are encouraging caution.

The increasing use of AI must be viewed within the wider media landscape and audience trends. 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. Conversely, audiences are increasingly questioning whether content is AI-generated and are struggling to distinguish genuine content from fabricated material. In Uganda, for example, in 2025 a convincing deepfake video of President Museveni apparently announcing that he would not run for presidency again was widely shared online, with some media outlets repeating the claim, before being debunked,<sup>17</sup> illustrating how AI-driven disinformation can erode trust in both political information and the media.

In this context, editorial integrity is becoming a market differentiator for audiences, as well as for funders. Parliament Watch Uganda is at the forefront of AI integration, embracing the opportunities that AI offers while doing so in ways that enhance rather than erode audience trust. The organisation's raison d'être is to strengthen public access to information, parliamentary transparency, and citizen engagement. In practice, this means working with vast volumes of parliamentary data that are mostly inaccessible to the public. They have found ways to integrate AI that enables them to pursue their core mission more effectively and at an accelerated pace, whilst being transparent with audiences about their AI use: for instance, creating AI-powered government budget trackers and AI-assisted quizzes, that the public, media, and civil society are already using to hold power to account.

<sup>17</sup> <https://factcheck.afp.com/doc.afp.com.74XF264>

<sup>18</sup> <https://techcabal.com/2025/12/11/former-cnn-anchor-launches-ai-prompt-library/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.therundown.studio/prompts>

Other regional AI innovations are underway, such as a recently launched AI prompt library aiming to tackle the high cost and inaccessibility of media production for African newsrooms.<sup>18</sup> For instance, one prompt transforms information into journalist-ready press releases, as well as other AI assisted ready-to-use templates for media pitches and TV scripts, customised for local contexts.<sup>19</sup> For resource constrained public interest media, such simple yet everyday innovations can help make the use of AI more affordable and sustainable in the long-term.

There are concerns about how AI tools can reproduce bias, for instance, image generation that defaults to depictions of the Global North or reinforces gender stereotypes. Hands-on training on using AI ethically and responsibly in the newsroom is one of the strategies being employed to help media producers mitigate these risks. Others are experimenting with localising AI-generated content through strong human editorial control. One expert described editors actively ‘translating’ AI outputs into natural ‘Kenyanisms’ and everyday speech, so that both language and content feel authentically rooted in local realities. Language localisation is regarded as a core part of AI strategy, recognising that trust erodes quickly if outputs sound foreign or generic.

The Africa Declaration on Artificial Intelligence (2025)<sup>20</sup> sets out a unified, continent-wide vision for ethical, inclusive and sustainable AI development, adopted at the Global AI Summit on Africa. It commits African states to driving innovation and economic growth through AI, positioning Africa as a leader in ethical AI adoption, and ensuring responsible AI governance and deployment. National-level strategies and regulatory frameworks are at different stages of development and rollout across the region. In the meantime, media outlets remain unsure how future enforcement or new regulations will affect their AI experimentation and long-term investment. This legal and regulatory uncertainty, coupled with risks of media repression, is driving cautious, ad hoc adoption of AI based on internal organisational norms and human-in-the-loop safeguards.

As this research finds, and as International Media Support’s 2023 report, *AI, Journalism, and Public Interest Media in Africa*, also highlights, further challenges include resource constraints that limit the use or development of AI tools; nascent business strategies for integrating AI; and insufficient collaboration between media and other stakeholders, including policymakers and the tech community. Yet, as is clear, there is also significant regional innovation in AI integration, including efforts to address some of AI’s current limitations and to use it in ways that strengthen both ethical AI use and media viability.

The following section presents five case studies that explore these tensions and opportunities in greater detail. While all three critical themes for media viability are relevant to each of the featured organisations to varying degrees, the case studies highlight the most innovative examples. The case studies feature: 1. Parliament Watch Uganda; 2. Reach a Hand Uganda & Sauti Plus; 3. Addis Standard; 4. The Elephant; and 5. Africa Uncensored. Income diversification and sustainability are explored in depth across case studies 2 – 5. Audience engagement and trust are examined in case studies 3 – 5. Strategic AI integration is explored in case studies 1 & 3.

<sup>20</sup> <https://c4ir.rw/docs/Africa%20Declaration%20on%20Artificial%20Intelligences.pdf>

# Case studies



The following section presents five case studies that explore these tensions and opportunities in greater detail. While all three critical themes for media viability are relevant to each of the featured organisations to varying degrees, the case studies highlight the most innovative examples.

The case studies feature:

1. Parliament Watch Uganda
2. Reach a Hand Uganda & Sauti Plus
3. Addis Standard
4. The Elephant
5. Africa Uncensored

Income diversification and sustainability are explored in depth across case studies 2 – 5. Audience engagement and trust are examined in case studies 3 – 5. Strategic AI integration is explored in case studies 1 & 3.



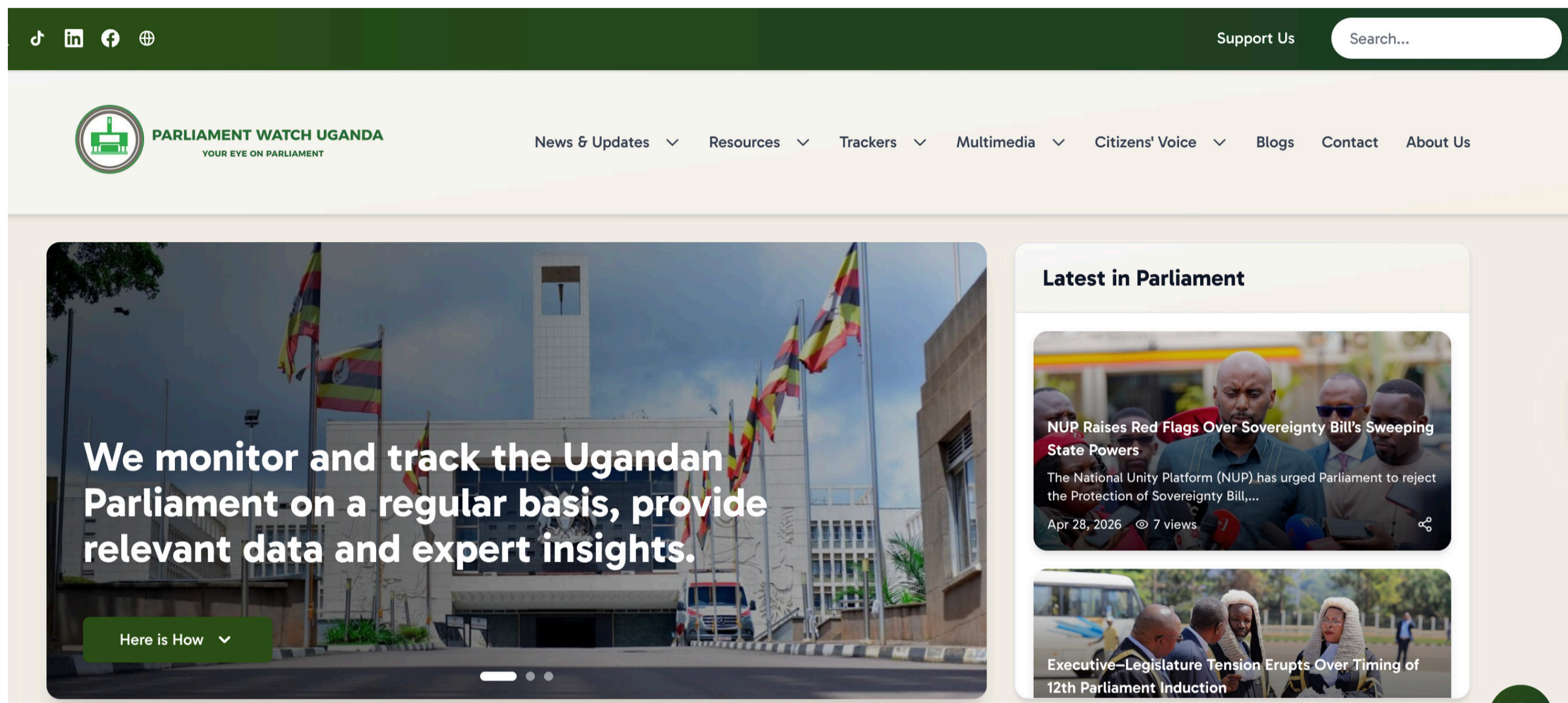
**PARLIAMENT WATCH UGANDA**  
YOUR EYE ON PARLIAMENT



## 1

## Parliament Watch Uganda

## Strategic AI Integration



Parliament Watch Uganda (PWU) is a Parliament-monitoring initiative of the Centre for Policy Analysis (CEPA), established in 2013 to monitor the Ugandan Parliament and inform the public. Its goal is to bridge the gap between Parliament and citizens, making the legislature more transparent, open, and accessible.

