

Tipsheet: Building a Sustainable Investigative Journalism Organisation — Lessons from Africa Uncensored

Investigative journalism is critical for accountability, but it is also one of the most expensive and high-risk genres to produce. Africa Uncensored's experience offers practical lessons on how mission-driven media can build long-term sustainability beyond donor funding.

Africa Uncensored is registered as a company limited by guarantee, which means that in Kenya, it operates as a non-profit-distributing entity without shareholders. Any surplus is reinvested back into the organisation rather than paid out as dividends. A key feature of this kind of structure is that it has no 'private owners', and exists solely to serve its mission.

This structure has the benefit of maintaining transparency and independence through:

- **Greater flexibility for generating revenue:** A company structure allows faster creation of commercial products and services, from documentaries to training to content partnerships.
- **Ability to own and grow equity:** Founders and staff can build value in the business, making long-term commitment more viable.
- **Access to commercial markets:** Broadcasters, streaming platforms, and corporate partners often prefer contracting with companies rather than NGOs.
- **Independence from donor cycles:** A for-profit structure helps diversify income and reduces dependency on grants that can shift with donor priorities.
- **Long-term sustainability:** A company can accumulate assets and reinvest profits — building a future-proof model for investigative reporting.

The Hybrid Model: Mission + Market

As the leading investigative journalism outlet in Kenya, we see ourselves as a mission-driven company, using commercial work to fund public-interest journalism.

Our key revenue streams include:

- Commissioned investigative documentaries
- Film and video production services
- Syndication and licensing of content
- Training programs and newsroom capacity-building
- Strategic grant partnerships that align with editorial goals

We see commercial revenue as a way to strengthen editorial independence.

How to Build Stable, Long-Term Funding

- **Diversify revenue:** Combine commercial, donor, and audience sources to avoid reliance on one stream.
- **Partner strategically:** Work with clients and donors who respect your editorial values.

- **Engage your audience:** Figure out how your audience can easily contribute to your work, through things like memberships, events, screenings, member-only newsletters and crowdfunding platforms for community-building and sustainable income sources.
- **Leverage investigations and publish them in multiple formats:** Repackage, license, or extend journalism across platforms for added value.

Invest in a multi-skilled team

Investigative newsrooms need both editorial and business capacity:

Editorial & Technical Skills

- Investigative reporting
- Data journalism
- Documentary production
- Video editing, animation, and visual storytelling

Business Skills

- Pitching and proposal writing
- Client management and negotiation
- Marketing and distribution
- Understanding audience analytics

As you engage your team, you need to look for people who can bridge storytelling with business development.

Build a Business Mindset in the Newsroom

- Experiment! Try out innovative content formats, find what sticks, and don't limit yourself
- Reward your existing audience which stays around and keeps supporting you, while finding new audiences and revenue opportunities
- Use data (eg. views, retention, engagement) to guide strategy
- Track which content did well, what you monetised best and what your audiences gravitated most to, and find out why they worked. Do your best to replicate this success
- Regularly evaluate for impact. Set metrics early, and make sure the data actually shows what is working, not what you **think** is working. Having lots of social media followers, for example, shows that you're popular, but if this does not translate into subscriptions, then it doesn't count.

What's Working for Africa Uncensored

Africa Uncensored has been able to not only uphold its reputation for investigative excellence but also to navigate industry challenges with agility. For 10 years now, we have managed to do this thanks to:

- A strong brand built on credibility and high-quality investigations
- A growing network of local and international collaborations and co-productions
- A diversified pipeline of revenue-generating projects, accounting for 20% of our revenue

This has enabled us to maintain investigative output despite the shrinking donor space, shifting priorities for platforms and funders, and an increasingly fragmented

media landscape. What sets us apart is the quality of storytelling, and our focus on what the audience needs to know about the news – giving them much needed context.

By leveraging this established credibility, our partnerships, and a diversified project portfolio, we have been able to adapt to evolving market conditions and audience needs, ensuring the continued delivery of impactful journalism.

We also have a 5-year strategy in place for 2026-2030 that aims to increase the proportion of revenue that comes from commercial partnerships, innovating within the investigative journalism space locally, unlocking new opportunities across the continent to tell meaningful and important stories in order to adapt in the local and global media landscapes.

Core Strengths Driving Success

Credibility and Brand Reputation

Africa Uncensored has established a strong brand identity characterized by its commitment to credibility and the production of high-quality investigative journalism. This reputation not only builds trust with audiences but also reinforces the organization's position as a leading voice in the media landscape.

Expanding Collaborative Networks

The organization continues to grow its network of both local and international co-productions. By partnering with diverse stakeholders, Africa Uncensored enhances its reach, shares expertise, and brings a wider range of stories to its audience.

Diversified Revenue Generation

Africa Uncensored maintains a diversified pipeline of projects that generate revenue. This approach reduces reliance on any single funding source and supports long-term sustainability, enabling the organization to pursue impactful investigative work.

Sustaining Investigative Output

Despite facing a shrinking donor space, Africa Uncensored demonstrates resilience and adaptability by maintaining its investigative output. This ability to continue producing meaningful journalism under financial constraints highlights the team's dedication and resourcefulness.

Unlocking the Next Level

In order to grow, adapt and thrive in the current media environment, mission-driven newsrooms doing investigative work need:

- Capital investment for equipment, studios, and tech
- Dedicated business development capacity
- Audience monetization tools (membership platforms, payment systems, CRM)
- Regional expansion strategies, starting with co-productions and growing into more meaningful collaborations
- Safety and legal defence support for investigative reporters

Key Lessons for Media Entrepreneurs

From our experience, the media can be a tough space to venture into, needing tenacity and adaptability. You will need to:

- Think beyond grants. While grant funding may help you to operate, grants end, priorities change, and you will need to keep up. Figure out how to package and sell your product to a willing audience.
- Think like creators, not just journalists: build products people want.
- Learn how to run your newsroom teams using basic business and negotiation skills. You have a product, and your audience (often) has the money. The product gets the money that will enable you to produce more of the product, so find that sweet spot.
- Figure out your business model. Hybrid models (commercial + donor + audience) are more resilient.

Sustainability is the strongest safeguard for editorial independence. You shouldn't produce what you can't sustain.