



## DIGITAL NEWS TRANSFORMATION FUND

### Applicant Guidance: Lessons from Rounds 1 and 2

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This guidance draws on patterns observed across successful applications in the Fund's first two funding rounds. Round 1 supported 21 projects. Round 2 supported 22 projects across all four funding categories: Ignite, Build, Grow, and Engage. It shows how funded projects demonstrated alignment with the Digital News Transformation Fund's objectives and assessment approach.

This guidance complements the Funding Policy and application form. It does not replace them and does not guarantee funding. Its purpose is to help applicants submit clearer, stronger, and more realistic proposals.

#### **Before you begin: eligibility and completeness**

Applications are screened for eligibility and completeness before they are assessed on merit. Both rounds showed that strong projects were sometimes held up at this first stage by avoidable gaps. Confirm the following before you start writing:

- You meet the eligibility criteria in the Funding Policy – available at [dntfund.org.za](https://dntfund.org.za) - including producing original public-interest journalism and operating independently of political parties and mainstream media companies.
- Your Press Council membership is current and in good standing, meaning your fees are paid up. The Fund verifies this directly with the Press Council.
- Your registration, tax compliance (SARS PIN), organisational bank account, signed founding documents, and proof of address for both the organisation and its governance members are ready to upload and not out of date.

Put these basics in place early. A strong project will not progress to Adjudication if the supporting documents are missing or expired.

#### **How applications are assessed**

Applications are assessed using a weighted scoring matrix approved by the Fund's governance structures. Assessors look for clarity, feasibility, and alignment with the Fund's objectives rather than ambition alone. These priorities held constant across both rounds.

Strong applications make it easy for assessors to see how the proposed project supports:

- Digital development and feasibility
- Financial sustainability and revenue diversification
- Clear audience benefit and reach

- Organisational capacity and governance
- Equity, diversity, and inclusion outcomes
- Public-interest impact and learning

Use the sections below as a practical guide to shaping your application.

## 1. Digital readiness. Show where you are starting from.

Assessors do not expect all applicants to be digitally mature. They expect honest self-assessment and an understanding of the digital environment in which you operate.

### What strong applications demonstrated

- **A clear description of existing digital activity**  
Applicants named their current tools and platforms, even when these were basic. Examples included simple websites, Facebook pages, WhatsApp distribution lists, or PDF publications.
- **Mobile-first planning**  
Projects assumed audiences primarily access news on smartphones and designed content, platforms, and formats accordingly.
- **Awareness of connectivity and data constraints**  
Strong applications acknowledged high data costs, limited bandwidth, or inconsistent internet access and planned around these realities where necessary.
- **Clear roles for each platform**  
Rather than treating platforms as separate, applicants explained how they worked together. Websites acted as content hubs. WhatsApp delivered alerts. Social platforms drove engagement. Newsletters supported loyalty.

### Weak versus strong example

#### Weak

*"We will improve our digital presence."*

#### Strong

*"We currently publish a weekly PDF and post headlines to Facebook. This project introduces a mobile-friendly website as the primary archive, with WhatsApp used for daily alerts to reduce data costs."*

### Questions to test your digital readiness

- Can you clearly describe your current digital footprint?
- Do you know how your audience currently accesses news?
- Have you designed for low-data environments?
- Does each platform serve a clear purpose?

## 2. Sustainability. Show how the work continues after the grant.

Sustainability scores are based on realism, not optimism. Assessors look for credible pathways beyond grant funding.

## What strong applications demonstrated

- **Multiple revenue streams**  
Funded projects typically identified three to five potential income sources, such as digital advertising, memberships, business directories, events, or sponsored content.
- **Clear sequencing**  
Applicants explained which revenue streams would launch first and why, rather than proposing everything at once.
- **Specific revenue targets**  
Targets were linked to current income levels and timeframes, not general growth statements.
- **Named partners**  
Strong applications listed specific partners and described what each partner would contribute.
- **Skills transfer**  
Projects invested in training staff or contributors so skills and capacity remained after the grant period.
- **Co-funding and in-kind support**  
Round 2 applicants could declare co-funding from other donors, their own funds, or in-kind support such as staff time or donated software. Declared co-funding, even where modest or in-kind, signalled commitment and a more resilient funding base.

## Weak versus strong example

### Weak

*"The project will create sustainable income."*

### Strong

*"By Month 9 we aim to generate R15,000 per month from local business listings, based on existing advertiser interest and current print rate cards."*

## Questions to test your sustainability plan

- Have you identified at least three potential revenue sources?
- Are targets linked to your current income?
- Are partners named rather than implied?
- What skills remain in your organisation after funding ends?
- Have you declared any co-funding or in-kind support?

## 3. Audience focus. Be precise about who you serve.

Applications scored higher when they served a clearly defined audience well rather than trying to reach everyone.

## What strong applications demonstrated

- **Clearly defined audiences**  
Applicants named specific communities, locations, age groups, or language groups and explained why these audiences were underserved.

- **Language alignment**

Projects planned content in the languages their audiences use and explained translation or editing workflows. Across both rounds, funded projects worked in a wide range of languages, including isiXhosa, isiZulu, Setswana, Sepedi, Sesotho, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, and English.

- **Platform choices based on behaviour**

Applicants matched formats to habits. Short video for youth. WhatsApp for rural audiences. Email for older readers.

