



## **Statement from SSRC President Alondra Nelson on the Social Data Initiative**

Recent revelations about the abuse of Facebook data and spread of disinformation make clear that social media can have negative ramifications for society. Today the SSRC begins an extraordinary Social Data Initiative at the frontiers of digital culture to examine the problem, explore questions about the responsible use of social network data, and generate insights to inform solutions.

With the potential to usher in a new paradigm for research collaboration between industry and the academy, Facebook will make data available for the first time to social science researchers via an independent, transparent, peer-review process.

The SSRC's role will include helping to form a steering committee of independent scholars to develop a research agenda about social media's impact on society, beginning with elections, and stewardship of both the independent application and selection processes, as well as the peer-review process. Any proposal submitted through this process must first have been reviewed by a University Institutional Review Board (IRB), federally approved IRB, or international equivalent.

For more than 90 years the nonpartisan SSRC has been at the forefront of social science, fostering innovative research, nurturing new generations of social scientists, deepening how inquiry is practiced within and across disciplines, and mobilizing knowledge for the public good. We have always been guided by the belief that open, just, and democratic societies require better understanding of complex social, cultural, economic, and political processes.

And these processes are now online. Access to these types of data, so necessary for social science in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, now resides largely within private companies. Indeed, the need for industry-academic collaboration to make it more readily accessible is a central recommendation of a report to be released this fall by the SSRC's To Secure Knowledge Task Force, which began its work a year ago. Gary King of Harvard University and a member of the SSRC's To Secure Knowledge Task Force and Nate Persily of Stanford Law School and a member of the advisory committees for the SSRC's Anxieties of Democracy and Media & Democracy programs, which have been examining related issues for years, are a driving force in the development of this [pioneering model for industry-academic collaboration](#).

With great potential come risks. We recognize these risks, including those regarding data privacy and are committed to protecting privacy rights. SSRC-appointed review committees will actively engage with technologists, advocates, and ethicists to develop 21<sup>st</sup> century academic standards for anonymized digital data use—with particular emphasis on the potential impacts on vulnerable groups by the dynamics the initiative studies. While Facebook and the users of its data are bound by the data access and privacy laws where they operate, the SSRC will have no qualms about withdrawing from this initiative should we deem it necessary.

Facebook's relationship to this initiative ends at the contribution of the raw, anonymized data. It will make no financial contribution to this initiative or its research, which will be made public without approval from the social network. Funding will be provided by the John and Laura Arnold Foundation, the Democracy Fund, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Charles

Koch Foundation, the Omidyar Network, and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The independent steering committee of scholars will regularly report publicly on its activities and Facebook's, including the decision-making criteria guiding the research agenda and the selection of researchers.

In short, this initiative will abide by the highest standards of academic research, and is part of what the SSRC has been doing for nearly a century: fostering better understanding of social processes to improve the lives of all.

Media contact:

John Keaten

212 784 5701

[jkeaten@groupgordon.com](mailto:jkeaten@groupgordon.com)