Thomson Media

MEDIA INNOVATION EUROPE 3.0

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

VALIDATION BOOSTER (VB)

Opening Date	2 July 2026
Closing Date (Deadline for application)	2 September 2026, 23:59 CET
Grant Budget Ranges	Grants for initiatives – ceiling of up to EUR 2 000 Grants for individuals – ceiling of up to EUR 2 000 Grants for media outlets / organizations – ceiling of up to EUR 3 000

1. Background

Media Innovation Europe: towards resilient public-interest media ecosystem (MIE 2026-2028) is a two-year programme co-funded by the European Union aiming to provide support to the European newsrooms and individuals through business needs assessments and personalised advisory, grants, training and mentorship to media managers and journalists that work or are building working in and building newsrooms that are moving towards a full digital transition. The project supports local, investigative, and community-focused media in adapting to digital transformation, diversifying revenue streams, improving audience engagement, and developing sustainable business models.

MIE's overall goal is to empower media outlets to navigate a changing media context, providing tools and guidance to align their journalistic products, business structures, and means of discovery and distribution in an audience-focused and sustainable way.

The project is delivered by a consortium led by the Vienna-based International Press Institute (IPI) together with the Berlin-based Thomson Media (TM), The Fix Foundation (TFF) and the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN).

The following countries are eligible to apply: All 27 EU member states as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Iceland, Kosovo, Liechtenstein, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia and Ukraine.

2. Objectives and scope of the Call

The **Validation Booster** is a six months long tailor-made acceleration programme for media outlets, networks, initiatives, media tech developers, and individual content creators (journalists) **who want to learn how to validate business ideas that drive digital transformation, enhance audience engagement, strengthen financial resilience, and introduce innovative production methods and formats.** The programme provides participants with the opportunity to explore and test new approaches, while diving into the process of rethinking a media organization's potential, sustainability, and feasibility in an evolving digital environment.

Over six months, participants engage in interactive lectures, workshops, practical assignments, and one-on-one mentoring. Built on startup methodology adapted to the media sector, the programme blends theory with practice and places a strong focus on digital services and products.

Successful applicants will receive:

- Financial support: Grants of up to 3,000 EUR for media organisations and up to 2,000 EUR for individuals and initiatives
- Expert mentorship: One-on-one coaching from experienced professionals
- Practical workshops: Up to twelve online workshops over four months

- Hands-on Validation: Two months to test and refine product or service
- Pitch Training: Guidance to craft compelling presentations for future funding and partnerships

Pre-selection of participants includes participation within the Ideation Lab Programme that serves as the project's foundational phase, designed to transform raw potential into focused, actionable media products. Through interactive 3 online workshops focused on media trends and technology, followed by an intensive 3.5-day in-person workshop, participants will work with an expert mentor network to explore pressing issues, discover genuine problems worth solving, and identify new opportunities for content and digital tools. By the lab's conclusion, participants will have narrowed their potential ideas into a single, polished concept, clearly defined their core hypothesis, and prepared a finalized pitch for competitive selection into the Validation Booster programme.

The programme targets individuals that can act as "intrapreneurs" – people who work for media outlets or CSOs with publishing activities and launching new digital products/services inside the existing entities. The ideal participant is a person (content creator, journalist, student) or media outlet team or network with capacity, capability and high interest in spearheading innovative initiatives and demonstrated commitment to participate in the programme.

Besides traditional media representatives and journalists, **we encourage media representatives such as individuals working part time for media organisations and/or those performing as individual content producers and creators, media CSO, media outlets, niche media/platforms, media tech developers and those building media products for the media industry** to apply as well.

After completing the Validation Booster beneficiaries will have developed skills which enable them to:

- Clearly define their idea/purpose;
- Test, validate and evaluate their business idea;
- Develop materials required to present and communicate their validated idea to interested parties and potential donors.
- Pitch their idea, if validated to wider pool of funders and investors

List of ideas that may be proposed for validation:

* Note: These examples are provided as inspiration. (We encourage you to think beyond them and apply with your own idea). Keep in mind that when defining your idea for validation, you should start by identifying a problem worth solving or an opportunity worth exploring in the market. Successful ideas are often rooted in a clear understanding of users' needs and challenges.

- An AI-powered membership platform that increases audience engagement while creating sustainable revenue streams.
- A community-supported investigative journalism model combining memberships, events, and audience participation.
- A data-driven newsroom transformation initiative using audience insights to improve content production and monetization.
- A multimedia content hub designed to attract younger audiences through innovative formats and personalized experiences.