- **Measurable reach targets**

Targets were ambitious but grounded in existing reach.

- **Clear access barriers**

Applicants named barriers such as data costs, digital literacy gaps, lack of local coverage, or misinformation and addressed them directly.

## **Weak versus strong example**

### **Weak**

*“Our audience is the local community.”*

### **Strong**

*“Our primary audience is isiXhosa-speaking residents in rural Eastern Cape villages who rely on WhatsApp due to limited broadband access.”*

## **Questions to test your audience clarity**

- Can you describe your audience in demographic and geographic terms?
- What language do they prefer for news?
- Which platforms do they already use?
- What currently prevents access to quality journalism?

## **4. Delivery planning. Prove the project is doable.**

Assessors look for evidence that the project can be delivered within the proposed timeframe and budget.

## **What strong applications demonstrated**

- **Phased implementation**

Projects were broken into manageable stages rather than attempting everything at once.

- **Specific deliverables with dates**

Deliverables were concrete and verifiable.

- **Clear responsibility**

Each major activity had a named lead or partner and a plan for how it would be executed.

- **Baselines and targets**

KPIs included a clear starting point and an intended outcome.

- **Risk awareness**  
Applicants identified potential risks and explained mitigation strategies.
- **Budget alignment**  
Every major budget item was linked to a specific activity or deliverable.

### Common budget problems across rounds

Applications lost feasibility marks when budgets were weighted toward items that were not digital transformation, such as office rental, furniture, or general overheads. Others requested equipment that exceeded the team's capacity to use it, or submitted a budget total that did not match the amount requested. Every line should connect to a digital outcome and to the people who will deliver it.

### Weak versus strong example

#### Weak

*"We will train journalists during the project."*

#### Strong

*"We will train 12 community contributors over three workshops by Month 6, budgeted at R24,000 for facilitation and materials."*

### Questions to test feasibility

- Are phases realistic for the term of your project?
- Are deliverables measurable?
- Do roles align with current capacity?
- Does every budget line connect to a digital outcome?
- Does the budget total match the amount requested?

## 5. Common features of funded projects.

Several themes appeared consistently across funded applications in both rounds.

### Transformation and inclusion

Projects clearly explained how they expanded access to journalism for underserved communities. Many were black-owned, women-led, youth-focused, or multilingual. Geographic diversity was intentional and explained. The two rounds were based across all nine provinces alongside several national platforms.

### Community engagement

Funded projects treated audiences as participants. They planned listening sessions, community events, contributor programmes, or feedback mechanisms.

### Capacity building

All funded projects planned for skills development. Training covered digital journalism, multimedia production, analytics, revenue generation, and management.

### Editorial independence

Each round asked applicants to describe how they ensure editorial independence and ethical journalism. A single sentence was not enough. Strong applications explained their editorial policies, the separation of ownership and funding from editorial decisions, their complaints and correction processes, and their Press Council or comparable accountability.

### **Governance clarity**

Applicants set out who is legally responsible for the organisation. Applications were stronger when they showed clearly defined roles to deliver and sustain the work.

### **Fact-checking and trust**

Some projects focused directly on misinformation. Others embedded verification practices, Press Council compliance, and transparency mechanisms.

### **Public-interest journalism**

Strong applications connected content to democratic outcomes such as accountability, service delivery, education, or local governance.

### **Ethical use of AI**

Use of AI is encouraged but not required, and the sector's caution about it is understood. Where proposed, AI supported journalism rather than replacing it. Examples included transcription, translation, analytics, and content personalisation, always with human editorial oversight, transparency, privacy protection, and ethical safeguards.

## **6. Tier-specific guidance. Apply to the right tier.**

Rounds 1 and 2 showed that tier choice affects the outcome. Some applications were stronger than their tier required and some were weaker. Read the tier descriptions in the application form carefully and choose the one that matches your current stage, not the one with the largest grant. Assessors sometimes recommend a different tier where the fit is clearer.

### **Weak versus strong example**

#### **Weak**

*"We are a print newspaper with no website and we are applying to Grow because we need the most funding."*

#### **Strong**

*"We are a print newspaper with no website. We are applying to Ignite to build our first digital platform, with a plan to grow from there."*

### **Read the section that applies to you**

- **Ignite applicants**

Ignite generally suits publishers with no website or digital publishing platform. If you currently publish through print, WhatsApp groups, or Facebook pages only, this is your tier. Focus on getting online and reaching your audience.

- **Build applicants**

Focus on foundations. Digital basics, governance, skills, and access. Advanced revenue projections are not expected at this stage.

- **Grow applicants**

Demonstrate traction. Show how you will expand audience and revenue using existing systems and content.

- **Engage applicants**

Demonstrate innovation. At this level, generic plans score poorly. Projects should show scalability, collaboration, or sector-wide learning.

## **7. Final guidance before you submit.**

Two rounds of funding point to the same conclusion. Strong applications share three characteristics:

- **Specificity**

Use numbers, names, dates, and evidence.

- **Honesty**

Acknowledging constraints strengthens credibility.

- **Focus on people**

Impact on audiences matters more than tools alone.

- Starting small is acceptable.
- Lack of scale is not a weakness.
- Lack of clarity is.

The Fund exists to support growth, learning, and transformation, not perfection. For more information visit [www.dntfund.org.za](http://www.dntfund.org.za).