PWU's objectives are to:

- Provide citizens, media, and civil society with timely, analytical, accurate, and accessible information on Parliament and its work
- Increase citizens' engagement with Parliament through digital technology
- Ensure Parliament's legislative, budget, and oversight functions reflect citizens' aspirations

**Parliament Watch Uganda (PWU) is a media house and civic tech platform that leverages technology to strengthen parliamentary transparency and public access to information. Over the past five years, PWU has significantly invested in AI, developing AI-powered government debt and budget trackers, parliamentary performance trackers, chatbots, and insights tools.**

AI adoption is a strategic priority for PWU, dedicating substantial time and resources to integrating it across its work. The organisation remains predominantly donor-funded and, over the last few years, has begun exploring resource diversification and sustainability, although its primary focus at present is on AI integration. The organisational leadership views active engagement with global technological change as essential to advancing PWU's mission.

The shift toward AI was driven by several core challenges:



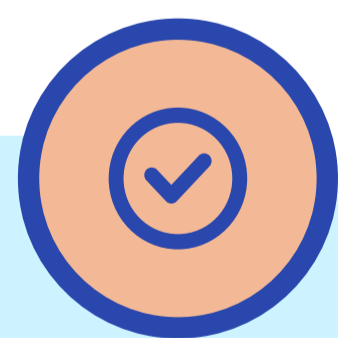
**Data volume:** Previously, PWU relied largely on manual processes to handle a vast volume of parliamentary data, including official records of Parliament, reports from ministries and other public bodies, and national budget documents and supplementary budgets, material that could not realistically be fully synthesised by staff within the time available.

**Labour-intensive performance monitoring:** Assessing Members of Parliament’s performance, including their contributions to debates and legislative work, was similarly time-intensive without automated tools.

**Accessible public communication and user-friendly dissemination:** A further hurdle involved presenting this complex data and analysis in formats that were accessible and understandable to the public.

PWU’s digital transformation has been a long-term process. Responding to audience research that indicated a strong preference for podcasts, short explainer videos, and other visual media over written reports, PWU began by establishing a multimedia studio to convert text-based research into engaging audio and visual formats. The organisation then invested in AI-enabled tools developed in close consultation with key user groups from the media, government, civil society, and the private sector. These tools are now being consolidated into a single, more cost-effective, one-stop platform. Primary dissemination occurs via social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, alongside radio stations, which continue to have significant nationwide reach in Uganda.

PWU is not only an early adopter of AI in its own work, but is also playing a key role in shaping regional debates. In May 2025, the Centre for Policy Analysis (CEPA), which hosts PWU, convened the Africa Artificial Intelligence Summit (AAIS) in Kampala under the theme “Navigating AI for Business Growth and Resilience in Africa.” The summit highlighted how AI can foster inclusive governance, civic empowerment, and smarter public policy, with CEPA and PWU advocating for ethical, human-centred AI development.



## Parliament Watch Uganda AI Features

### ➤ AI-powered government budget trackers

AI tools that synthesise national budget data, including approved budgets and supplementary budgets, to provide the public and other stakeholders with searchable, analysable information on public spending.

**➤ AI-powered parliamentary performance trackers**

Systems that analyse parliamentary records to assess and provide an overview of the performance of individual Members of Parliament, including their contributions to debates and legislative activity.

**➤ AI-powered debt trackers**

Tools that track national debt levels, including debt per capita, debt-to-GDP ratios, and sources of loans, allowing users to query and interpret complex debt data.

**➤ Chatbots on the website and digital platforms**

AI-driven chatbots integrated into PWU's website that help users navigate content, access parliamentary information, and receive simplified explanations of complex documents.

**➤ AI-powered "Insights" sections**

Embedded tools that enable users to pose questions about parliamentary, budgetary, or policy issues and receive tailored, AI-generated summaries and analysis based on PWU's own datasets and research, and that of other like-minded institutions.

**➤ Interactive trivia tools**

AI-assisted quiz and trivia functions that present questions to the public, often on governance, parliament, and public finance topics, to increase engagement and support civic education. Audiovisual data is then created by data from these tools.



## Lessons Learned & Best Practices

**Make AI adoption problem-driven:**

PWU's AI investments are anchored in concrete challenges: data overload, labour-intensive performance monitoring, and difficulty presenting complex information in accessible formats. The starting point was to diagnose core workflow bottlenecks and design AI tools specifically to address these challenges.

**Build on a strong digital and editorial foundation:**

PWU's transition did not jump directly into deploying AI tools. It began with a broader digital transformation of content formats: establishing a multimedia studio, moving from text-heavy reports to audio-visual outputs, and strengthening dissemination via social media and radio. These early digital investments, combined with robust editorial processes, helped identify which AI tools would be most impactful and made it easier to integrate them as extensions of existing workflows.

**Co-design with users to build relevance and trust:**

PWU co-developed tools such as the debt and budget trackers through early engagement with journalists, officials, civil society actors, and private sector representatives, iterating based on their feedback. These users identified concrete challenges in accessing and using PWU's data, directly shaping the design process.

**Human-in-the-loop approach:**

PWU's principle is that AI is an assistant, not an author. Editorial checks remain stringent, and AI outputs are always verified before publication. Tools are clearly signposted as AI-enabled, and early user feedback, especially around inaccuracies or confusing responses, is treated as essential for improving reliability and maintaining audience trust. An AI manual, together with editorial policies and approval processes governing AI use, particularly for politically sensitive content, is crucial to safeguarding standards.

**Consolidate AI costs:**

The primary cost driver has been developing these tools with skilled developers. While individual monthly and annual paid subscriptions for AI tools may appear modest, their aggregate impact significantly increases overall expenses. Rising maintenance costs for multiple AI tools have also prompted a shift towards consolidating all resources into a single, user-friendly one-stop portal for public access.

**Harness AI to support audience engagement and civic education:**

PWU uses AI to foster richer engagement with citizens by sharing information in simplified forms, enabling users to ask questions and receive tailored summaries, and offering interactive trivia tools that encourage audiences to engage with institutional information in a more playful, accessible way. This helps lower barriers to participation and supports deeper civic education and democratic engagement.