- A platform for co-creation of content between journalists and audiences, supported by membership revenue.
- An integrated local media ecosystem combining journalism, community engagement, events, and digital services.
- An AI-assisted production workflow that reduces costs, improves efficiency, and enables the creation of new content formats.
- A niche information service delivering highly personalized content to targeted community groups.

To attend this programme applicants have to have a good command of spoken English.

The programme has a total duration of six (6) months and is structured in two phases:

Phase 1: Ideation Lab Programme (Pre-selection Phase)
28 September 2026 – 31 October 2026

Phase 2: Validation Booster Programme (For Selected Participants)
18 January 2027 – 10 June 2027

Participation in both phases is mandatory for participants selected to progress through the programme. The Ideation Lab Programme serves as a preparatory and pre-selection phase and will include three online workshops designed to help participants refine their ideas and strengthen their readiness for the Validation Booster Programme. Participation in the Ideation Lab Programme does not automatically guarantee advancement to the Validation Booster Programme. Only participants who demonstrate the highest levels of commitment, engagement, and progress in developing their ideas will be selected to continue.

*Thomson reserves the right, based on the quality and maturity of the submitted application, to invite certain applicants to enter the Validation Booster Programme directly, without participating in the Ideation phase.

Please note that the deadline for the application is **2 September 2026 23:59 CET**.

2. Profile of potential Beneficiaries

The Validation booster is intended for:

1. **Organisations** – media outlets, both traditional and online media, groups/teams of journalists with the status of a legal entity (e.g. associations, formally established networks, etc.) and non-profit media organisations in Creative Europe countries.
2. **Individuals** – media professionals, freelance journalists, entry level journalists, students and media content creators and producers and media tech developers.
3. **Initiatives** – actions of groups of professional individuals engaged in strengthening the role of underrepresented groups in the media sector, promoting quality

journalism, regional initiatives with focus on environment, health, human rights, or some other niche topics or areas of interest for their local communities, etc.

The applicant should consider eligible and ineligible costs when proposing the business idea and considering an amount of the total indicative budget in the Application Form.

Eligible costs including human resources, necessary audience and market research costs: travel, accommodation, outsourcing expert help, all validation process-related costs including piloting/testing activities such as events, episodes, platforms, focus groups, software etc., and renting equipment and space needed for the purpose of piloting activities.

Ineligible costs include costs for buying office equipment, construction costs, entertainment and excessive transport and event costs, restaurant bills or hospitality costs for personnel not directly participating in the project; bank costs charged by the beneficiary's bank for transfers from the granting authority; currency exchange losses; Taxi.

The activities should be implemented in the Creative Europe countries.

4. Available funding and allocations

The **Validation booster** grant process starts with this Call that will be open until 2 September 2026, 23:59 CET. Programme for selected participants starts from end of September 2026 *for those that are selected to pass first ideation Programme and will last till 10 June 2027 for those that will be selected further for Validation Booster programme)

Upon the closure of the call, all applications that fulfil technical requirements – eligibility check - will be evaluated by a jury. The jury will be evaluating the proposals against the criteria of Quality and Relevance, Potential and Social Impact, Digital Products or Services helping build future financial sustainability, Value for money. For details see subsection 4.2.

Following the evaluation phase media outlets will start with the Ideation program and if selected further for the Validation Booster a grant allocation will be made.

Minimum and Maximum Grant Award

Grant Budget Ranges:

- Grants for individuals – up to EUR 2,000
- Grants for informal initiatives – up to EUR 2,000
- Grants for media outlets / organisations – up to EUR 3,000

No co-financing from the applicant's side is expected or is obligatory within this Call for Applications.

4.1. Instructions for application submission

4.1.1.Application Form content

To apply for the Validation booster (VB) media outlets will need to send in an application via the Jotform platform.

Applicants will need to submit the **application form** including the proposed **budget** via this **LINK.** Application Form should be completed in **English language**.

The Jury will review the proposals submitted and recommend up to pre-selected 45 participants to join the Ideation programme and up to 15 for Validation Booster programme.

Any error or major discrepancy related to the Application Form instructions may lead to its rejection.

Applicants may submit up to two (2) applications, provided that each application relates to a distinct idea or project proposal. However, regardless of the number of applications submitted, an applicant may receive funding for only one (1) proposal under this Call for Applications.

Applicants who have previously participated in the Thomson Validation Booster Programme and received grant funding under that programme are eligible to apply under this Call for Applications. However, priority will be given to new applicants who have not previously benefited from the Validation Booster Thomson Programme.

