Requests for Proposals

Social Data Research and Dissertation Fellowships

Date of RFP Posting:
April 23, 2020

Last date revised
April 23, 2020

Deadline
June 16, 2020

CONTACT INFORMATION

Please direct all inquiries to: socialdata@ssrc.org

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Overview

Ongoing work at the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) over the past several years, including our 2018 "To Secure Knowledge" report, has identified the importance of access to socially-relevant data in order for researchers to address large issues that inform, empower, and protect the public interest. Much of this data, including social media and the algorithms that determine how information is shared, is proprietary, held by private companies and inaccessible for independent research projects. While social media platforms are beginning to engage the broader research community, critical questions of public importance–such as the role of social media in democractic politics–need to be addressed now with available tools that meet the highest scientific and ethical standards.

The **Social Data Research Fellowship** and the **Social Data Dissertation Fellowship**, new endeavors of the Social Science Research Council, with support from Omidyar Network, seek to encourage multifaceted pathways for the collection and analysis of social data, with the larger aim of cultivating robust research on technology and society. In particular, we are interested in supporting research that makes creative use of available social data to investigate how social media interact with democracy and elections. Expanding ethical scholarly access, use, and analysis of a range of social data is critical to understanding the complex ways that social media and other technologies impact political life and processes.

SSRC invites proposals from scholars in the social sciences and related fields for the **Social Data Research Fellowship** and the **Social Data Dissertation Fellowship**. These fellowships will support research projects of up to 12 months in length that are focused on two key areas:

1. **Advancing scholarly research on the role of social media in elections and democracy, with an emphasis on the 2020 US elections,** including local, state, and/or national primary or general elections. Topics may include (but are not limited to) disinformation, polarization, election integrity, political engagement, political advertising, microtargeting, voter suppression, forms of algorithmic bias related to elections, the impact of news reporting and changes to the media ecosystem, or other related areas. Research that explores more than one social media platform or the relationship between social media platforms is particularly welcome, as is research that explores the disproportionate effects on the political participation of women and under-represented groups.
2. **Expanding best practices and methods for accessing and analyzing relevant data that can inform our understanding of the impact of social media on democracy,** including (but not limited to) new methods of data collection and sharing; exploring implications for data privacy and ethics; alternative proxy data to inform our broader understanding of proprietary social media data; and ethnographic, journalistic, or other qualitative approaches to data collection.

COVID-19:

The worldwide Covid-19 pandemic has rapidly changed the policy, electoral, and media landscapes related to the 2020 US elections. This grant opportunity's primary emphasis is related to social media and the 2020 elections, as described above; however applications that investigate the impact of the coronavirus pandemic as it intersects with the core themes outlined above are particularly encouraged. For example, explorations of policy debates, news, or disinformation circulated via social media on topics relevant to the 2020 US elections and amplified by circumstances related to Covid-19—such as vote-by-mail debates, health care policy, Covid-19 disinformation campaigns related to the election, and so on—are welcome.

ELIGIBILITY

The **Social Data Research Fellowship** program is open to researchers who hold a PhD in a relevant discipline and are based at an institution of higher education (college or university) or a non-profit focused on social research. These awards may not exceed $50,000 US.

The **Social Data Dissertation Fellowship** program is open to PhD students who are actively enrolled in a PhD program, who may apply for awards of up to $15,000 US in support of dissertation research. Applicants to the program should have completed all PhD coursework by the beginning of the fellowship term.

Applicants whose primary research affiliation is to a partisan organization are not eligible, nor are projects with a primarily partisan rather than scientific objective.

Applicants should be prepared to provide evidence that their research project will be reviewed by a Common Rule-compliant University Institutional Review Board (IRB) or the international equivalent. However, IRB review is not required at the time of application.

For information about the review process and criteria, please see "Review Process and Criteria" below. The Review Committee will be composed of members of the SSRC Social Data Initiative (SDI) advisory committee, advanced scholars, and expert practitioners.

All approved proposals will be subject to the SSRC's Ethics Review Framework (see **FAQ**).

While applicants are not restricted from working directly with corporations and proprietary data, applicants should disclose any relevant restrictions on data use, including but not limited to non-disclosure agreements (NDAs), data use agreements, pre-publication review, or other restrictions.

PROPOSAL REQUIREMENTS

To submit a proposal and view the required application form, please visit: http://apply.ssrc.org. You may begin a proposal and save your progress at any time until final submission.

The proposal requires the following:
- Application Form
- Project Narrative
- Data Management Plan
- CV
- Budget
- Letter of Affiliation

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:

Applicants should be prepared to provide information in the Applicant Portal, including:
- a brief, descriptive title (125 characters) and abstract (no more than 250 words) written for a nonspecialist audience clearly explaining the project's principal focus, questions, and expected results;
- a biographical sketch (200 words or less) of the Principal Investigator (PI);
- brief details about other sources of funding or support for the project (including pending proposals); and
- data to be collected and/or used as part of the project, detailing any relevant restrictions on data use, including (but not limited to) non-disclosure agreements (NDAs), data use agreements, pre-publication review, or other forms of restriction.

Additionally, applicants should be prepared to provide brief responses about:
- Expected Outcomes and Products
- Ethical and Privacy Considerations
- Methodology and Analysis Experience

Details are available in the SSRC Application Portal.

PROJECT NARRATIVE:

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

- an intellectual justification and description for the overall project, related to the dual objectives outlined in the Overview, above;
- a brief description of any related project work done to date (noting any preliminary analysis informing the proposed research);
- a description of the data and/or methods to be used in the project, and why they are appropriate;
- a discussion of how these data and/or methods will inform broader conversations about scholarly approaches to studying social media data and the challenges therein;
- specific objectives and/or milestones;
- a brief timeline of activities;
- expected outcomes and their significance;
- a public dissemination plan; and
- potential risks posed by research.