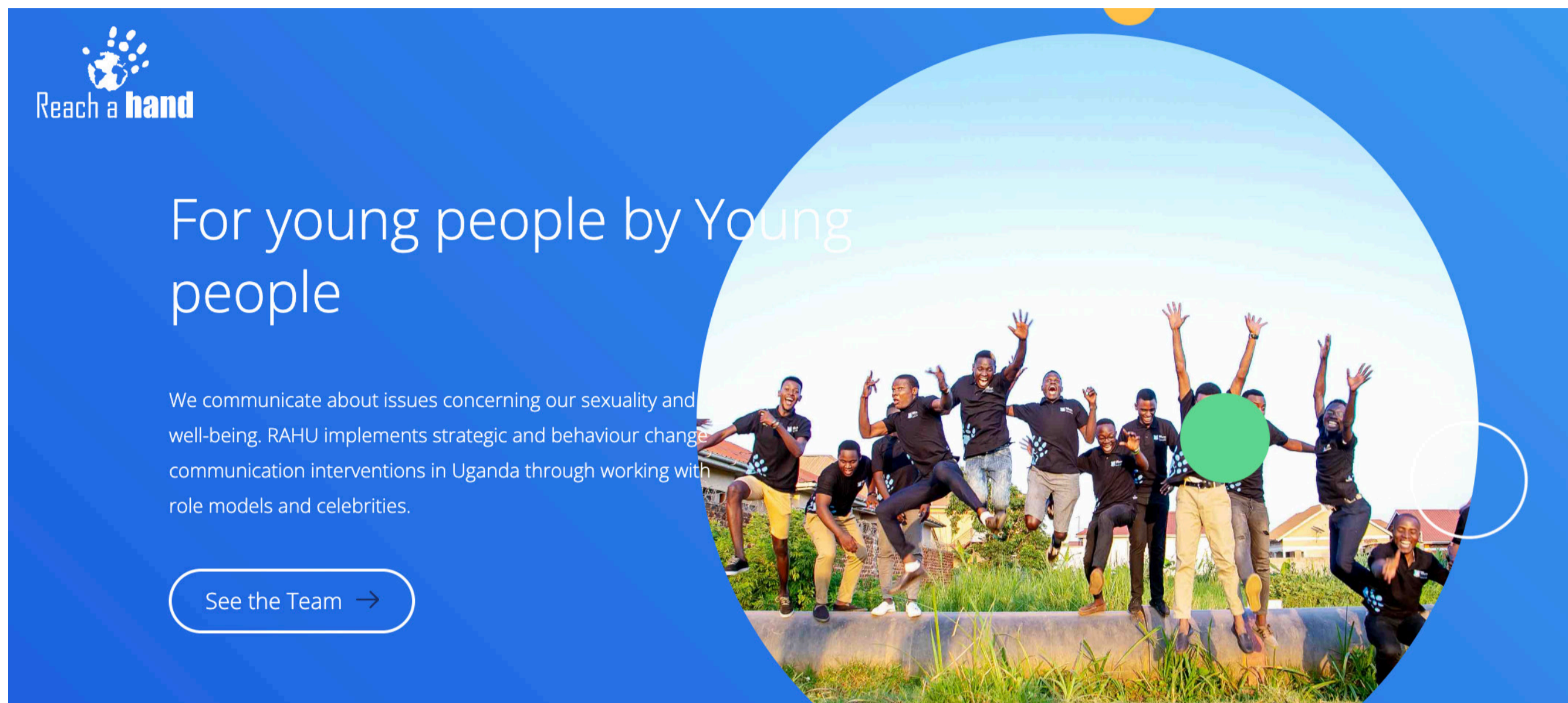
**Factor in political context:**

PWU operates within a politically restrictive environment in which critical media and civic actors face growing intolerance, including withdrawal of parliamentary accreditation and, in some cases, physical intimidation of journalists. At the same time, a clear national AI policy or regulatory framework in Uganda is still pending, leaving organisations like PWU to work in a "trial and error" space that is potentially vulnerable to ad hoc restrictions or backlash. This makes careful risk awareness and a strong emphasis on accurate, trustworthy information especially essential. It is important to consider how AI-powered tools might be received by authorities, and to pair technical innovation with advocacy, networking, and collective learning to strengthen the wider ecosystem and reduce isolation.

## 2

## Reach a Hand Uganda &amp; Sauti Plus

## Income Diversification &amp; Sustainability



Reach a Hand Uganda (RAHU) is a youth-led nonprofit organisation established in 2011 in Kampala, Uganda that empowers young people aged 10–30 through programmes on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and HIV/AIDS prevention, supporting them to contribute to socio-economic development.

➤ **Vision:** For young people to make informed choices in life.

➤ **Mission:** To empower young people in Uganda with complete information, skills, and tools to live healthy, focused, and productive lives.

RAHU produces the edutainment, most notable to the TV series “Kyaddala” (“It’s Real”), which addresses SRHR, HIV/AIDS, and the everyday challenges facing young people. It also runs a successful YouTube channel and podcast and is a well-respected media presence.

Sauti Plus is a Social Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) agency and audio-visual production house founded in 2020. It focuses largely on SRHR edutainment through podcasts, videos, and the Sauti Plus platform. The Hub was founded by RAHU’s founder, drawing on lessons from the media industry, and was born out of a need to produce high-quality social change content and reliable information.

➤ **Vision:** To deliver comprehensive, culturally diverse and inclusive marketing and communication solutions that achieve results for brands and partners.

➤ **Mission:** To provide transformative Social Behaviour Change Communication and impactful marketing and communication solutions that drive positive societal shifts.

**In response to growing uncertainty in the donor space, RAHU’s founder developed an innovative approach: the creation of Sauti Plus, a legally separate but mission-aligned SBCC agency offering a service-earning model that could, over time, support sustainability.**

Today, the organisations actively seek opportunities to collaborate in ways that mutually reinforce each other’s work: RAHU engages Sauti Plus through formal procurement for its donor-funded communication needs, while Sauti Plus provides specialised media capacity that amplifies RAHU’s programmes. Sauti Plus generates income by selling creative, production and communications services to RAHU as well as to other NGOs, embassies and global development organisations, and by pursuing media-focused grants and occasional joint proposals with RAHU.

Although Sauti Plus does not yet provide a direct financial return to RAHU, its revenues are reinvested in its own operations and used to co-fund shared initiatives such as the iKon Awards<sup>21</sup> and a digital fellowship open to RAHU Peer Educators.<sup>22</sup> Strategically, both organisations see this arrangement as a step towards a more diversified and resilient model in which a mature, surplus-generating Sauti Plus can eventually channel funds back into RAHU’s youth-focused programmes.

The need and approach for income diversification are shaped by a number of key challenges, including:



**Heavy dependence on volatile donor funding:** RAHU relies entirely on grants and donor funding. Staff are acutely aware of donor cuts and shifting priorities, yet remain committed to their work: *“There is a lot of uncertainty, but at the end of the day, the work cannot stop just because there is no money. Young people heavily trust and rely on us.”*

**Fragmented and unsustainable media support ecosystem:** For actors like RAHU and Sauti, there is no stable, one-stop ecosystem to support experimentation with new income models. Uganda’s media support landscape includes organisations such as the Human Rights Network for Journalists and the Uganda Media Women’s Association, which provide legal assistance, safety support and mentoring on gender-responsive journalism, but these bodies largely operate in isolation with limited coordination or visibility. Many of them are also dependent on donor funding, so their services become unreliable when grants are cut.

**High cost of communications and audio-visual content:** RAHU explains, *“Many communications and marketing agencies in Uganda are purely profit-driven, which means a lot of NGOs cannot afford their services.”* As a result, organisations that critically need professional communications and visibility to advance social causes often cannot afford agency rates, leaving a gap between their programmatic needs and what the market offers. RAHU also notes that private agencies’ limited understanding of how social impact organisations and NGOs operate also made the model unsustainable.

<sup>21</sup> The iKon Awards are Ugandan film and television accolades founded by the Chief Executive Officer of RAHU and organised with partners including Sauti Plus. It has considerable reach, with the 2024 iKon Awards reaching 1.48 billion users across X, Instagram, and TikTok.

<sup>22</sup> Sauti Plus runs digital fellowships and programs focused on communications, filmmaking, and SRHR advocacy, including the iKON Young Filmmakers Fellowship which incorporates digital storytelling and media training. The digital fellowships are open to RAHU peer educators.



## Reach a Hand Uganda & Sauti Plus Income Diversification Strategies

### ➤ **Discounted communications services to NGOs and development actors (Sauti)**

Sauti provides agency services such as creative and campaign design, PR and digital, film, events, audio-visual production to NGOs, embassies, and global development organisations at heavily discounted rates, opening up a broader mission-aligned client base.

### ➤ **Dual revenue models: retainers and one-off projects (Sauti)**

Combining retainer contracts for ongoing communications, PR, digital and audio-visual work with one-off jobs, including event coverage, single videos, photography, etc., and deliberately trying to grow the retainer side for more predictable income.

### ➤ **Cross-organisation collaboration (RAHU & Sauti)**

Much of RAHU's programmatic work requires high-quality digital content beyond its in-house capacity. Because RAHU and Sauti share a mission focus and Sauti offers NGO-oriented, affordable rates, RAHU can procure competitively priced services from Sauti through standard procurement processes, while Sauti generates earned income. This arrangement enhances the effectiveness and efficiency of RAHU's communication work and supports Sauti's financial sustainability in a mutually reinforcing way.

