

Big tech is painting itself as journalism's savior: We should tread carefully

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We've long been warned about the looming demise of traditional journalism in the face of digital disruption. But some tech giants, once the very disruptors themselves, have been positioning themselves as

journalism's saviors.

Programs such as the [Google News Initiative](#) promise not only to keep journalism alive, but by enabling innovation, to also help it adapt and thrive into the future.

Much of the media industry has welcomed this financial and technical support. For smaller, cash-strapped newsrooms, it can be life-changing.

But modern journalism is already heavily dependent on the platforms offered by big tech. Adding new financial dimensions to this relationship raises urgent questions about press independence.

We set out to explore how big tech's "philanthrocapitalism" could be reshaping the news industry, focusing on countries in the Global South, where such funding can play an outsized role.

Our [findings](#) suggest an emerging web of dependency between cash-strapped newsrooms and Silicon Valley's deep pockets. That offers some important lessons, both for media organizations and the tech giants themselves.

A double-edged sword

Big tech is now deeply enmeshed with modern journalism. Platforms such as Google and Facebook are at the heart of the way news is distributed, and new players like OpenAI are revolutionizing the way we create content.

These companies admittedly provide vital digital infrastructure that has enabled much of the innovation we've seen in journalism over the past decade. But they're also the entities that disrupted the traditional news business model in the first place.

Google News Initiative's [Innovation Challenge](#) offers selected news organizations grants to explore new ways of incorporating technology into journalism.

Launched in 2018, it has provided about [A\\$44 million](#) for more than 200 projects in 47 countries.

To investigate the news-tech relationship further, we conducted 36 in-depth interviews with media organizations in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East that received grants as part of this program.

The regions included in our study are all part of what's known as the [Global South](#), where relative political instability, the digital divide, limited funding and a lack of media literacy can all make news organizations more vulnerable to the influence of big tech.

Great ideas, tough to implement

Our [study](#) uncovered a wide range of exciting journalistic technology projects launched by the Google News Initiative's Innovation Challenge. But many struggled to progress beyond the initial stages or sustain themselves long term.

In Brazil, for example, two promising projects were ultimately discontinued.

The Lume app, [developed](#) in partnership with nine independent journalism organizations, was designed to make local news more accessible for people with vision impairments. Another, ConfereAI, used artificial intelligence to help users fact check the accuracy of links and short texts.

Both projects got off to a promising start. However, for financial and

technical reasons, their development could not be sustained after launch.

Across all of our respondents, three-quarters expressed difficulties implementing new technology. Many said they simply lacked the resources or expertise. This can create a cycle of dependency on further funding or support.

News and technology aren't an easy cultural fit

We also found many news organizations were outsourcing technical development to companies and individuals based outside their own country, such as the United States, Canada or in the European Union.

That might save money and time in the short term. But as a broader trend, it raises serious concerns about how well newsrooms are being empowered to build their own capabilities, and the potential for new forms of "[digital colonialism](#)".

Those that did try to hire locally faced their own challenges. Many media organizations, especially in Africa, struggled to pay high enough salaries to attract required tech talent.

Tech companies typically offer higher pay than many of these newsrooms can afford, often in foreign currencies like dollars or euros.

Some success stories

That isn't to say there weren't any success stories. Google even encouraged some organizations to plan for long term sustainability early on, including Stears, a legacy media company in Nigeria.

Stears' project proposed developing an easy-to-use subscription

management service. This would allow African publishers to implement paywalls and monetize their audiences without needing technical expertise.

Stears acknowledged the benefits of Google's advice to plan for the long term.

"If sustainability wasn't a major consideration from the beginning, things could have been different ... because the Google team encouraged us to prioritize sustainability from the outset, it will be a matter of returning to our normal day-to-day operations and aligning our expenses accordingly."

But this was unfortunately not a reality for many other projects that were ultimately discontinued. At least eight projects from the organizations we interviewed were phased out or never made publicly available.

Big tech is under pressure

Google has been criticized for profiting from news without paying for it. By promoting [technological innovation](#) in media, Google is positioning itself as a "philanthrocapitalist" organization.

Its initiatives are presented as support for the news industry, and help build goodwill among journalists, media organizations and policymakers. But we should be skeptical, because this strategy also serves Google's broader interests.

If being seen to fund innovation and training programs can deliver a more favorable regulatory environment, it might ultimately help the tech giant avoid stricter regulations forcing direct payments to news publishers.

Regulators around the world are increasingly throwing their weight behind such proposals. But in many regions, including [Brazil](#), Google has been pushing back hard.

Journalism must embrace tech, but carefully

To survive, journalism must continue to embrace technology. But doing so should never cost newsrooms their independence.

News organizations should prioritize building direct relationships with their audience to reduce reliance on third-party platforms. They should also stay informed about evolving regulations, and actively participate in policy discussions shaping the future of the news-tech relationship.

Google itself can still make a positive contribution to journalism. But our findings suggest that to enhance this program, Google should broaden its funding criteria to support a more diverse range of news organizations over a longer time period.

Support should also be extended beyond technological innovations to encompass newsroom operations and other journalistic projects.

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