Digital News Transformation Fund (DNTF) – Application Guide

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About this application process
This Fund uses a simple two-phase application process. Start here and follow the steps below.

Steps
1) Read this Application Guide from start to finish.

2) Complete the Readiness Assessment. This tells you which funding tier (Build, Grow, Engage) to apply for.

3) Complete the Phase 1 Application Form on the link. Please refer to the online application guide for assistance with the system.

NB: Please remember to save your application regularly to avoid losing your data. The save icon is at the bottom of the application form. To retrieve your saved application form, click on 'Pending Tasks' in the portal, as indicated below:
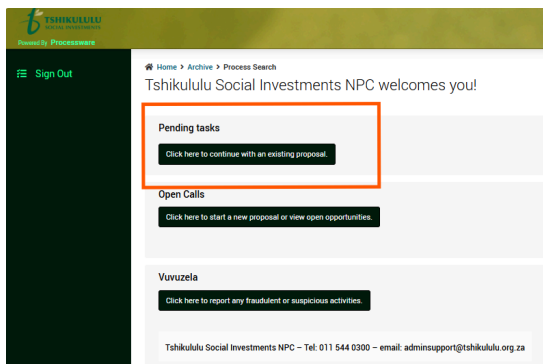
What each phase involves (high level)

Phase 1 (short form):
• Confirm basic eligibility (Press Council membership, tax compliance, audience profile, ≤1m monthly unique monthly website views).

• Describe your publication and audience.

• Input your funding tier (per the Readiness Assessment) and give a short project summary and high-level budget.

Note: Organisation-level documents are not required in Phase 1.

Phase 2 (detailed form – by invitation if shortlisted):
• Upload organisation documents (legal registration, founding documents, governance, Press Council proof, SARS TCS PIN, financials per Option A/B/C).

• Submit the full Project Plan (≤10 pages), detailed line-item budget and budget narrative.

• Provide any additional declarations and compliance confirmations.

1. About the DNTF

The DNT Fund is a partnership between Google and the Association of Independent Publishers (AIP) to support the digital transformation and sustainability of South Africa's small-to-medium independent news publishers. The Fund provides project-based grants and capacity building to strengthen digital operations, audience development, and revenue diversification in public-interest journalism. It is governed by an independent board of diverse industry stakeholders and experts; neither AIP nor Google has decision-making authority.

The Fund will provide comprehensive training, specific to each tier, along with a mentorship and peer learning platform for grantees to exchange knowledge, discuss challenges, and co-develop solutions. Therefore, training does not need to be included as part of project planning, unless there is some specific training relevant to your project.

2. Funding Objectives

The Fund aims to:

- Build core digital infrastructure and operational capacity.
- Grow audience reach, revenue diversification, and organisational resilience.
- Engage the sector through scalable, collaborative innovation that benefits the broader ecosystem.
- Advance equity, diversity, inclusion, and vernacular content.
- Support ethical, transparent, and responsible use of technology, including GenAI.

3. Eligibility Criteria

- Be a legally registered South African entity (for-profit or non-profit) or be fiscally hosted by one.

- Be a subscriber member of the Press Council of South Africa in good standing. Support/industry bodies may apply where the funded activities directly benefit publishers that meet (or will, through the project, meet) this requirement.
- Focus on original public-interest journalism and serve audiences through digital channels.
- Have less than 1 million monthly unique website visitors.
- Be tax-compliant (SARS TCS PIN).
- Commit to the Fund's monitoring, evaluation and reporting requirements.

Note: Publishers must have a dedicated organisational bank account (not a personal account) for funding to be processed.

4. Permitted Funding Activities

- Digital infrastructure (e.g., CMS builds, websites, mobile-first redesigns, analytics, SEO).
- Product development (e.g. newsletters, podcasting), data strategy, and audience growth initiatives.
- Revenue diversification (reader revenue, membership, ad optimisation, events, services).
- Organisational development and governance improvements.
- AI/GenAI adoption with ethical safeguards and data governance.
- Shared services, sector platforms, and collaborative innovations.

4.1 What the Fund will NOT cover

- Support for political parties or individual candidates.
- Political propaganda or party-aligned campaigning.
- Activities intended to influence legislation beyond legally permissible, non-partisan advocacy.
- Projects implemented outside South Africa (unless the beneficiaries are based in South Africa).
- Applications from unregistered or non-compliant entities.
- Organisations that cannot demonstrate minimum governance, financial controls or reporting capacity.
- Applicants who cannot commit to the Fund's monitoring and evaluation requirements.
- Retrospective funding for activities already completed.
- Expenses already covered by another donor (unless through agreed co-funding).

- Content aggregators, general-interest magazines without clear public-interest journalism, and broadcasting services.
- Consultants applying in a private capacity unless the project's beneficiaries meet all eligibility criteria.

5. Funding Tiers & Grant Amounts

The DNTF supports three project tiers. Multi-year (up to 3 years) projects are encouraged, subject to annual review and availability of funds.

- Build: Foundational digital infrastructure & sustainability basics — Max grant per year: R380 000
- Grow: Expansion of reach & capability — Max grant per year: R950 000
- Engage: Advanced, scalable innovations & sector lifts — Max grant per year: R1 900 000

NB: This is the maximum amount per grant per year and is not a guaranteed amount per tier.

5.1 Funding Tiers explained

Below are details on the three tiers and the types of projects that could be supported within each.

Build – foundational

- · Who it's for: Individual and collective beneficiaries with little or no online presence.

- · Goal: To establish a solid digital foundation and strengthen financial and operational sustainability.

- · Up to R380,000 annually for foundational digital initiatives.

    Examples:

    - · Contributions to technology infrastructure (e.g., hardware and connected devices).

    - · Ensuring adequate connectivity.

