African News Innovation Challenge winners announced

20 digital journalism projects have earned US$1 million in funding and technical support as part of the African News Innovation Challenge (ANIC).

ANIC is reportedly the largest fund for digital journalism experimentation in Africa, and is designed to spur solutions to the business, distribution and workplace challenges that face the media industry.

A jury of 15 international media strategists, technology innovators, and funding experts evaluated more than 500 project plans before selecting winners from a shortlist of 40 projects. The winners were announced by ANIC manager, Justin Arenstein in Kigali, Rwanda, on 28 November 2012, at the African Editors' Forum annual general meeting.

"Africa's media face some serious challenges, and each of our winners tries to solve a real world-problem that journalists are grappling with. This includes the public's growing concern about the manipulation and accuracy of online content, plus concerns around the security of communications and of whistleblowers or journalistic sources," says Arenstein, who manages ANIC as part of a wider digital innovation program with Africa's largest association of media owners and operators, the African Media Initiative (AMI).

Evident themes

"The other major theme evident in many of the 500 entries to ANIC is the realisation that the media needs better ways to engage with audiences. Many of our winners try tackle this, with projects ranging from mobile apps to mobilise citizens against corruption, to improved infographics to better explain complex issues, to completely new platforms for beaming content into buses and taxis, or even using drone aircraft to get cameras to isolated communities."

Other significant trends include efforts to improve newsroom workflow systems, and boost media revenues.

Winning projects get cash grants

Winning projects will receive cash grants ranging from US$10 000 to US$100 000, plus additional technology support from a team of four full-time developers at AMI's jAccelerator lab in Kenya, and business development support from media strategists affiliated with the World Association of Newspapers & News Publishers (WAN-IFRA). Ten of the winners will also be flown to the Knight Foundation's annual M.I.T. Civic Media Conference in the United States, while the rest will be showcased at other important industry events.

The projects have the potential to be replicated by media elsewhere in Africa, or to be scaled up across the continent, to create wide and sustained impact.

"Finding and supporting great ideas for improving news reporting was just one of our aims. A second equally important objective was to kickstart a pan-African community of news innovators and journalism technologists. We are thrilled that ANIC seems to have succeeded, connecting people from across the continent and the wider world to work on collaborative projects. We're already seeing skills and knowledge exchanges outside of ANIC," says AMI chief executive, Amadou Mahtar Ba. "We intend nurturing this new community through a series of other digital initiatives."

Peter Barron, Google's director of External Relations for Europe, Middle East and Africa said "We want to see journalism flourish in the digital age in Africa and the African News Innovation Challenge has helped spur some really exciting projects from across the continent. We're looking forward to seeing these projects unfold and to working further with African journalists who are using technologies to gather and tell important stories."

ANIC's founding partners include Google, Omidyar Network, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the US State Department, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA).

The 2012 winners

1. actNOW - Ghana
   A mobile application that empowers audiences to act on investigative reportage, by providing simple tools for citizens to organise themselves into civic action groups around issues reported by the media, or to petition government or corporations in response to journalistic exposés.

2. AdBooker - South Africa
   An open-source, streamlined workflow management system for planning and managing media advertising. It will generate ad rates and manage bookings, artwork production and ad placements.

3. Africa Check - South Africa/Nigeria
   A pan-African, non-partisan and crowdsourced fact-checking service that systematically verifies claims made in media reports. The project is intended to improve the accuracy and quality of reporting by exposing incorrect assertions by sources quoted in the media as well as errors in news stories.

4. africanDRONE (renamed skyCAM) - Kenya/Nigeria
   A pilot project that establishes Africa's first newsroom-based "eye in the sky" drones and camera-equipped balloons to help media that cannot afford news helicopters cover breaking news in dangerous situations or difficult-to-reach locations.

5. Africa's Wealth (renamed NewsStack) - Nigeria/Namibia
   A project to integrate a new generation of forensic data analysis tools such as DocumentCloud, Poderopedia, Overview and Mapa76, into a unified and reusable journalist toolkit. The kit will be used in a yearlong, pan-African investigation by ten media organisations into the continent's extractive industries.

