

To: The Social Science Research Council

From: Funders Supporting Independent Scholarly Access to Facebook Data¹

Date: August 27, 2019

Re: Next Steps

In April of 2018, a diverse group of charitable funders announced financial support for a special research initiative to increase public understanding of Facebook's role in elections and democracy. The [collaborative structure of the project](#) was intended to provide access to data in a way that protected individual privacy and the security of private data while enabling fully independent research that advanced public understanding.

It now seems clear that the technical and legal complexities associated with making proprietary data available to independent scholars are greater than any of the parties originally understood, and Facebook has as a result been unable to deliver all the data initially anticipated. The 83 independent scholars whose proposals were selected for funding have access to only a portion of what they were told they could expect, and this has made it difficult or, in some cases, impossible for them to complete the approved research. Nor can Facebook or its privacy and security advisory committees yet offer a definitive timetable for when the full set of proposed data can be made available.

¹ The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Charles Koch Foundation, Children's Investment Fund Foundation, Democracy Fund, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Laura and John Arnold Foundation, Omidyar Network, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

The funders therefore recommend pausing the Social Media and Democracy Research Grants RFP process unless and until more data become available. The SSRC should not seek to reclaim funds already distributed to existing grant recipients, and it should continue to support those who are able to complete the approved research. The SSRC should, in addition, provide scholars whose proposals were accepted but who have not yet received their awards with the promised funding if they can complete the approved research with the data that are at present available. Facebook has, for its part, affirmed that it will continue to provide all these scholars with access to data that has already been made available, as well as additional data that they hope to make available in the future.

If Facebook is still unable to provide [the data specified in the initial RFP codebook](#) by September 30, we recommend that the SSRC begin taking steps to wind down this project by the end of 2019. In recognition of the time and resources that the SSRC and Social Science One have invested, as well as the potential importance of your work, we will continue to support you until that time. Some or all of us may be willing to consider extending or reinitiating this support, including funds for regranting to scholars, if new data of sufficient import and value become available.

We are communicating now because we think it important to provide clarity to scholars who have been planning work that was to be funded with our resources but who remain uncertain about both what data they will have access to, and when they will have it. We

also believe it prudent to preserve resources allocated to this project if, as is presently the case, they cannot be used adequately to achieve their originally intended purpose.

Facebook has informed us that it plans to continue working to resolve the technical issues and legal questions that have hindered broader data access. We are undertaking an evaluation of the existing project, the results of which will inform the decisions of individual funders about whether they wish to participate in that effort. In all events, we hope Facebook (not to mention other platform companies) will find a way to provide deeply robust privacy-protected data like that originally intended, because we continue to believe that independent scholarly analysis of social media platforms is essential to better understand the impact of these platforms on elections and democracy around the world.

We appreciate the partnership of the Social Science Research Council and Social Science One in supporting this mission and working with the broader scholarly community.