



**SSRC** | Social Data  
Initiative

## *Requests for Proposals*

# **Social Media and Democracy Research Grants**

**Date of RFP posting**  
**July 11, 2018**

**Last date revised**  
**July 11, 2018**

**Deadline**  
**Rolling submissions with first review beginning August 9, 2018**

### IMPORTANT INFORMATION AND REVISION HISTORY

This program does not provide pre-submission review of proposals, but staff can answer questions about the program submitted to: [[socialdata@ssrc.org](mailto:socialdata@ssrc.org)]

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## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

### Overview

The longstanding study of media effects on democracy and elections has taken on new resonance with the rise of social media platforms, the dramatic change in the business model of traditional news media, changes in advertising infrastructure, and increasingly globalized and interconnected communications. Recent revelations about the unintended disclosure of industry data and spread of disinformation across national borders make clear the need to better understand the impact of social media on society. The **Social Media and Democracy Research Grant Program** invites proposals that examine the impact of social media and related digital technologies on democracy and elections, generate insights to inform policy at the intersection of media, technology, and democracy, and advance new avenues for future research. The initiative seeks to study these processes in an independent, transparent, and ethical way according to the highest standards of data privacy and academic research, to improve the lives of all.

Successful proposals may receive *research support* (with funds contributed by seven charitable foundations to the [Social Science Research Council](#), SSRC), *data access* (facilitated by Social Science One in collaboration with Facebook), and [peer pre-review services](#) (from Social Science One).

This RFP was written and defined by [Social Science One](#), in collaboration with SSRC, following the new paradigm for industry-academic partnerships in the [King-Persily paper](#). This RFP is issued by the SSRC as part of its [Social Data Initiative](#), directed by Jason Rhody. The research is funded by a group of charitable foundations including [Laura and John Arnold Foundation](#), [The Democracy Fund](#), [The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation](#), [The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation](#), [The Charles Koch Foundation](#), [Omidyar Network](#), and [The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation](#). The SSRC independently administers this research funding as well as the peer and ethics review process and, with Social Science One, manages the research process. [Gary King](#) and [Nathaniel Persily](#), for Social Science One, and [Alondra Nelson](#), for SSRC, work together as a Steering Committee to coordinate the activities of all participating organizations.

This RFP includes requirements that ensure research will be conducted in a transparent, accountable, and ethical way; that the findings will meet the highest standards of social science; and that scientific results are disseminated in a manner that can be appreciated by nonspecialist and scholarly audiences alike.

### Timing

Proposals will be accepted on a rolling basis, with the first period of review beginning August 9, 2018.

## Research Scope

The **Social Media and Democracy Research Grant Program** invites applications from researchers worldwide who wish to access privacy-preserving data from Facebook and who are committed to developing a sound and credible knowledge-base of research on the role of social media in elections and in democracy more generally.

Proposals reviewed beginning on August 9, 2018 are for the purpose of analyzing the *Facebook URL Shares* dataset within the *initial scope of research* (see below). Data documentation, the availability of new datasets, and expansions in allowable research scope, can be found, and will be updated, at [SocialScience.One](#). When available, applicants may apply for access to more than one dataset in a proposal, always through the [SSRC grant application process](#).

The *initial research scope* includes observational (i.e, for now, non-experimental) research studying the effect of social media and related digital technologies on democracy and elections. This may include disinformation, polarization, election integrity, civic engagement, political advertising, or other related areas. The goal of such research should be to better understand the effect of social media and other digital technologies, and to investigate fundamental scientific questions concerning political communication in the digital age. The focus for this initial RFP should not be investigating internal corporate policies, decisions, or product development, and it should be for scientific purposes, not for purposes of advocacy, journalism, investigation of individuals, or research for competitors. Proposals must engage with questions of real-world, practical importance.

The dataset(s) currently available for research are:

- Facebook URL Shares dataset; see [SocialScience.One](#) for details.

## Permitted Analyses of Facebook Data

The use of Facebook data is governed by many legal, administrative, and terms of service rules protecting customer privacy, proprietary data, and other information. Therefore, as with many data access protocols using private government data, proposals must be explicit about the quantities they are trying to estimate and (at least roughly) the statistical procedures that will be used to analyze them. *Researchers are only permitted to perform the analyses, and estimate the quantities, that are proposed and approved; new types of analyses and quantities to estimate require additional applications.* All analyses, and all code applied to data provided by this project are subject to monitoring and audit under supervision of Social Science One and Facebook. Grantees and their institutions will be required to sign legal contracts agreeing to these rules and to penalties for violating them. Grantees and their institutions will be required to sign a data use agreement with Facebook developed for this project (a copy of which will be available at [SocialScience.One](#)). All grantees are also required to sign a sponsored research agreement, a conflict of interest statement, and a grant award agreement with the SSRC.