### ➤ **Co-funding and co-running joint initiatives from Sauti's revenue (RAHU & Sauti)**

Sauti uses part of its earned income to co-fund joint initiatives with RAHU, such as the iKON Awards and a digital fellowship. These programmes build a pool of skilled, in-network creators who strengthen youth livelihoods while reducing reliance on costly external providers, supporting both organisations' sustainability.



## Lessons Learned & Best Practices

### **Separate, mission-aligned entities can drive diversification without diluting core purpose:**

Structuring Sauti Plus as a legally separate but mission-aligned social behaviour change agency allows RAHU to remain a grant-funded NGO while Sauti experiments with earned income. Sauti serves RAHU and other NGOs with communications, PR, digital, film and events, opening up a broader client base while still advancing RAHU's youth-focused, public-interest mission.

**Complementary revenue streams support resilience:**

Both organisations are working to reduce reliance on volatile donor funding by building several complementary income streams. While Sauti is not yet in a position to directly fund RAHU, RAHU can procure competitively priced communications services from Sauti, and Sauti uses part of its earned income to co-fund joint initiatives. This layered approach to grants, procured services and co-financed projects is gradually strengthening their overall financial resilience.

RAHU was also interviewed for RNW Media's global study as one of the organisations experimenting with AI. Both RAHU and Sauti are cautious in their adoption of AI, trying to balance potential efficiency gains with their mission and ethical commitments. While AI tools help speed up tasks like design and editing, some staff remain uncertain or sceptical about AI use, and there is evidence of external pushback, with audiences engaging less with AI-generated content than with locally crafted, human-led posts. These reactions currently limit the extent to which they feel able to use AI for cost savings or income-enhancing efficiencies.

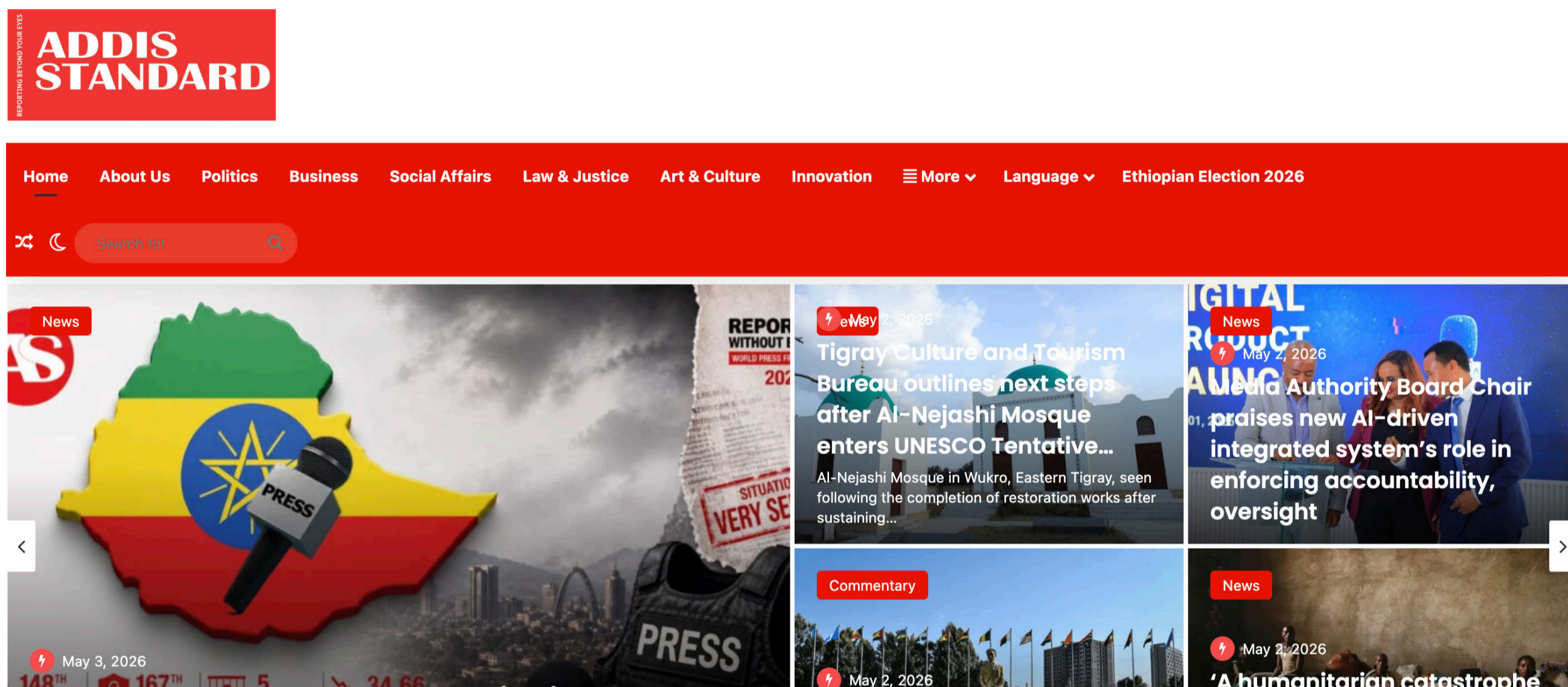
## 3

## Addis Standard

Income Diversification &amp; Sustainability

Audience Engagement &amp; Trust

Strategic AI Integration



Addis Standard, founded in 2011 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, is a trilingual independent digital media outlet publishing in English, Afaan Oromoo and Amharic. It was initially launched as a monthly print magazine for bold investigative journalism and opinion, filling an information gap by platforming critical thinkers and public intellectuals. Under severe political pressure, the magazine closed, reinventing itself online, adding daily news to analysis and commentary, and expanding into multimedia.

In its current online form, it continues to focus on socio-political and socio-economic issues, with editorial policies that emphasise transparency, integrity, and professionalism.

Since its launch, Addis Standard has weathered national political turmoil while remaining on the frontlines of public interest reporting. Today, its strategy centres on strengthening digital engagement and reach across platforms to serve diverse audiences and experimenting with a range of digital revenue streams, including website and platform monetisation, sponsored content, YouTube and podcasts. It is also integrating AI to make multilingual production in English, Amharic and Afaan Oromoo more efficient. Throughout, its core aim remains the same: to provide reliable, independent public interest journalism for citizens, while strengthening its organisational viability.

## Key challenges impacting funding include:



**Political changes and shrinking civic space:** In 2016, a state of emergency forced Addis Standard to terminate its print magazine, cutting off a key advertising stream. The abrupt shutdown meant it could not honour multi-year ad contracts and had to reimburse clients who had paid in advance, an especially heavy blow for a small organisation.

**Conflict and insecurity reducing revenue from international advertising:** Economic collapse and ongoing conflict in Ethiopia have eroded investor confidence and led many multinational advertisers to withdraw from the country, making traditional advertising revenue – historically a significant income stream for Addis Standard – increasingly unreliable.

**Reluctance of some advertisers due to Addis Standard's uncompromising editorial line:** While some advertisers have remained due to the outlet's popularity, others are hesitant to associate with a publication known for robust and critical political commentary.

**Low revenue from platform monetisation:** Platform monetisation has yielded limited and sometimes counterproductive results. Revenues from some platforms are disproportionately low relative to traffic. Monetising one of Addis Standard's social media platforms coincided with a steep drop in reach – from about 200,000 views per post to only a few thousand – attributed to algorithm changes. Demonetising this platform is now being considered in order to rebuild organic reach and then leverage a larger unpaid audience to secure more traditional, directly negotiated ad deals.

Addis Standard's evolving income diversification and sustainability strategy is anchored by a two-year transition-to-multimedia project, including a new in-house studio supported in-kind by a global media development organisation. While the outlet is generating modest revenue from website and platform monetisation, sponsored content, and YouTube, these streams are not yet sufficient to cover operations, and media funding remains necessary. Based on their current plan, they aim that within two years around 30 – 35% of their operational budget will come from monetising multimedia outputs, including YouTube channels, podcasts and other studio produced digital content, with the remainder still covered by grants and other funding sources.



