

22 'watchdog' projects in Africa win funding

innovateAFRICA.fund has selected 22 digital projects for \$1 million in seed grants and technology support to tackle issues as diverse as fake news and frontline war reporting, as well as innovative ways for watchdog media to use bots, drones and sensors to improve their reporting.



Image by 123RF

The projects, which include both digital journalism and civic technology ideas, were selected from 736 applications from across 49 African countries. Proposals underwent an intensive two-month technical review process that concluded this week with a final evaluation of the 73 strongest ideas by an independent jury of international experts.

"The world is facing challenging political and socio-economic realities. We need the media and other civic watchdogs to provide the checks and balances needed to help us navigate an uncertain future. It has therefore been fantastic to see not just the superb quality and range of entries, but also the diversity of ideas and collaboration that innovateAFRICA has fostered across the region," says juror and Omidyar Networks director of investments for Africa, Ory Okolloh.

Prior to joining Omidyar, Okolloh cofounded the pioneering Ushahidi crowdmap platform, along with a string of other 'hacktivist' initiatives.

Code for Africa is the continent's largest federation of civic technology and data journalism labs, incubated by the International Center for Journalists, with affiliate civic tech labs in: Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda.

Implementation plans

The 22 innovateAFRICA projects will spend the next month refining their implementation plans and budgets before receiving seed grants of between \$12,500 to \$100,000 each, along with engineering support from Code for Africa's civic technology labs across the continent. Projects will also benefit from business development and other strategic mentorship from global experts at the Media Development Investment Fund and Global Editors Network.

“We’ve selected some of the brightest innovators in this space to experiment with leapfrog technologies, but the real focus is to help teams build real-world solutions to real-world problems that can immediately be adopted and scaled by mainstream media companies and civil society,” explains innovateAFRICA founder Justin Arenstein .

innovateAFRICA is currently the largest fund for digital journalism experimentation in Africa, and is managed by Code for Africa, as part of the International Center for Journalists’ (ICFJ) wider data journalism initiative Africa. Arenstein is an ICFJ Knight International Journalism Fellow. While only 22 projects qualified for seed funding, innovateAFRICA will also help the other 51 shortlisted projects explore alternate funding, industry partnerships and community-drives.

The winning projects target a number of common themes: from ways to use new technologies such as drones, sensors and satellites to produce real-time reporting in difficult-to-reach places; to new ways to harness artificial intelligence (AI) and web robots (bots) for improved news gathering and audience engagement. A number of projects will also strive to improve visual storytelling in Africa, combining cartoon illustrations with viral video techniques, along with data visualisations and immersive storytelling that includes 360° and virtual reality imagery.

Fake news threat

“These projects represent exciting new approaches to tackling the challenges that face today’s media, both in Africa and around the world. The increasing threat of fake news is particularly troubling because it undermines the free flow of credible information that underpins modern societies,” says Jerri Eddings, a juror and senior program director at ICFJ. “We need innovative solutions to such problems, and it is heartening to see that innovateAFRICA has surfaced so many creative ideas for facing these challenges.”

The grantees are:

1. afriBOT, by the European Journalism Centre, The Source (Namibia , Zimbabwe)

"We will build an open source newsbot to help African news organisations deliver personalised news and engage more effectively with audiences via messaging platforms."

2. africanDRONE, by WeRobotics, UnequalScenes (pan-Africa)

"We will establish Africa's first drone journalism hub, in Tanzania, as the basecamp for the continent wide africanDRONE community of certified drone journalists, mappers, and storytellers."

3. ATLAS, by Quartz Africa, Atlantic Media (pan-Africa)

"We will bring Quartz's chart-building and data visualisation platform, Atlas, to newsrooms and organisations across Africa for free, and will build a database of Africa-focused data sources and visualisation templates to make data journalism more accessible."

4. Blast Tracker, by Sophie Tremblay (Tanzania)

"We will establish Africa's first investigative sensor journalism initiative, installing underwater microphones along Tanzania's coast to track and map explosions from dynamite fishing in real-time, supported by camera drones to speedily identify and track boats involved in the explosions."

5. Bot Starter-Kit, by HEI-DA.org (pan-Africa)

"We will develop an easy-to-use sensor journalism starter-kit for small to medium sized African newsrooms"

that will include hardware/software, to help journalists establish their first 'citizen data' projects."

