DESIGNING A SUSTAINABLE MEDIA ORGANISATION: THE IMS BUSINESS MODEL CANVAS

A sustainable media organisation requires more than money. It needs a clear vision and mission, as well as the structures, capacities, and resources needed to sustain it over time. The IMS Business Model Canvas helps media organisations connect their editorial purpose, audience needs, organisational capacity, and financial choices in a coherent way.

This is particularly important in a media funding environment that is increasingly fragmented and uncertain. Resources may come from audiences, public funding, philanthropy, commercial activity, or private capital, but each source operates according to different expectations, timelines, and conditions. To navigate this complexity, media organisations need clarity about who they are, what value they create, and how their overall model supports both public-interest journalism and long-term organisational resilience.

There is no one-size-fits-all business model that works for all media. Each organisation needs to develop its own approach, shaped by internal drivers such as its mission and internal capacities, its relationships with audiences and other critical stakeholders, and external political and market contexts. The IMS model of a sustainable media organisation therefore brings together three core dimensions: a valued and differentiated offer that responds to the audience needs, a viable revenue model, and a supportive organisational model that is relevant in each market context.

These dimensions are interdependent and need to align. Before reviewing a business model, media organisations should have the following fundamentals considered and articulated, ideally in writing:

- Mission – why your media organisation exists
- Vision – its long-term direction
- Values – the principles that guide decisions and shape culture

🔍 Need help? See [Values, value, and impact handbook | IMS]

The IMS Business Model Canvas helps media organisations build a holistic understanding of how value is created, delivered, and captured across key components, including audiences, content, impact, revenue, costs, technology, data, partnerships, people, and processes. It serves as a critical framework from which further strategic planning can develop.

The Canvas is best used as an iterative tool. Media managers can begin with areas they know best – such as audience segments, editorial activities, or distribution channels – and build outward to identify connections, gaps, and opportunities. It supports reflection, strategic discussion, and practical planning, while helping teams understand where strongest values lie and where further development is needed.

The IMS Business Model Canvas helps align editorial, organisational, and financial thinking. It is not a fixed formula, but a framework for ongoing analysis, adaptation, and decision-making – serving both as a planning tool and a practical resource for strengthening long-term sustainability.

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IMS BUSINESS MODEL CANVAS

SOCIAL VALUE PROPOSITION

What is your unique offer?
Which of your audience's problems do you help solve?

AUDIENCE SEGMENTS

Who is your target audience?
Do you understand your audiences' content needs? How do you reach, engage, and grow your audiences?
What are your audiences' content-consumption behaviours?

DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS

How and when do you deliver content? In what formats and on which platforms? List them in order of importance.
Do you plan to use other channels? How can you use new channels to increase reach and offer value to your audiences?

ACTIVITIES

What are your key editorial activities and products? What are you offering through your content?

Where do your activities create the most value, and for whom? How do your audiences/customers benefit?

How does your content stand out from that of your direct and indirect competitors?

REVENUE STREAMS

What are your current revenue streams?
Which revenue streams are linked to your audiences (e.g. donations, micropayments, memberships or subscriptions)?
What else might your audiences, customers, or partners be willing to pay for?

What forms of advertising do you have and with what return on investment?
Which revenues come from other activities (e.g. services, paid partnerships, or products)?

How diversified are your revenue streams? What pricing strategies do you need to consider?
What is your capital stack? How dependent are you on grant funding, and what other forms of capital could work?
Identify at least two new revenue streams you want to test over the next 3-6 months.

The Entrepreneurial Journalism Playbook | IMS

IMPACT

What kind of impact do you want your journalism to have, and on whom? How will you measure whether your journalism has an impact? How will you know that you are successful?

Impact Framework for Media Projects Toolkit | IMS

AUDIENCE AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

How do you engage your target audience(s), both online and offline? What do you do to create a strong community of loyal followers? How can you further strengthen or grow your community? Who is helping you move forward?

COSTS

What are your main costs? List them in order of size (e.g. personnel, platform costs, AI tools, customer acquisition).
Which of your key editorial activities have the highest costs?
What is your budget forecast for the next 12 months?
What is your cost–income analysis?
Which of your costs are fixed and which are variable?
Are you wanting to grow – and if so, how?

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IMPACT

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Where do your strategic partnerships lie and what value do they create?
Who are your key partners and which are most critical to what you do?
Who are you dependent on? Who is dependent on you?
What roles do your key partners play (e.g. content, distribution, technology, revenue, funding)?

ACTIVITIES

DATA ANALYTICS

How do you collect and use data to better understand your audiences and measure content performance?
What challenges do you face in digital security, data collection, analysis, and storage?
How do these challenges hinder your efforts to generate revenue?
What technologies or digital tools can you use to collect, store, and analyse data more systematically?

DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

What digital infrastructure (artificial intelligence, software, tools, customer relationship management, content management systems) do you use to run your operations?
How does existing infrastructure enable your editorial, audience, and business activities?
What gaps or limitations exist in it, and what is needed to improve it?

MARKETING AND BRANDING

What market research do you have, or what do you need?
What customer profiles do you have (or need)?
How do you brand, promote, and advertise your media and its value, products, and services?

PEOPLE AND GOVERNANCE OF YOUR ORGANISATION

What is the organisational structure (ownership, legal status, management team)?
What is your registration status (e.g. non-profit or for-profit), and how does it shape your financial operations?
What skills does your team currently have, and where are the gaps? What are your team's strongest and weakest areas?
What does your leadership culture look like, and how is your talent pipeline evolving?

PROCESS FRAMEWORK

What takes most of your time?
How are tasks divided and tracked? How are decisions made within your organisational structure?
What technologies could help make your workflows more efficient?

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TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION	CONTEXT AND ENVIRONMENT	PROFESSIONAL AND ETHICAL STANDARDS	PROCESS FRAMEWORK
What technologies and artificial intelligence are actively used in your core workflows (editorial, audience, business)? What are the most important technological changes you face or anticipate? How do you decide on and approach adopting new technologies, including AI (criteria, process, key considerations)?	How do you understand, track and navigate the enabling environment around you? What political, economic, legal, and social factors affect how you operate? What constraints and opportunities do they create? What key external challenges, risks, or threats do you face (digital, physical, legal, political, economic)? How do these factors affect your operations, content, and sustainability?	What policies, regulations, and ethical standards guide your work? Who is responsible for overseeing them, and what gaps do you have?	

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