“Ten or five years ago this would not have happened. People were not ready to collaborate this way. This has now changed,” says Mounir Krichane, Director of the Initiative for Media Innovation (IMI), Switzerland.

The initiative is a consortium between, on the one hand, public and privately-owned media companies in Switzerland and, on the other, some of the most prominent research universities in Europe. The aim is to combine scientific research with professional practice to create breakthrough innovations that have real value for media organizations.

IMI was founded in January 2018. The first year was spent building the initiative and launching the first call for proposals, on misinformation and public trust. There’s money available too. The founders are financing CHF 700,000 (EUR 635,000) worth of research project costs per year, with some additional funding from investors and even public sources like Ofcom, the Swiss communications watchdog. The media companies also provide expertise and a first-hand understanding of the media environment. Two people work full time at the initiative’s Media Centre in Lausanne.

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(MOUNIR KRICHANE)
“The big challenge is that you are bringing in people from very different backgrounds to work on an initiative they are co-financing and from which they all want to gain something. It’s one of the challenges but also one of the success factors,” says Krichane.

“We were very lucky to have the right people who were smart enough and open-minded enough to come together, sit at the table, and start to collaborate.”

Mounir Krichane, a former applied researcher who built cutting-edge distributed wireless weather sensors at EPFL and who also has experience with RTS and its Digital Lab, underlines the applied nature of the projects IMI is funding.

“Any project funded has to come up with something that’s beneficial to media.” All partners share the results of the research, even if only one of them acts as the media partner.

Founding members include SRG-SSR, a private media group Ringier, technical university EPFL of Lausanne and the universities of Geneva, Lausanne and Neuchâtel, through their common platform Triangle Azur. Others have since joined. EPFL competes with the likes of Cambridge, Oxford and ETH Zurich for the top European spots in university rankings in the field of engineering and technology.

According to Krichane, both private and public media now understand that this kind of common initiative is needed. Digital transformation has resulted in both societal and business pressures that threaten the future of established organizations. “People are more inclined to collaborate because of that. Everybody has understood that they can’t do it on their own.”

The initiative’s first call for proposals was on the subjects of fake news and public trust. Close to 30 came in; 10 candidates were then asked to submit a full application. Six projects have now been launched, and four of them use sophisticated machine-learning models to deliver practical solutions for partner media organizations.

SRG is media partner for two of the published projects, both of which use machine learning and data science. The first uses deep-learning techniques to reduce the risk of picking false or irrelevant content in automatic aggregations. The second call for proposals has already been published, specifically looking for projects to strengthen the relationship between media organizations and their audiences. Projects involving new approaches for content recommendations and predicting audience needs would be especially welcome.

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https://www.media-initiative.ch/