4.1.2. Application deadline

The applicant must submit the Application Form **by 2 September 2026 23:59 CET**.

Applications submitted after the last deadline will not be considered for funding. The deadline applies to all parts of your application, including supporting documentation.

4.1.3. Clarifications, Questions & Answers

Requests for clarification should be submitted in English language to the email address below, **no later than 1 August 2026:**

NerminaS@thomsonfoundation.org

Online information session will be organised in due time. The session will be conducted in English. Information about its exact time, format and length will be announced and provided timely.

Applicants will be informed in writing of the outcome of their application. Non-selected applicants may request feedback on their proposal within 10 calendar days of receiving the notification of results. Feedback will be sent and limited to information related to the

evaluation of the applicant's proposal and will not include confidential information concerning other applications.

4.2. Evaluation and selection

The evaluation will be conducted in three (3) steps:

STEP 1: ADMINISTRATIVE AND ELIGIBILITY CHECK

During this step, the application will be assessed whether:

- Application Form is filled as per instructions provided in this Call and in the Application Form,
- All mandatory documents are submitted,
- The Due Diligence will be conducted through the Due Diligence Checklist which will be provided to the applicant within the Application form. Any missing supporting document or any incoherence between the declaration by the applicant and the supporting documents may lead to the rejection of the application on that sole basis,
- The requested budget amount is within the given threshold, and
- Clear consent if selected the applicant will be committed during the whole duration of the project - 7 months

The application that does not meet the above listed criteria will be rejected and the applicant will be notified accordingly. The application that passes this check will be evaluated further.

STEP 2: EVALUATION CRITERIA (PROPOSAL QUALITY)

The application is assessed based on these criteria:

Quality and Relevance of the Proposed Project (40 points)

- How well does the project align with the specified objectives?
- What is the level of innovation and originality in the project's approach?
- How clearly defined and feasible is the idea proposed?

Potential and Social Impact (30 points)

- What is the expected impact on the target community or audience by the proposed idea?
- How will the project/proposed idea address and solve specific social issues, needs or challenges?
- What are the potential long-term benefits of the idea, if validated?
- How well does the project/proposed idea promote inclusivity, and positive social change?

Proposed digital services and products helping build future financial sustainability (20 points)

- Whether proposed project/idea test some innovative modalities toward its digital platform and media? (i.e. introduce innovative production methods, workflows, content formats, or services)
- How the proposed project/idea contributes to the digital transformation of the media organization?
- Whether proposed project/idea have potential to help build financial sustainability?

Efficiency of Expenditures and Value for Money (10 points)

- How cost-effective is the proposed budget in relation to the project's objectives and expected outcomes?
- Are the expenditures justified and reasonable for the scope of work?
- Does the budget demonstrate a clear and efficient allocation of costs including human resources, necessary audience and market research costs and all other validation process-related costs?

The application that does not meet the above listed criteria will be rejected and the applicant will be notified accordingly. The application with higher scores will be recommended by the evaluation panel for possible grant awarding and subject to available funding. The Project reserves the right to propose budget changes to maximize budget utilization, ensuring that the principles of value for money and the overall project efficiency are applied.

Successful applicants will receive a Grant Agreement. The Project will ask the grant recipient to submit a post-grant report that includes a narrative description of project outcomes and a financial report backed up by eligible costs spent. The narrative and financial report template will be prescribed by the Project.

STEP 3: FINAL NOTIFICATION

The following is the indicative table of the application, evaluation and notification process:

Call for Application process	Date / Month
Launching of the Call	2 July 2026
Information session	TBD
Deadline for requesting any clarifications from the Project	1 August 2026
Deadline for submission of applications	2 September 2026 23:59 CET
Notification to rejected applicants on the results of the administrative check (Step 1)	7 September, 2026

Notification to applicants on the results of the qualitative assessment (Step 2)	11 September 2026
Grant Agreement Signature (Validation Booster programme)	January 2027

5. VISIBILITY

All project-related visibility activities will be carried out in accordance with the Project Communication Strategy. Grantees will be guided on Project's visibility requirements. Grantees will be required to plan and carry out communication activities in accordance with Project rules and procedures. Each media outlet or team that receives support will be briefly introduced, with a summary of its project and details of its work accomplished during the project period. In addition, partners will also publish interviews and feature stories about the experiences of teams that took part in the program. All of this will be highly useful in terms of raising the profile of transformational projects made possible with the support of the consortium.

ANNEXES

Annex 1: Application Form including budget LINK