## Addis Standard Income Diversification Strategies

### ➤ Platform monetisation and sponsored posts

Advertising income, such as from Google AdSense, alongside sponsored articles and other content partnerships on the website.

### ‣ **Daily news recaps and podcasts as new distribution channels**

Converting written stories into short daily video updates and weekly podcasts, to reach audiences on YouTube and other platforms and increase opportunities for platform monetisation.

### ‣ **Multilingual multimedia newsroom**

Dedicated team producing content in English, Amharic and Afaan Oromoo across multiple formats to deepen engagement with distinct language communities and, over time, build sustainable advertising revenue around those audiences and outputs.

### ‣ **Partnerships to broaden content and revenue**

Exploring collaborations with non-political content creators such as non-political TikTok influencers to extend reach and drive traffic to their website, and considering corporate partnerships while ensuring any such relationships align with Addis Standard's values.

Addis Standard is exploring strategic AI integration, partly in response to the demands of serving diverse audiences in three languages. As a small newsroom producing both nationally relevant coverage and region-specific stories, it needed ways to accelerate multimedia production and make cross-language publishing more efficient, without undermining editorial standards or eroding audience trust. Against this backdrop, the organisation has integrated AI in multiple ways.



## Addis Standard Strategic AI Features

### ‣ **Ethical AI-assisted translation and content sharing**

AI tools generate first-draft translations between its three working languages and help identify relevant stories for cross-language reuse, while human editors retain full control over accuracy, nuance, and final publication.

### ‣ **AI-enabled multimedia production**

AI voice and editing tools convert written news into daily AI-narrated clips and streamline video/audio workflows, with experimental work on Amharic transcription and voice recognition to speed up turning interviews into publishable text.

### ‣ **Newsroom AI governance and safeguards**

An internal ethical AI module for staff, developed with support from an ethical AI specialist organization, which frames AI strictly as assistive infrastructure for routine tasks such as translation, content sharing and multimedia editing. AI tools may not be used to generate original journalism or replace core editorial decision-making, and all outputs remain subject to human editorial review.



## Lessons Learned & Best Practices

### **Maintaining editorial integrity:**

Maintaining editorial independence is non-negotiable when pursuing funding and revenue opportunities: “It was imperative for us to look for funding alternatives from places where we’re not required to compromise on our editorial integrity.” This stance underpins Addis Standard’s audience trust: even under severe political and financial pressure, they continue to cover public interest issues, only accept funding that does not influence content, and carefully scrutinise potential corporate partnerships for ethical risks. Their model treats trust as a core asset - hard-won through consistent, critical coverage and transparent red lines on funding - which in turn underlies their ability to build loyal audiences and pursue more sustainable income.

### **Multilingual publishing to build audiences and revenue:**

Addis Standard has invested significant time and energy in developing a digital media and income-diversification strategy. A core part of this is creating dedicated products in multiple languages, expanding reach across platforms and engaging underserved communities in their own languages. To maximise limited reporting resources, nationally relevant stories with cross-community significance are first produced in one language, then translated and adapted for the others, with the original editor reviewing translations for accuracy and nuance. This approach ensures that diverse communities can access reliable information and quality journalism, with language-specific pieces and dedicated product editors safeguarding relevance and accuracy for each audience. In turn, this broader, more trusted reach creates stronger foundations for generating revenue through online advertising and monetised content.

### **Partner with mission-aligned experts to embed ethics and build capacity on AI:**

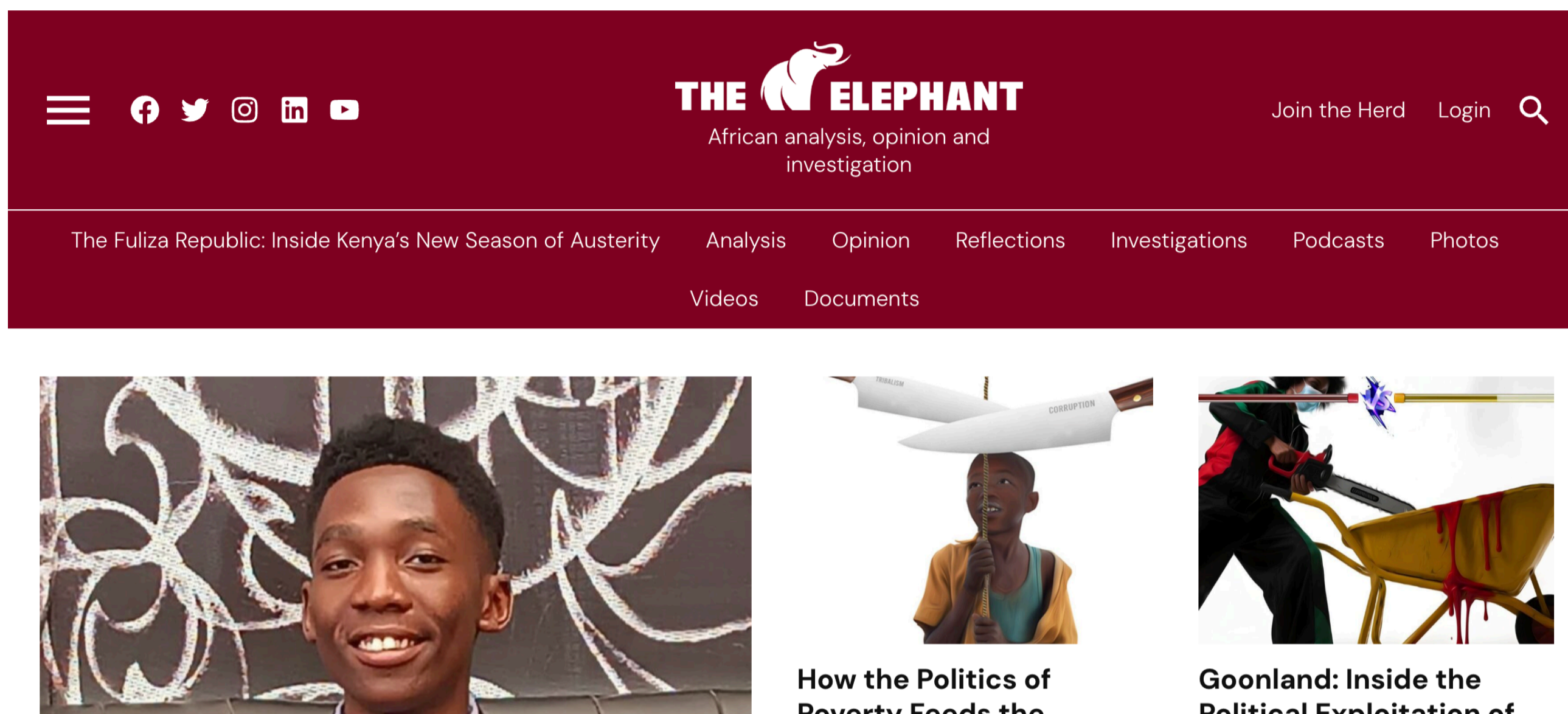
To operationalise ethical AI use in practice, Addis Standard collaborates with AI specialists to select appropriate tools and train staff on how to use them while maintaining human editorial control.

## 4

## The Elephant

Income Diversification &amp; Sustainability

Audience Engagement &amp; Trust



The Elephant, founded in Nairobi, Kenya in 2016, is a digital platform for public-interest journalism on social, economic and political issues. Launched amid a period of shrinking civic space, it set out to examine contemporary challenges through the lens of the country's history and struggles for self-determination and justice. As Joe Kobuthi notes, more than 50 years after independence the country is still grappling with persistent problems in areas such as corruption, governance, education and health, and The Elephant's role is to give these issues "context, background and history" so that society can better explain, interrogate and reimagine itself.

Rooted in Pan-Africanist ideals, its editorial approach is guided by principles of editorial autonomy, truth and objectivity, information for the common good, integrity and authenticity.

