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Google News Initiative in Africa and the Middle East:

The Influence of Platforms on Media Innovation

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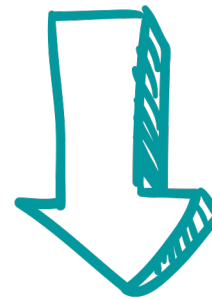
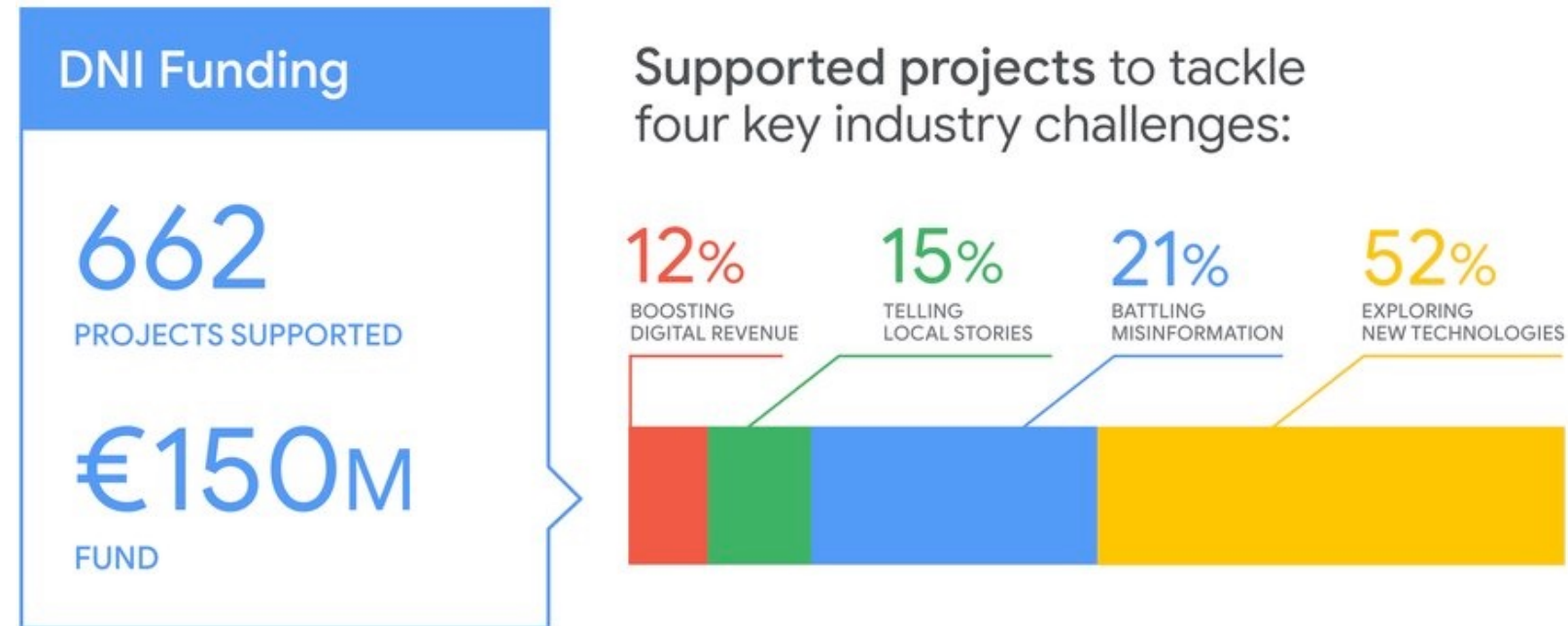
Platforms and Media

- Positive changes to reach & engagement (Kleis Nielsen & Ganter, 2018; Karlsson, 2011)
- Revealed & exacerbated weaknesses in media companies' business models (Evens et al., 2017).
- Platformization of journalism, infomediation, and dependencies (Kleis Nielsen & Ganter, 2022; Poell et al., 2022; Smyrnaiois & Rebillard, 2019)
- Philanthrocapitalism (Bishop & Green, 2008), platform regulation & the implications of platforms' funding for journalism schemes like the GNI (Newman, 2019; Rashidian et al., 2019; Papaevangelou, 2023)
- GNI Innovation Challenge (2018)
 - Strengthen quality journalism
 - Help sustainability
 - Empower technological innovation

