

Empowering news organisations through technological innovation



By [Louise Marsland](#)

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Last year Google launched the Google News Initiative to help to build a stronger future for journalism by helping media to thrive in the digital age. This was followed by the GNI Innovation Challenge to aid publishers in Africa transition to digital. By making available funding in various regions of the world, Google hopes the GNI Innovation Challenges will empower news innovators, globally, to "demonstrate new thinking in online journalism and the development of new publishing business models".



Mich Atagana is head of communications and public affairs at Google SA.

Google also hopes that the knowledge generated from the various projects and shared with the wider industry will in turn grow digital journalism and the opportunities for digital publishers. We speak to Google South Africa communications and public affairs head, **Mich Atagana**, about the initiative.

■ *Where do you think the need exists for digital news startups in Africa? What is your key objective with the launch of the GNI Innovation Challenge?*

Today, news publishers in many parts of the world are grappling with questions of how quality journalism can thrive in the digital age. With economic models changing, declining print revenue, and new ways in which people are consuming news, unprecedented challenges are facing the news industry. These realities are not lost on African digital news players either. With increasing numbers of Africans turning to the internet for news, players in this space need the knowledge on how to best run profitable and credible businesses online.

Our key objective with the [Google News Initiative \(GNI\) Innovation Challenge](#) is to help news organisations meet the needs of their growing digital businesses, collaborate with them to solve important business and industry-wide challenges, and also support them to elevate and strengthen the quality of journalism.

■ *What are you looking for from applicants? How will you evaluate the entries?*

We're inviting proposals for projects to address increasing engagement with readers and/or exploring new business models in any form, such as subscriptions, membership programs, and so on.

The best part about innovation is that it can come from anywhere and everywhere. We want to make sure that all news organisations, large and small, legacy publishers as well as new entrants, have the opportunity to inject new ideas and shape the future of the industry.

The theme of the challenge is to increase reader engagement and/or explore new business models, such as personalisation, analytics, audio and voice applications, subscription, membership and loyalty programs. Projects can be highly experimental but must have well-defined goals and have a significant digital component.

Initial selection of projects will be done by a project team comprised of experienced Google staff who will review all applications for eligibility, innovation and impact. They'll pre-select projects and make recommendations for final selection to a jury comprised of Google staff and experienced industry figures.

A panel will evaluate the submissions and fund selected projects up to \$150k, with funding for up to 70% of the total project cost. The funding will be reviewed against several criteria, including a "sharing component" - for example, a project proposal can include publishing its findings or holding a public seminar to encourage applicants to share the knowledge and learnings to others.

■ *What do you think the values are that a news organisation should espouse?*

News organisations in Africa and beyond should lead by elevating and strengthening the quality of journalism.

■ *How can publishers make use of Google to boost readership and advertising revenue for their news startups and established news ventures?*

The challenge will focus on increasing reader engagement and exploring new business models in any form including subscriptions, membership programs, contributions and/or new digital products and services.

The challenge is open for news organisations of every size, including freelancers, sole traders and news startups and associations, that aim to build innovative digital media projects focused on increasing reader engagement and exploring new business models.

■ ***What is Google doing to combat the scourge of fake news and aid publishers in this regard?***

In the US, UK, Germany, and France, Google has rolled out fact-checked Search results. These are indicated by a small blue tick to indicate that information has been fact-checked. This helps assure readers that the information they are getting is accurate and verified. We are looking to expand this feature to more countries.

Locally, we work very closely with Africa's fact-checking authority, Africa Check, which won a Google global prize to work on how to best tackle fake news using AI. We have partnered with them on a number of activities around fact-checking in South Africa, especially around elections trends and content monitoring as well.

■ ***Explain how Google is aiding the free flow of credible information with the GNI Innovation Challenge, as well as other innovations.***

We've long collaborated with the news industry to drive traffic, increase audience engagement, and generate revenue. But there are legitimate questions about how high-quality journalism can be sustained in the digital age. The Google News Initiative signifies a major milestone in Google's 15-year commitment to the news industry. The GNI represents our largest company-wide effort to help journalism thrive in the digital age and brings together everything we're doing with the news industry to:

- Elevate and strengthen quality journalism.
- Evolve business models to drive sustainable growth.
- Empower news organisations through technological innovation.

More: about the [Google News Initiative](#).

To enter: the [GNI Innovation Challenge](#).

ABOUT LOUISE MARSLAND

Louise Burgers (previously Marsland) is Founder/Content Director: SOURCE Content Marketing Agency. Louise is a Writer, Publisher, Editor, Content Strategist, Content/Media Trainer. She has written about consumer trends, brands, branding, media, marketing and the advertising communications industry in SA and across Africa, for over 20 years, notably, as previous Africa Editor: Bizcommunity.com; Editor: Bizcommunity Media/Marketing SA; Editor-in-Chief: AdVantage magazine; Editor: Marketing Mx magazine; Editor: Progressive Retailing magazine; Editor: BusinessBrief magazine; Editor: FMOG Files newsletter. Web: www.sourceagency.co.za.

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