## Award Information

Depending on what is requested and approved, awards may provide data access (from Social Science One and Facebook), funding (from SSRC), and peer pre-review services (from Social Science One). Funding is awarded to the applicant via their institution to cover costs of research. Eligible expenses are outlined in the Budget section, below.

To efficiently manage the grant application process, a Principal Investigator may have only one proposal pending to SSRC review at a time, but may participate in other proposals in other roles. Researchers may only apply for datasets available, or formally scheduled for access, at the time of application.

All proposals will be subject to additional security and ethical scrutiny as outlined in the Evaluation Criteria section below.

Applicants must demonstrate the technical and methodological skill base to effectively work with large, complex data sets and a commitment to data privacy.

Proposals must also have received prior approval from the applicant's Common Rule-compliant Institutional Review Board (IRB), federally approved IRB, or international equivalent. Scholars from developing nations may request an exception to the pre-approval requirement. While an IRB equivalent will still be required to gain access to and conduct research on the dataset(s), these scholars can request guidance and financial assistance (in the project budget proposal) in applying for private IRB approval. The SSRC has developed a process to help streamline this approval, and applicants will complete this process as part of the Application Form, detailed below.

In recognition of the pressing nature of this subject matter, Social Science One, separate from Facebook and SSRC, is also introducing a new "[peer pre-review](#)" service for academics writing papers with the data made available through this partnership. Peer pre-review -- which takes place immediately after the first draft of papers are written -- provides scholars studying this vanguard area of research advice and feedback from experienced academics in advance of journal peer review in the hopes of shortening time to publication. Grantees finishing a paper draft should contact Social Science One (not SSRC or Facebook) for access to this private service. Peer pre-review is only for grantees of the **Social Media and Democracy Research Grant Program**, and is unrelated to peer review managed by SSRC during the proposal application process.

## Eligibility

- Applications are welcome from university researchers (or collaborative teams that include scholars from elsewhere, so long as the PI is a university-affiliated researcher) who:
  - hold a PhD in a relevant discipline;
  - hold a formal affiliation with an institution of higher education, and can submit the proposal with the support of that institution as the Principal Investigator (see Letter of Support, below);
  - provide evidence that the proposed activities have been approved by a Common Rule-compliant University Institutional Review Board (IRB), federally approved IRB, or international equivalent, or meets the required criteria to delay IRB approval in order to receive financial assistance in doing so (for more details, see Award Information, above);
  - have a clear research plan addressing the thematic issues of the grant program.
- Eligible applicants may only request access to datasets available at the time of application. However, the Principal Investigator listed on any application may only submit one proposal at a time, and may only have one pending proposal at any one time.
- Research projects shall not be funded if their primary goal is to aid in the election or defeat of certain candidates or parties.
- At this time, proposals must be submitted in English.

## PREPARING YOUR APPLICATION & BUDGET

### Proposal Contents

All proposals should use no less than 1-inch margins (2.54 cm), with a font size no less than 11 pt. Proposals should be single-spaced.

#### APPLICATION FORM:

- Title: The title that you assign to your project should be brief (not more than 125 characters), descriptive, and informative to a nonspecialist audience.
- Abstract: Provide a one-paragraph description (of no more than 250 words) written for a nonspecialist audience clearly explaining the project's principal focus, questions, and expected results. (Abstracts for successful applications will be made public).
- Datasets: Select the datasets for which you are requesting access.
- Short answer questions:
  - Practical Importance of Project
  - Expected Outcomes and Products
  - Ethical and Privacy Consideration
  - Data Analysis Experience
- List of Participants If the proposed project includes any participants other than the Principal Investigator, list their names, titles, affiliations, a link to an online CV, and a brief description of their proposed activities. You must clearly identify which participants are requesting data access, as they will be required to agree to the same terms of service that govern data access.

#### PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

In no more than five (5) single-space pages, the project description must include:

- an intellectual justification and description for the overall project, aligning research questions and goals to the research scope articulated in the RFP, and the datasets available for research access;
- which available Facebook data, and any other data you obtain on your own, you plan to analyze;
- specific objectives or milestones;
- statistical or other methods to be used and why they are appropriate;
- a brief timeline of activities, including a brief description of work done in this area to date;
- expected outcomes, public dissemination plan, potential risks, and their significance to understanding democracy. See section V, Award Conditions, for open access and licensing requirements.

#### CV:

Provide a 2-page curriculum vitae (CV); this abbreviated CV should identify your current and recent appointments, education, and most relevant scholarly activities that would inform reviewers about your capacity to accomplish the proposed activities, including related technical skills and research projects.