Media Innovation and Responsibility

- Innovation is critical for journalism in the context of platform capitalism, yet there are significant reservations
- Responsible Innovation promotes acceptability, sustainability, ethical values, and social desirability
- RI requires a capacity to change direction or strategy in response to stakeholders, public feedback, or altering circumstances
- Four dimensions of RI: **Anticipation, Reflexivity, Inclusion, and Responsiveness**
- Limitations of RI

GNI Innovation Challenge



GOOGLE NEWS INITIATIVE

\$300M

\$300 million committed to the news industry, with \$189 million spent in 118 countries over the past two years.

\$40M

\$40 million for GNI Innovation Challenge and YouTube Innovation Funding programs covering 213 news organizations.

Research Questions



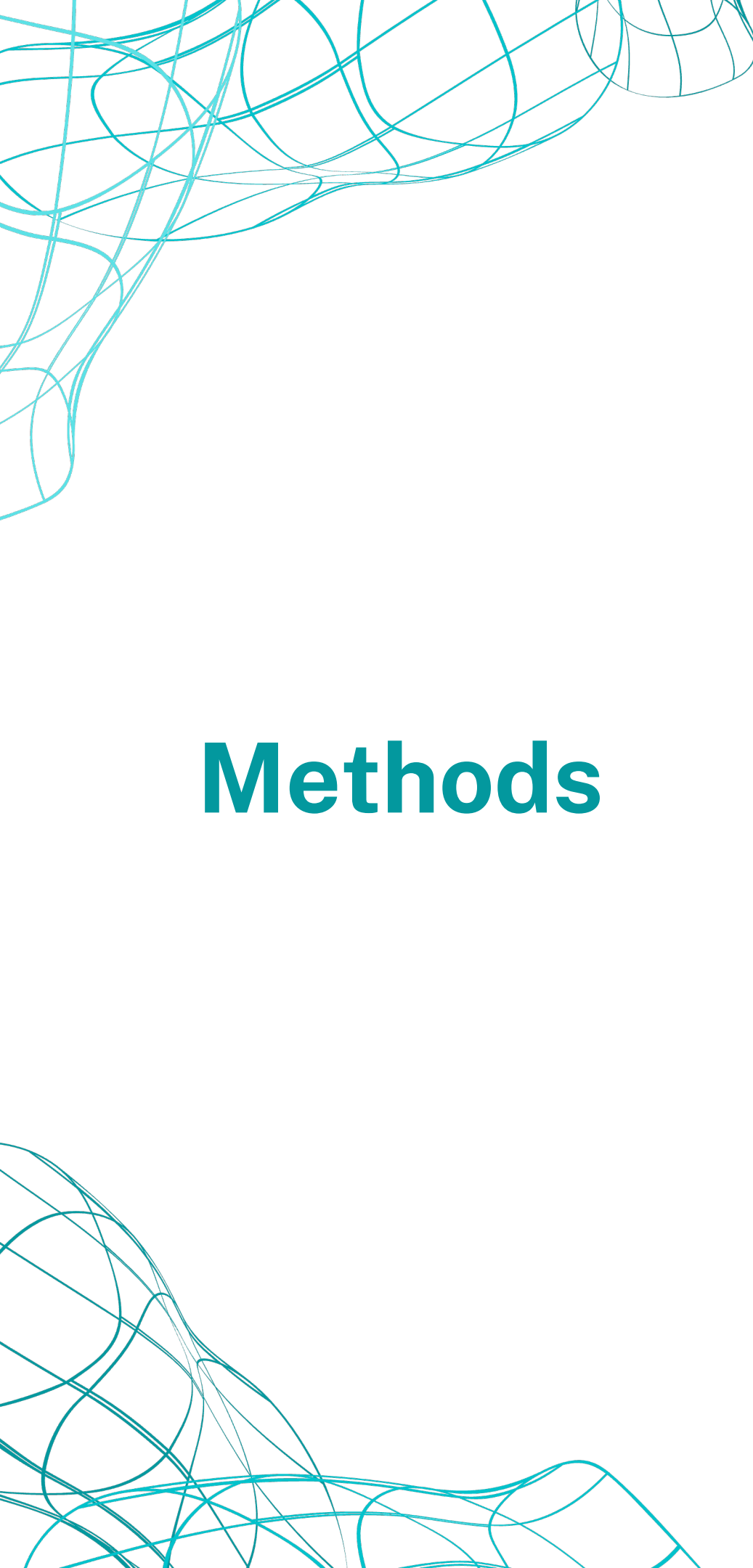
RQ1

What are the main characteristics of the technological innovations proposed by GNI Innovation Challenge grantees in Africa and the Middle East?



RQ2

Are these news media organisations becoming increasingly dependent on these platforms' technological and financial aspects? If so, how?



Methods

Step 1

Data collection

13 in-depth, semi-structured interviews in Africa and the Middle East. Analysis of project descriptions for each of these regions.

Step 2

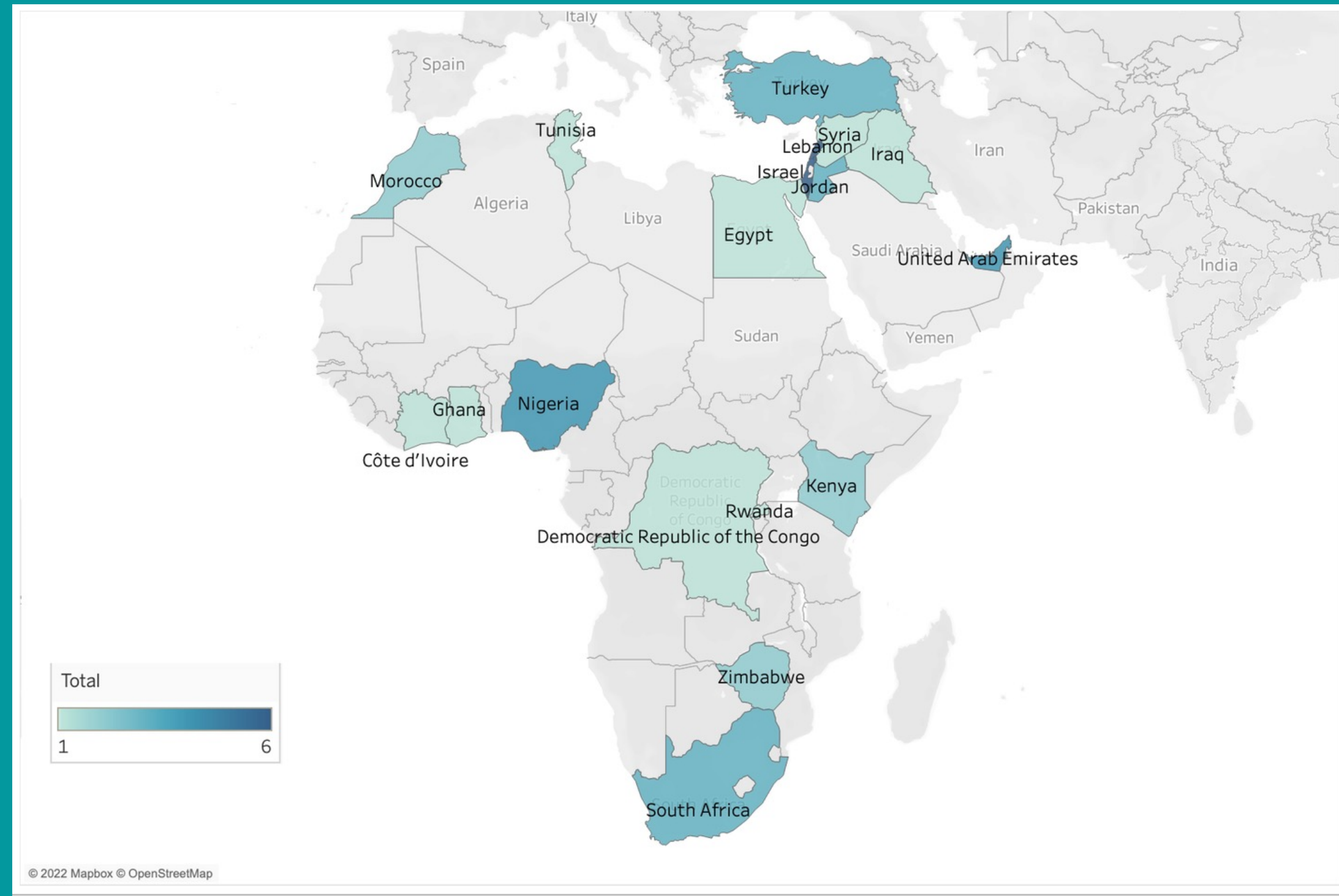
Data Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis using NVivo