- Audience development strategies.

- Website development, domain registrations, and content management systems, mobile-first or offline-accessible platforms appropriate to low-connectivity environments.

- Use of GenAI and publishing tools (e.g., plugins).

- Organisational development for those facing acute sustainability challenges, including:

  o Strategic and digital transformation planning.

  o Training on digital tools and products.

  o Management training and development.

  o Market scoping and analysis.

Grow – expansion

- Who it's for: Individual and collective beneficiaries with a basic digital publishing product.

- Goal: To expand reach and digital capability.

- Up to R950,000 annually for expanding digital presence and capabilities.

  Examples:

  - Optimisation or expansion of websites, CMS, and publishing tools.

  - Development or expansion of content visibility programmes (e.g., SEO, newsletters, audio/video news).

  - Use and integration of GenAI tools.

  - Development of data and governance strategies.

  - Audience-growth campaigns (e.g., youth/vernacular focus), newsletters, podcasts.

  - Membership/donation funnels; CRM integrations; data strategy and governance.

· GenAI Use with guardrails; product diversification (events, branded content).

Engage – advanced & sector-level

· Who it's for: Digitally mature individual beneficiaries and collectives.

· Goal: To invest in new technologies that improve online reach, engagement, and business models.

· Up to R1,900,000 annually for advanced, scalable innovations.

Examples:

· Investments in audience engagement and reach (e.g., publisher and GenAI tools).

· Improvements to ad performance.

· Shared ad-sales networks; joint CMS instances; sector platforms

· Development or enhancement of reader revenue models.

· Creation of data and digital governance strategies.

· Cross-outlet content sharing initiatives; scalable infrastructure pilots.

6. Assessment & Scoring Process (100 points)
- Alignment with DNTF Objectives – 15 points
- Innovation & Use of Technology (incl. GenAI ethics) – 15 points
- Sustainability & Revenue Potential – 15 points
- Feasibility & Readiness (project plan, timelines, budget) – 15 points
- Organisational Capacity & Governance – 10 points
- Audience Reach & Engagement – 10 points
- Equity, Diversity & Inclusion – 10 points
- Impact & Learning Potential – 10 points
- Minimum score to proceed: 60 points.

7. Application Pack Requirements

Phase 1 – What to submit
- Completed Phase 1 Application Form (short form).
- Project Summary and basic budget (high-level only).
- Funding tier selection and project dates.
  - Note: No organisation-level documents are required at Phase 1. Phase 1 applications are open from 25 August until 14 September 2025.

Phase 2 – What to submit (if shortlisted)
- Completed Phase 2 Application Form (detailed).
- Project Plan (≤10 pages) using the template.
- Detailed line-item Budget + Budget Narrative (using the template).
- Organisation documents: legal registration, founding documents, governance structure & KYC for all governing members, Press Council proof, SARS TCS PIN (and Section 18A if applicable), proof of address.
- Financial documentation (choose Option A/B/C as per Annex 1).
- Declarations & compliance confirmations.
  - Note: Phase 2 applications open on 15 September and close on 28 September 2025.

8. Project Plan (Required Attachment for Phase 2 – use template provided)

Your project plan should not exceed 10 pages (excluding annexures). It includes the following sections:

- Executive Summary (max 300 words).
- Problem Statement & Context.
- Objectives.
- Workplan / Activities (start–end dates, responsible persons).
- Deliverables & Milestones (tie to Fund KPIs where possible).
- Timeline.
- Budget & Cost Assumptions (aligned with activities).
- Risks & Mitigations (operational, financial, legal, tech/AI ethics).
- Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Plan (indicators, baselines, targets, data sources & frequency, reporting cadence).
- Sustainability & Handover (post-grant viability).
- Ethical AI / Data Governance Safeguards (if applicable).

- Partnerships & Roles (MOUs/SLAs if applicable).

9. Monitoring, Reporting & Financial Compliance
- Bi-annual progress reports (narrative and financial). Use template provided.
- Audited financial statements for grants > R950 000; otherwise, independently reviewed statements or a funded external reviewer.
- Final impact report upon completion (aligned to agreed indicators).
- Case studies and learning outputs may be shared publicly.
- Site visits and/or virtual verification may be requested.

10. Grant Agreement, Disbursements & Use of Funds
No funds will be disbursed without a signed grant agreement. Disbursements may be made in two tranches per year, subject to satisfactory reporting and performance. Unspent funds must be returned or re-allocated with written approval.

11. Key Dates & Deadlines (2025)
- **25 Aug 2025**: Launch & Call for Proposals
- **25 Aug – 14 Sept 2025:** Phase 1 Applications Open
- **15 – 28 Sept 2025**: Phase 2 Applications Open (by invitation only)
- **28 Sep 2025**: Applications Close
- **29 Sep – 27 Oct 2025**: Adjudication & Due Diligence
- **27 October – 9 November**: Board ratification
- **10 November – 7 December 2025**: Contracting and disbursements (upon receipt of signed contracts)
- **12 January:** Training starts

12. Support & Contact Information
Website: https://dntfund.org.za
Email: dntf@tshikululu.org.za

Call: 011 544 0300 and ask for the Digital News Transformation Fund Administration.

Annex 1: Financial Documentation Options (A/B/C)

Please note that publishers need to have a separate bank account in order to qualify for funding.

Option A – Standard case

● Audited (or independently reviewed) financial statements (AFS) (≤ 18 months old) and bank statements for the last 6 months.

Option B – New/early-stage entities (< 18 months or no audit cycle completed)

● Year-to-date management accounts (IS, BS, CF) signed by accounting officer/CFO, and bank statements for the last 6 months.

Option C – AFS older than 12 months but ≤ 18 months

● Submit those AFS plus interim management accounts to most recent month-end.