Over the last decade, The Elephant has explored digital innovation and experimentation to diversify its income and broaden audience engagement. It has evolved through several distinct stages: it began as a website and, during Kenya's 2017 election period, expanded into social media, especially on X. As organisational capacity grew, it became a multi-platform operation with a YouTube channel and early podcast offerings, positioning itself at the cutting edge of digital innovation and storytelling. By 2018, it had become a globally read outlet, reaching audiences in over 175 countries with roughly 100,000 weekly views across its content and drawing contributors from around the world. The COVID-19 period then forced a further phase of internal transformation, with integrated digital workflow systems built to manage a fully remote newsroom and sustain production.

## The organisation continues innovating in response to several financing challenges:



**Dwindling donor funding:** Recent U.S. international cooperation funding cuts and a broader decline in financial support for public interest media has further stretched limited resources. Efforts to introduce a paywall also proved unsustainable: when they experimented with a full-site paywall, audience engagement dropped, making a hard paywall model unsustainable.

**Algorithmic and platform bias against media serving Global Majority audiences:** The Elephant reports difficulty getting its content to surface via search and platform algorithms (for example, on Google and news platforms), a challenge echoed by other organisations in the region. As a result, they must work harder on tagging, search engine optimisation and distribution to reach new audiences. This impacts their reach, and related opportunities for monetising content.



## The Elephant Income Diversification Strategies

### ➤ Platform-based strategy

Multiple, interlinked platforms, including the website, YouTube channel, podcasts, a new WhatsApp magazine and a hybrid annual lecture series, that can each carry part of the financial load, while keeping core journalism freely accessible. The WhatsApp magazine is a dedicated product on the region's most used app, with plans to introduce a small fee and exclusive content over time. The annual lecture series will showcase academics and prominent public intellectuals in an in-person format, with some online elements, launching as a free offering but designed to become a paid event in the longer term.

### ➤ Audience contributions and small donations

The website includes a contribute/donations function; while not actively promoted, it brings in organic support, with opportunities in the future for more deliberate contributor fundraising.

The Elephant is at the early stages of exploring AI and is taking a measured, capacity-aware approach, currently using it strictly as a tool to augment work rather than to create news stories or any analysis. Its core commitment remains to “first-principles” journalism: investigations, reportage and reflective writing grounded in human experience, even as it looks for partners to help integrate AI carefully into workflows and audience outreach. Given audience skepticism around AI, they also remain cautious about adopting tools in ways that could depersonalise their journalism or erode audience trust.



## Lessons Learned & Best Practices

### **Treat “platform organising” as core to sustainability:**

The Elephant’s experience and research highlight platform organising as the most important vehicle for media sustainability in Kenya. How a newsroom structures and manages its platforms, trains media managers and designs its wider ecosystem is a critical driver of long-term viability, especially as donor funds shrink. In response, The Elephant focuses on building and strengthening interconnected platforms, both its own and those in the broader ecosystem, that can increasingly become income-generating and self-sustaining, while ensuring high-quality public-interest content. It uses website analytics to understand who is reading its content, from where, and at what times, and uses these patterns to inform decisions about what to publish, when to release it and how to tailor formats for different audience segments. Further, their approach is experimental and iterative. After it became clear that putting the website behind a paywall would not work, they kept access relatively open to maintain reach and influence, while layering niche paid or premium offerings. They are currently experimenting with the WhatsApp magazine and lecture series to test alternative approaches.

### **Design products around local audience habits:**

The Elephant’s decision to develop a WhatsApp magazine emerged from paying close attention to what is specific about their audiences and region: WhatsApp is the most widely used platform, and its nature as a messaging app focused on private communication on the phone can give users a stronger sense of personal engagement than more publicly visible social media platforms.

### **Human-centred approach:**

Audiences want to know their news sources are reliable. For The Elephant, staying true to a consistent editorial philosophy centred on the common good, integrity and authenticity means readers learn that “if The Elephant has something on this issue, I can rely on it.” They invest heavily in human relationships, recognising that increasingly “people follow people.” Institutional trust is strengthened by sustained relationship management with journalists and contributors: writers bring their own credibility and communities, so investing in those relationships means audiences end up trusting both the brand and a constellation of recognisable voices. Against the backdrop of rapid AI automation, the distinctive value of human reporters and human connection is especially appreciated.

## 5

## Africa Uncensored

Income Diversification &amp; Sustainability

Audience Engagement &amp; Trust



HOME

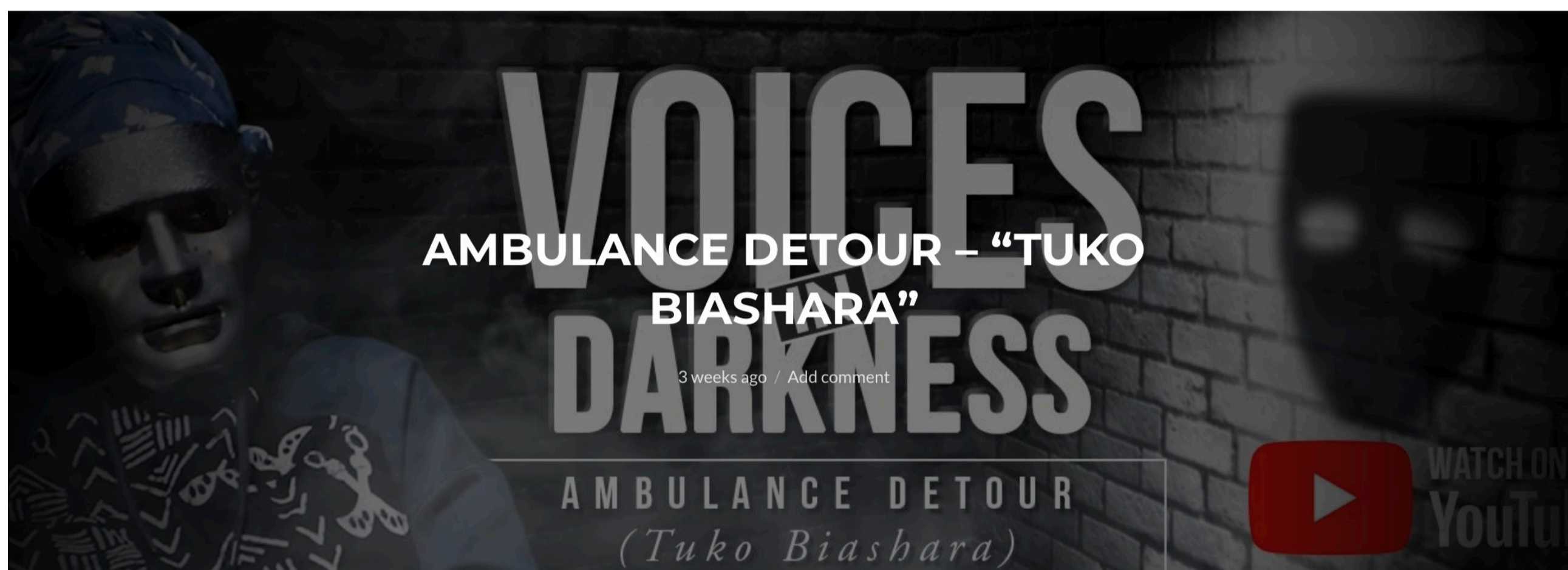
PIGA FIRIMBI

WIZILEAKS

FEMICIDE

PRODUCTIONS

NEWSLETTER



Africa Uncensored is an independent digital investigative media house founded in 2015 and based in Nairobi, Kenya. Dedicated to producing high-quality, in-depth journalism that holds power to account and brings underreported issues across the continent to light, it aims to strengthen transparency and accountability in society.

The organisation focuses on, but is not limited to, corruption, debt, climate change and related social justice, human rights and governance issues. It is known for high-impact investigations such as Kanjo Kingdom, which exposed abuses by Nairobi city council officers and helped bring those responsible to justice, and The Profiteers, which uncovered regional profiteering from South Sudan's civil war. Africa Uncensored also invests in the future of journalism in Africa: it has trained over 1,000 mid-career, emerging and student journalists; built a regional network of investigative reporters across Eastern Africa and the Great Lakes; hosts an annual flagship investigative journalism conference; and runs a college outreach programme that introduces students in Kenya to investigative journalism as a viable career.