Step 3

Reporting

Combination of emerged patterns with our theoretical framework to create a thematic narrative



Africa and the Middle East

Africa and the Middle East



AI-driven projects

In a scenario of a technological innovation, Latin America and Middle East organizations were the ones that most proposed AI solutions to help their business strategies. In the Middle East, a great part of these projects from 2021 and 2022, while in Latin America, this trend was higher in 2019 and 2021.



Immersive Technologies

Few projects mentioned immersive technologies, such as VR and AR. In Africa, FrontLineInFocus proposed the use of immersive technologies to shed light on the real life of people and children who live in conflict zones.



A new revenue source

These projects can serve as a test new financial models sponsored by Google. However, they also serve to sustain these organizations business models while developing them.

Africa and the Middle East



AI-driven projects

GNI Innovation Challenge has granted funds for 43 projects in Africa and the Middle East until 2021, with 22 projects in 2019 and 21 projects in 2021.



Immersive Technologies

Projects were categorized based on their aims: Technological Innovation (projects using emerging technologies like AI or immersive tools), Audience Building (projects focused on reaching new or niche audiences), and Business Model (projects aiming to develop new revenue streams or strategic goals).



A new revenue source

Most projects (42%) focused on developing a business model, followed by projects focusing on technological innovation (30%) and audience building (28%). Israel and Jordan had a higher number of projects introducing novel technologies, particularly AI solutions, in newsrooms.

Path Dependency and Power Relations

While news organisations fail to generate enough revenue streams to create sustainable business models, the reliance on “Silicon Valley for funding and organisational imperatives” (Poell et al., 2022, p. 12) initially appeared as a promising path for sustainability.

However, as some of these organisations highlighted, there are limitations to developing these projects in the region due to the lack of knowledgeable IT personnel, high hiring costs, and reliance on third-party vendors. As a result, most projects ended up being MVPs of their original idea.

Thus, tech companies set the terms and conditions, leading news organisations to adapt incessantly to their needs. This shows how the power and functions provided by “big tech” platforms, such as Google and Facebook, continue to pervade news organisations, sustaining power asymmetries.



Responsible Innovation

There is a discrepancy in the deployment of emerging technological innovations in Africa and the Middle East.

While North and West African news outlets rely primarily on the traditional use of technologies to create or develop tools to support their organizations' business models, in the Middle East, more emerging technologies are being deployed with this grant, particularly in Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon. In Southern Africa, the focus is on building new audiences

However, what Google does with the GNI Innovation Challenge is an extension of “philanthrocapitalism,” which Bishop and Green (2008) define as private wealth that “can advance the public good by applying entrepreneurial skills, speed, and score-keeping to our most persistent challenges” (p. ix).



Conclusion

- **GNI**

Google promotes its GNI Innovation Challenge aiming to “develop sustainable business models by diversifying revenue streams and/or increasing audience engagement” in the news industry (Google News Initiative, n.d.). What seems to be a promising solution to developmental gaps in journalism in fact holds great points of concern.
- **MVP**

Unless there are new funding sources, these products are born with an expiration date. Furthermore, most of these projects propose to build new products without a detailed study if they will be accepted by different stakeholders involved. Usually, top-down, large-scale projects are initially rejected by audiences, until they prove to be useful (de Hoop et al., 2016).
- **Responsible Innovation**

The grant-project promotes the development of emerging technologies in the news value chain by applying tech companies' business strategies to the creation of mainly novel products without addressing critical factors that could guarantee their success (e.g., four dimensions of the RI framework)

Thank you!

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