#### LETTER OF SUPPORT:

The proposal must include one (and only one) letter from the applicant's department head (or equivalent organizational official of equal or higher rank) acknowledging the institutional commitment to process the award, adhere to the limits for indirect costs outlined in this RFP, and confirm that the applicant has successfully received IRB or equivalent approval.

#### BUDGET:

If financial support is requested, the application must include a budget specifying amounts (please detail the specific currency requested, or list in \$US dollars).

Eligible expenses include (but are not limited to):

- graduate or undergraduate research assistance;
- salary and fringe to support the PI or project team members;
- project-related travel (applicants should estimate transportation, lodging and per diem);
- additional ethical review (including private IRB review);
- article processing charges for open access publications;
- equipment (no more than 10% of total budget)

Funding requests may not exceed \$50,000 inclusive of any institutional indirect costs, which may not exceed 15% of the award amount.

#### APPENDICES:

The proposal may include no more than six (6) pages of appendices, which can include supplementary material like a bibliography, extended work plan, figures, or other material directly relevant to the proposed project. Weblinks to other materials are allowed if linked to public URLs available in search indices.



## SUBMITTING YOUR APPLICATION

All grant applications must be submitted through the SSRC Application Portal, located at <http://apply.ssrc.org>.

In order to apply through the SSRC Application Portal, you must create a unique login ID and a secure password. You may begin filling out a proposal, save it, and return to complete it at a later time.

## SSRC PROPOSAL PROCESSING & REVIEW PROCEDURES

### Review Criteria

Applications will be judged based on the following criteria, using the process outlined below.

- *Intellectual merit*: the intellectual significance of the proposed project and its capacity to advance scholarship and/or scientific understanding.
- *Feasibility*: the appropriateness of the proposed activities, methods, planned activities, and budget to accomplish the stated aims of the proposed project.
- *Qualifications*: the degree to which the participants have the expertise, skills, and knowledge to accomplish the stated aims of the proposed project.
- *Ethics and Privacy*: the commitment to and stated plan to meet or exceed standards for the ethical use of data, including the protection of individuals and their privacy.
- *Contribution to the Public Good*: the likelihood that the proposed project will advance the public good, the plan to disseminate project findings.

### Review & Selection Process

The review process has three steps. First, according to the highest standards of academic research, proposals will be subject to **peer review** managed by the SSRC. All proposals are carefully reviewed by SSRC staff to ensure that the proposal meets basic eligibility requirements and that the application fulfills all submission requirements. Each application is then reviewed by three to ten other persons outside of SSRC, either as *ad hoc* reviewers, members of the Review Committee, or both, who are knowledgeable in the particular fields, methods, or approaches represented by the proposal. The Review Committee, or some portion thereof, will meet regularly to discuss proposals and their review, and produce a slate of recommendations for support.

Second, the applications recommended for support will then undergo additional **ethics and privacy review** operated in collaboration with [PERVADE](#), a multi-institution project studying how a broad range of stakeholders is responding to research ethics challenges in data science. Each finalist proposal will be read in-depth by a pair of ethics panel members, who will create a review report, which will then be shared

with the PI. Reports will focus on flagging potential concerns and recommending best practices to mitigate potential harms.

Third, the co-chairs at Social Science One, acting like editors at a scholarly journal, take input from both prior steps, along with their knowledge as a trusted third party following the structure of this initiative, and make final **substantive decisions** about which proposals to support. Examples of the private knowledge the co-chairs have include ongoing litigation that would subject researchers addressing certain topics to legal discovery; proprietary information that change the likely importance of certain research topics; and complex privacy constraints that would be violated in certain types of data.

## AWARD ADMINISTRATION

### Notification of Award

The SSRC notifies grantees and makes funding awards.

### Award Conditions

Awards provide support for up to 12 months of access to specific Facebook data, subject to the terms and conditions outlined for each dataset. Access may be renewed following terms outlined at time of award.

Grant amounts vary depending on the proposal. Grants are intended to support the principal investigator, as well as his or her research team, if relevant.

### Reporting Requirements

Grantees will be required to submit a project report every six (6) months and a final report at the end of the grant period (if the award period is only 6 months or less, only a final report will be required). A final financial report will also be required.

Grantees are required to report research results and findings to Facebook, SSRC, and Social Science One. The SSRC will convey these findings to the public.

New drafts of academic papers must be provided to the SSRC and Social Science One as they are released publicly. They will be made available open access, subject to ensuring proper academic credit.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

For questions, contact us by email: [socialdata@ssrc.org](mailto:socialdata@ssrc.org)