6. #CartooNews, by AfriCartoons (pan-Africa)

"We will digitise the existing AfriCartoons archive of 1000s of news cartoons and will redevelop our existir fanbase of 400,000 people on Facebook to supply African online audiences with ready-made and bespoke graphic content: editorial cartoons, comics, animations, caricatures, illustrations, and line-drawn infographics."

7. CHECK, by PesaCheck & Meedan (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda)

"We will implement a cloud-based workflow system and collaborative workbench for the regional PesaChe fact-checking network to improve news verification in three East African countries."

8. CitizenScience, by Open Data Durban (South Africa)

"We will create a citizen science network in Durban's shantytowns that uses air and waterquality sensors to boost data-driven science journalism and real-time civic activism, through a network of clubs at schools an civic labs for adults."

9. DollarStreet Africa, by Gapminder Foundation (Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania)

"We live in a globally connected world. But we do not understand it, and it scares us. DollarStreet will expa its use of photos as data to show how people on the same income level live very similar lives across Africa and the globe."

10. ENGAGE, by Engage Video Group (South Africa)

"We will use our proven expertise at creating viral audiences around social video to build an African versio of BuzzFeed/Vice that combines hard-hitting journalism with video-first formats."

11. FOI Portal, by mySociety, Article 19 East Africa (Kenya)

"We will launch East Africa's first online portal for Freedom of Information (FOI) requests in Kenya to help journalists and citizens use new access to information legislation to create high-impact public interest stories."

12. FRONTLINE, by African Defence Review (South Africa)

"We will transform the well-established African Defence Review (ADR) into an African version of <https://www.bellingcat.com/> that uses satellite images and other digital 'open intelligence' sources to shine light on African war zones and the murky economies that fund conflict."

13. Graphic Journalism Hub, by ONA Systems (Tanzania)

"We will establish Africa's first Graphic Journalism hub for visual storytelling, using graphic novel /comic animations, to produce news as mobile-optimised social video and graphic novels for multiple African mex partners."

14. Hospital Helper, by Health-E News (South Africa)

"We will create South Africa's first geo-data tools and journalism for checking the safety/health rating of yo local hospital or clinic, based on official government audits or inspection results."

15. InfoFinder, by AfricaCheck (Kenya, Nigeria , South Africa, Senegal)

"Africa is awash in unverified data. We will further develop AfricaCheck's 'info finder' tool by expanding th number of pre-verified data sources to help media and the public to check claims."

16. LiveWire, by Grass Root Nation (South Africa)

“Mainstream media is out of touch with grassroots communities. We will build on our popular petition and community mobilisation tools to create a crowdsourced ‘PR Wire’ service that alerts mainstream broadcast and print media about mass events (pickets, marches, protests) by grassroots communities.”

17. MembaO, by Code for Sierra Leone (Sierra Leone)“We will build West Africa’s first data-driven platform that uses parliamentary records and investigative research to strengthen citizen oversight of elected politicians and Parliament itself.”

18. MeshNews, by Outernet, DataZetu (Tanzania)“Much of Africa is still offline. Outernet will harness satellite and radio technologies to broadcast digital news and interactive data journalism content to rural audiences in Africa who don't have traditional internet coverage.”

19. NewsBot, by Atchai, Star (Kenya), Punch (Nigeria)“We will pioneer rapid-deployment news gathering tools using Facebook/SMS based chat-bots, that will help journalists quickly collect opinion data and eyewitness accounts through polls and surveys.”

20. Overlay, by Paul Watson, formerly of Storyful (pan-Africa)“We will tackle fake news and ‘post-fact’ information in the news reportage by creating a journalist-sourced verification information network integrated directly into social media platform timelines.”

21. OpenGazettes, by AfriLII, the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (Nigeria)“Government gazettes are a goldmine of actionable information. We will liberate Nigeria’s gazettes by digitising and turning them into structured searchable data for free access by journalists, activists and business users.”

22. DECLARE, by Media Monitoring Africa (South Africa)“We will create Africa’s first interactive site for journalists and media organisations to disclose their interests to help combat conflicts of interest and to help fact-checkers identify credible media professionals in their fight against fake news.”