Africa Uncensored has evolved from a small newsroom into a larger, more structured investigative outlet, enabling it to diversify its income and expand its reach. This growth has been underpinned by a strategy of using digital media platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, combining long-form investigations with shorter, more accessible formats. The approach has allowed Africa Uncensored to monetise some content while deliberately expanding revenue sources beyond traditional grants. As a result, the outlet has broadened its audience, deepened its relationship with viewers and readers, and drawn on public support not only for visibility and impact, but also for financial and political resilience.

**Diversifying income streams was, and continues to be, critical for navigating a range of pressures, including:**



**Substantial time and resource investment necessary for investigative journalism:** High-quality investigations are slow and resource-intensive. This sits in a shifting information environment where individual creators can publish rapidly on social media, sometimes with unverified allegations, but at other times breaking accurate stories ahead of newsrooms. Africa Uncensored’s slower, more rigorous approach protects its “main currency,” reputation and audience trust.

**Vested interests limiting mainstream media publication:** A core element of Africa Uncensored’s business model is selling finished investigations and documentaries to legacy media outlets. However, in some cases where powerful political or economic actors are implicated, these outlets have declined to carry certain pieces. Rather than allowing these barriers to halt its public interest work, Africa Uncensored leverages its financial independence to publish investigations directly on its own digital platforms ensuring the story reaches audiences and can still have impact. One such investigation went viral in Kenya and across the region, demonstrating the power of retaining editorial and distribution autonomy.

**Producing sensitive content that platforms will not monetise:** Because of YouTube’s content and advertising guidelines, many of Africa Uncensored’s investigations that include graphic or sensitive material, such as reporting on human rights abuses and protest violence, have historically been deemed ineligible for monetisation. TikTok similarly often places this type of content behind warnings. As a result, a large share of their work remains non-monetisable, significantly limiting what they can earn from major platforms.

**The threat of SLAPP suits (strategic lawsuits against public participation):** SLAPP suits are a major threat to Africa Uncensored’s journalism. Even when investigations are well-documented and legally sound, powerful actors can use lengthy court processes, or the threat of them, not to win on substance but to delay or block publication, effectively using the legal system to silence or stall critical reporting. This means missed opportunities for public accountability, significant resources tied up in stories that cannot be published or have lost relevance by the time cases are resolved, and substantial legal costs.



## Africa Uncensored Income Diversification Strategies

### ➤ **Direct sale and co-publishing of documentaries and catalogues of existing content**

Producing documentaries end-to-end, then approaching potential partners (e.g. broadcasters or platforms) to co-publish them in exchange for a fee. If no buyer is found, still releasing the work on Africa Uncensored's YouTube channel as public interest journalism.

### ➤ **Platform monetisation and reinvestment**

Monetising selected content on YouTube to generate advertising revenue. While modest, this income is reinvested into promoting content across YouTube, Instagram and other platforms, helping digital operations become more self-sustaining. Using YouTube live feeds has also enabled them to monetise material that would otherwise be ineligible under standard content and advertising guidelines on sensitive content.

### ➤ **Commissioned productions through its production house**

Taking on commissioned work for aligned organisations (such as Amnesty International). These projects generate income while remaining consistent with their public interest and values.

### ➤ **Audience Donations**

Partly driven by audience demand to support their work, Africa Uncensored receives donations from the public. They first initiated a deliberate donation drive in 2024, with reporters and producers recording short pieces to camera asking audiences to contribute, and attaching these appeals to stories across their digital platforms.

### ➤ **Grants and project funding**

Applying for grants that align with the organisation's mandate. Using successful awards to fund specific programmes or investigations, delivering agreed activities while meeting funder requirements and journalistic standards.

Alongside funding-related pressures, Africa Uncensored also identifies challenges around audience engagement and trust, namely:



**Tensions between audience expectations and journalistic duty:** Africa Uncensored has a loyal support base that values the strength of its investigations, but has at times faced accusations that it is “siding with the government.” As the organisation stresses, their commitment is not to any political side but to reporting the truth based on verified research: “We have an obligation to just say the truth, even when it’s unsettling.” This can mean contradicting narratives strongly held by their own supporters, yet they point to the robustness of their reporting over time as validation of this approach.

**Balancing audience expectations with content diversification:** The outlet is widely associated with hard investigative journalism, and some audiences have reacted negatively when it produces content on unconventional or taboo topics, such as a series on sex, which also led to them highlighting LGBTIQ+ communities, which is rarely discussed on mainstream channels. Africa Uncensored regards this both as part of its public interest mandate, “reporting on topics that no one else is doing,” and as a strategic way to reach new audiences.

**Changing audience habits and engaging younger audiences:** Some audiences increasingly expect faster, bite-sized information rather than lengthy investigations. Staying relevant as behaviours and consumption habits shift means the newsroom has had to adapt and rework its storytelling formats across platforms, whilst continuing to share the stories that need to be told.



## Africa Uncensored Audience Engagement Strategies

### ➤ Reinventing formats to match changing audience habits

Producing both long-form YouTube documentaries and short social media reels as stand-alone stories that convey the gist of the investigation. This provides information and engagement for viewers who never watch long-form, while also serving as teasers that draw some audiences back to the full documentary. Although resource-intensive, this multi-format approach has paid off in higher engagement and in reaching distinct audience segments across platforms.

**› Campus tours to engage new, young audiences**

Running campus tours in Kenyan college, with 1–2 day crash courses on investigative journalism, showcasing their work, and enabling staff to interact directly with students. This strategy engages young people, positions investigative reporting as a viable and attractive career path, and simultaneously builds a talent pipeline and keeps the brand visible to emerging generations of journalists.

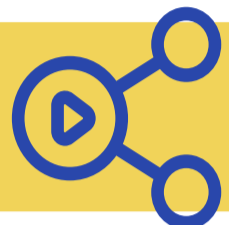
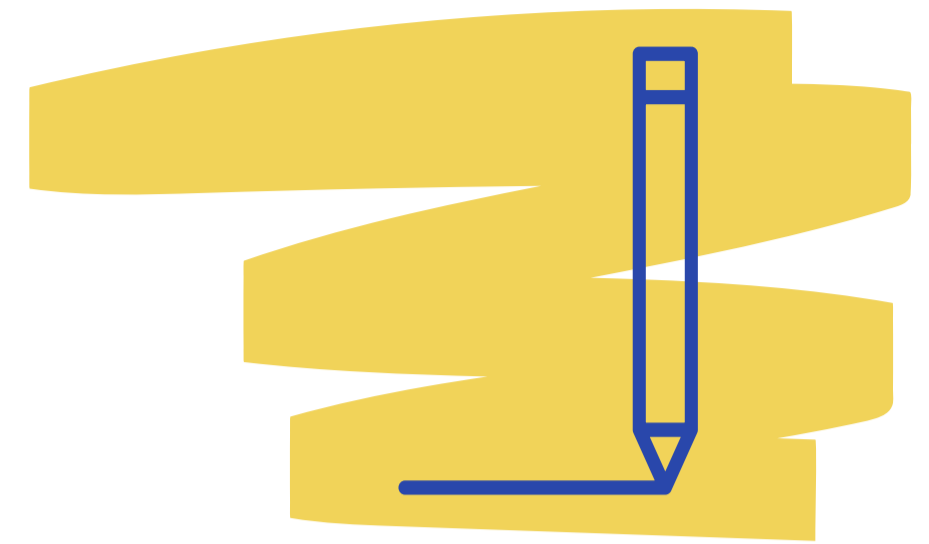
**Lessons Learned & Best Practices****Strengthening digital distribution to diversify income and broaden audiences:**

Publishing content across its website, YouTube and TikTok is a mutually reinforcing strategy. Multi-platform, multi-format publishing helps attract and engage diverse audiences, including younger viewers who often prefer short-form content, which in turn expands reach. This wider, more engaged audience base then creates greater opportunities for monetisation and partnerships across platforms, further supporting the sustainability of their work.