6. Citizen Desk - Mozambique
   This toolkit allows news organisations to create a mobile-optimized platform for aggregating, verifying, publishing and rewarding citizen journalism. The platform will be integrated into the widely used Superdesk production management system and serve as a way to incorporate citizen journalism into a news organisation's core workflow.

7. Code4Ghana - Ghana
   This "kick-starter program" helps Ghanaian media experiment with data-driven journalism. It will provide access to data scientists and programmers, specialised training and a series of public "hackathons" designed to build news tools that take advantage of the new Ghana Open Data Initiative.

8. ConvergeCMS - Kenya/Tanzania/Uganda
   An open-source and data-optimized editorial content management system and technical support program designed specifically for African media houses. It will help newsrooms centralize and manage content creation, dissemination, archiving and workflows.

9. CorruptionNET - South Africa
   An open-source mobile platform that gives citizen reporters a step-by-step toolkit for filing journalistic reports to newsrooms about corruption or other abuses of public resources. The citizens can report using SMS or MXit, Africa's largest social mobile network.

10. DataWrapper - Nigeria/Senegal/Tanzania
    An initiative that establishes a network of full-fledged data visualization desks in forward-thinking newsrooms across Africa. It will help improve the use of interactive infographics and data-driven visual news apps, using the open-source DataWrapper toolkit plus other powerful graphic tools.

11. End-to-End (renamed First Mile Crowdmapping) - Liberia/Ghana/Kenya
    A crowdsourced reporting tool built on top of the SourceMap.com platform to help African journalists and citizens tell complex investigative stories. This tool will visually map the people, places and events behind the "first mile" of supply chains, so that consumers can understand where goods originate in African industries such as cocoa or logging.

12. FlashCast - Kenya
    This platform will beam hyperlocal news to commuters in taxis and buses, using smart, location-aware LED displays. It also allows the audience to use their mobile or other digital devices to engage in conversation about news items with viewers in other taxis and buses.

13. Green Hornet - South Africa
    A plug-and-play toolkit for journalistic sources and whistleblowers, developed in collaboration with the Tor Project for use by investigative reporters in African newsrooms.

14. ListeningPost - South Africa
    Africa's first social media-focused newsroom will produce actionable information from citizen reporters. It will establish a customized Storyful dashboard that aggregates social media posts and will include mobile apps that commission and sell crowdsourced photos and news.

15. MoJo: Keeping media honest by monitoring online journalism - South Africa
    A user-friendly toolkit of analytical software for African media-monitoring projects and other civic watchdogs. It will help improve media professionalism by keeping the media honest, detecting online censorship and exposing plagiarism.

16. openAFRICA - Kenya/Nigeria/Rwanda/South Africa
    A digital document and knowledge management toolkit, coupled with the creation of a pan-African online archive, to house and search documents for investigative pieces. This kit will streamline freedom of information (FOI) requests to government agencies and then use semantic search and analysis tools to help journalists and the broader public assess these documents.

17. ODADI (renamed Code4SouthAfrica) - South Africa
    An incubator for watchdog journalism that embeds data scientists and programmers into newsrooms to build new data

desks and news APIs. The group will receive additional support from a local civic technology lab, which will provide trainers who help the reporters use data in stories.

18. Oxpeckers - South Africa
    A narrative mapping project that uses satellite imagery and geographic data analysis in stories to expose cross-border criminals and syndicates damaging the environment through logging, poaching and ecological degradation.

19. Wikipedia Zero - Cameroon/Ivory Coast/Tunisia/Uganda
    An initiative designed to boost original content from African news media for the new Wikipedia Zero mobile platform that is available free of charge to hundreds of millions of Africans, in 37 African languages, via either SMS or mobile phones.

20. ZeroNews - pan-African
    A simple tool for African news publishers to disseminate their content, free of charge, on mobile channels, including Facebook Zero and various Google platforms, so that they can reach a new generation of mobile news consumers in a cost-effective way.

For more, go to africannewschallenge.org.

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