DATA MANAGEMENT PLAN:

Applicants will be required to provide a Data Management Plan based on the following requirements: https://s3.amazonaws.com/ssrc-cdn2/5ea0af34abfc6.pdf

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.

BUDGET:

Please provide an itemized budget form and budget narrative. This section should not exceed two (2) pages.

For the Social Data Research Fellowship:
Project budgets for the Social Data Research Fellowship may not exceed $50,000.

Eligible expenses include (but are not limited to):
- salary and fringe to support the PI;
- graduate or undergraduate Research Assistants (RAs);
- project-related travel (applicants should estimate transportation, lodging, and per diem);
- other associated research costs, including costs for data collection; and
- equipment (no more than 10% of the overall budget).

The narrative justification should detail how you arrived at all estimated and final figures in the budget. For example:

- If you are requesting funds for salary support, provide information on how you calculated all figures and indicate if you are applying for salary replacement or a course buy-out/semester buy-out.
- If you are requesting funds for research assistance, provide information on the hourly RA rate at your institution/field site, how many hours the proposed RA will devote to the project, and what their responsibilities will include.
- If you are requesting funds for conference support–up to $1,000 for one domestic conference OR up to $1,500 for one international conference–provide information on the conference you plan to attend, the capacity in which you are attending (panel speaker, moderator, etc.) and whether or not your panel/paper has already been accepted. The SSRC will only provide travel funds for one conference.
- If you are requesting funds for domestic or overseas research, please provide information on the source(s) used to derive your calculation of all costs, including international and local travel and accommodations.
- If you are requesting funds for equipment, please provide details about what equipment is necessary and how it will be put to use to further the aims of the project.

In addition, if you indicated in the Application Form that you have received additional funding for this project through another source(s), you should explicitly address how the various grants will be used together.

Note: Awards are made to individuals, but if routed through institutions after consultation with SSRC, institutions may only request a maximum of 10% indirect cost recovery, which must be included within the overall budget.

For the Social Data Dissertation Fellowship:
Project budgets for the Social Data Dissertation Fellowship may not exceed $15,000.

Eligible expenses include (but are not limited to):
- salary support or stipend;
- tuition payment or reimbursement;
- project-related travel (applicants should estimate transportation, lodging, and per diem);
- other associated research costs, including costs for data collection; and
- equipment (no more than 10% of the overall budget).

The narrative justification should detail how you arrived at all estimated and final figures in the budget. For example:
- If you are requesting funds for salary support, provide information on how you calculated all figures.
- If you are requesting funds for tuition payment or reimbursement, please detail how expenses are

calculated and method of payment.

- If you are requesting funds for conference support–up to $1,000 for one domestic conference OR up to $1,500 for one international conference–provide information on the conference you plan to attend, the capacity in which you are attending (panel speaker, moderator, etc.) and whether or not your panel/paper has already been accepted. The SSRC will only provide travel funds for one conference.
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Note: Awards are made to individuals, but if routed through institutions after consultation with SSRC, institutions may only request a maximum of 10% indirect cost recovery, which must be included within the overall budget.

FORMAL LETTERS OF AFFILIATION:

Please include a formal letter of affiliation from your home institution for the proposed fellowship term. This letter should be on institutional letter-head, signed by the appropriate university or institutional official–such as your department chair, dean, or associate/assistant dean of the relevant school or college, or the executive director or president of your nonprofit institution–and should outline how your proposed research fits into the larger institution and complements institutional research strengths. If you are proposing to use the fellowship funds in support of a reduced course load and/or a semester buy-out, the letter should also attest that this is feasible. Finally, this letter should include any mention of university cost-share (if relevant), e.g. any university 'top off' or 'cap off' for salary support should be included here.

For the Social Data Dissertation Fellowship only:
If applying for a Social Data Dissertation Fellowship, please also include a formal letter of support from your dissertation advisor or supervisor outlining how the fellowship would support your dissertation research, including details about your current stage of completion and likely time to degree.

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. Web links to other materials are allowed if linked to public URLs available in search indices.

SUBMITTING YOUR PROPOSAL

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.

The completed application must be submitted by 11:59pm EST on June 16, 2020.

Applicants should expect to be notified by August 2020.

SSRC PROPOSAL PROCESSING & REVIEW PROCEDURES

Review Process and Criteria

Proposals will be reviewed according to the highest standards of academic research. 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 persons outside of SSRC who are knowledgeable in the particular fields, methods, or approaches represented by the proposal. The selection committee, or some portion thereof, will meet to discuss proposals and their review, and produce a slate of recommendations for support.

Applications recommended for support will undergo additional ethics and privacy review. Each finalist proposal will be read by ethics reviewers, and any concerns or requests for changes will be shared with the PI via written report. Reports will focus on flagging potential concerns and recommending best practices to mitigate potential harms.

Review Criteria:
- Intellectual merit: the intellectual significance of the proposed project and its capacity to advance scholarship, scientific understanding, and/or public knowledge, as well as the degree to which the project offers thoughtful and generalizable models or new pathways for studying the impact of social media on democracy.
- 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.

REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

Successful applicants will be required to adhere to all reporting requirements and the SSRC Terms & Conditions. Grantees will be required to submit a project report every six (6) months, a final report at the end of the grant period, and a public white paper to be posted on the SSRC website. A final financial report will also be required.

CONTACT INFORMATION

For questions, contact us by email: socialdata@ssrc.org