**Rigorous editorial processes underpin resilience and trust:** A structured editorial approach, where a managing editor reviews every story for adherence to house standards and ethics, is central to sustaining audience trust and withstanding pressure. As Emmanuel Chenze reflects, “We have to be very rigorous, because also we have a responsibility. Our biggest currency is our reputation.” This high bar for verification helps the newsroom stand firm when facing SLAPP threats or audience push back, because they can point to the strength and integrity of their reporting.

**Building and mobilising audience support is critical in hostile environments:** Directly appealing to audiences to support their work has proven crucial for Africa Uncensored’s survival in a context of political pressure and legal threats. During their reporting of the 2024 protests in Kenya, public backing helped neutralise government accusations, and their first deliberate donation drive generated more income from audience contributions than from YouTube monetisation. Cultivating and activating audience support, politically, reputationally and financially, is a vital buffer for public interest media.

# Recommendations



## For media organisations

**Continue to uphold safe, inclusive and reliable media:** High-quality, accurate and ethical reporting remain at the heart of public interest media and are critical for trust and, therefore, long-term viability. Ensure this continues to be a cornerstone of organisational strategy, policies and practices.

**Define your niche:** Clarify and commit to a distinctive niche aligned with your mandate (e.g., health, governance, misinformation). A clear focus strengthens editorial identity, attracts thematically aligned donors, deepens coverage on priority topics.

**Develop a strategy and experiment with income diversification modalities:** Create a clear strategy to strengthen financial viability, then test income-generating options such as audience-based revenue (memberships, small donations, events), service-based income (training, production services, research/consulting), and values-aligned institutional partnerships, while ring-fencing editorial independence. Use the results of these experiments to refine and adjust the strategy over time

**Engage your audiences in multi-media expansion and AI-assisted tool development:** Engage diverse users, across genders, geographies, and sectors including journalists, officials, civil society, and private companies, to understand how they interact with your work, the challenges they face, and how your data can be presented in accessible, user-friendly formats that sustain engagement. As well as ensuring relevance, such an approach also supports trust building with your audiences

**Develop robust policies and practices for ethical AI use:** Ensure your organisation and staff are well supported in AI-assisted work through gender-inclusive training, an AI manual, and clear editorial policies and approval processes that maintain human oversight of AI-assisted outputs to safeguard standards. Ensure clear roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authority in AI-assisted workflows, including for journalists and editors. Consider engaging mission-aligned experts to help design and implement these frameworks. Ensure transparency and maintain audience trust through clearly labelling AI content, and clarifying how it's used by your organisation.

Support the public in increasing their media literacy: Where relevant, underscore the crucial role of public interest media and its relevance for strengthening transparency, accountability, and good governance, among other key democratic principles, that benefit both individuals and society. This can help strengthen engagement and trust, including audiences' willingness to make financial contributions in support of public interest media.

**Collaborate and scale regionally:** Leverage existing cross-border audiences to co-produce content where relevant and share technology.



## For funders

**Provide core funding to public-interest media partners:** Long-term, flexible support enables media organizations to invest in institutional capacity, safeguard editorial independence, and innovate. Core funding helps outlets adapt to a changing landscape, including accelerating digitalization and strategic AI adoption to strengthen audience engagement.

**Collaborate with public interest media and media support organisations to identify practical ways to support media viability in contexts of restricted civic space:** For public interest media this includes, for example, rapid-response grants for relocation or legal defense, resources and training on digital security. For media support organisations, this includes resources for training and innovation support for hyper local and small media organisations.

**Advocate for enabling, ethical AI laws and policies:** Where feasible, work alongside national and local public-interest media to champion government frameworks that both protect press freedom and enable responsible AI use. Encourage policies that require transparency, accountability, and human oversight in AI-assisted news production; guard against algorithmic bias and data misuse while supporting local-language AI development. Ensure these frameworks are developed through inclusive consultations with media, civil society, academia, and the tech sector, with gender-responsive and youth-inclusive participation built in from the outset.



## For media support organisations

**Research, advocate for and broaden understandings of media viability:** Consider expanded understandings of media viability, taking into account leadership and organisational set-up, and wellbeing of staff.

**Facilitate regional hubs and shared infrastructures:** Create umbrella structures that allow small outlets to pool resources (legal registration, financial services, tech support), and to exchange lessons learned and best practices on areas such as digitalisation, revenue diversification, and strategic AI adoption within and across national contexts.

**Build bridges to technology actors and advocate for fair, transparent monetisation for digital news content:** Act as connectors between local public-interest media and large digital platforms (Google, OpenAI, Meta), lowering access barriers to grants and tools, and advocating to ensure smaller organisations are fairly compensated for their monetised content.

**Mainstream ethical, inclusive AI practices:** Provide training, guidelines, and case studies on responsible AI integration - emphasising cultural sensitivity, inclusion, privacy, and transparency - and include safeguards against bias and discriminatory outcomes to ensure AI does not exacerbate existing inequalities.

**Document and co-advocate for discoverability of Global Majority public interest media:** In collaboration with public interest media, commission, document and publish robust evidence on whether and how search and recommendation algorithms disadvantage Global South outlets, and under what conditions. Any follow-up advocacy should articulate clear standards for fair visibility, and push for transparent, accountable ranking and indexing practices by major platforms.



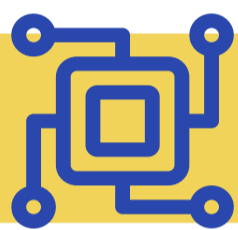
## For governments

**Ensure open civic space and protect fundamental freedoms for public-interest media:** Guarantee freedom of expression, press freedom, and access to information; prohibit arbitrary arrests, intimidation, and shutdowns; and uphold due process for journalists and media outlets. Establish and strengthen independent regulators, transparent licensing and accreditation processes, and rapid remedies for violations. Repeal or amend laws that criminalise journalism, enable surveillance without oversight, or unduly restrict digital speech.

**Create open, predictable environments for media investment:** Adopt and strengthen clear advertising, taxation, and competition policies, and ensure inclusive consultation with media, civil society, and academia when drafting reforms.

**Establish inclusive, regionally aligned national AI frameworks:** In dialogue with media agencies and diverse civil society, develop inclusive national AI frameworks aligned with regional standards (AU/RECs) that mandate transparency, accountability, and human oversight; protect media freedom and civic space; address algorithmic bias and data privacy; and support local-language AI development and fair access to compliant tools for newsrooms.

**Increase investment in local-language community radio:** Provide sustained, scalable funding for local-language community radio to strengthen audience engagement and trust, laying a durable foundation for media viability



## Technology companies & social media platforms

**Ethical, multilingual AI tool development:** Invest in ethically advancing multilingual AI by adopting inclusive data practices, co-developing with local media organisations and communities, ensuring robust bias and privacy safeguards, and training models on high-quality datasets that reflect diverse geographic and regional contexts

**Support audience insight generation:** Develop tools that provide media organisations with anonymised user behaviour patterns and audience insights, enabling them to understand engagement while ensuring ethical sharing of user-protected data and maintaining privacy within appropriate regulatory frameworks.

**Ensure fair transparent remuneration for digital news content:** Paying publishers proportionately for the value they create, provide clear revenue-sharing formulas and predictable payout thresholds, and ensure advance notice of policy or algorithm changes. Enhance publisher controls and transparency with detailed revenue and distribution analytics, clear appeals for demonetisation/downranking, and localised support for smaller, multilingual outlets, especially those producing high-quality public interest content.

**Ensure fair visibility for Global Majority public interest media:** Establish and uphold clear standards for fair visibility and make ranking and indexing systems transparent and accountable. This includes regularly auditing how algorithms and product design affects media outlets in the Global Majority, creating dedicated discoverability mechanisms for verified public interest publishers, and providing practical, tailored guidance and tools so these newsrooms can meaningfully improve their reach.

**Strengthen policy and practice to protect public interest media and journalists from digital threats and violence:** In dialogue with media, review and strengthen efforts to prevent harassment and online threats and to protect them when they occur. Ensure that policy and practice take into account the forms of harassment that affect certain groups disproportionately.

