

Request for Proposals

Improving the digital information ecosystem

About Civitates and its partners

Civitates is a new philanthropic initiative of 16 foundations committed to upholding democratic values in Europe. It believes in European democracies, where all citizens have the opportunity to access information, make their voices heard, organise, mobilise and engage fully in the democratic processes. To achieve this vision, Civitates strengthens the capacity of civil society to play its indispensable role in shaping vibrant and open European democracies that work for all.

Hosted by the Network of European Foundations, Civitates aims at strengthening civil society by empowering its actors to respond to challenges related to the shrinking space for civil society, as well as to address the way democracy is impacted by changes in the way information of societal importance is produced, distributed and consumed. This Request for Proposals includes contributions by Adessium Foundation, Fondation de France, Fritt Ord, King Baudouin Foundation, Nicolas Puech Foundation, Oak Foundation, Omidyar Network and the Open Society Foundations.

Background

Public discourse plays a vital role in open, democratic societies. It is an important forum through which people can voice their concerns and form opinions. Moreover, public discourse provides input for decision making processes. Digitization has fundamentally changed the way information is produced, distributed and consumed and thereby affects the public discourse. The implications of these changes cannot yet be fully grasped.

Recent years have witnessed the rise of a handful of technological platforms as dominant players in a digital information ecosystem that has allowed an unprecedented outreach of news and information. Online platforms provide new opportunities for social engagement, both in the production of news and information, and in online activism and movement building. At the same time, the functioning of tech platforms also raises concerns on the quality of public discourse.

The quality of public discourse is faced with many challenges. Algorithms, which have replaced the human editor as information gatekeepers, are designed to help advertising succeed rather than to inform the public about matters of societal concern. Additionally, unlike with traditional media, there are few potent mechanisms for holding tech platforms accountable. Furthermore, the lack of regulation and transparency of the algorithms used by online platforms, the role of these platforms and their interactions with the digital advertising industry and political actors, and issues

related to data protection and data exploitation, make it easier to manipulate public discourse through disinformation. Moreover, some current regulatory responses can be problematic for democracy when they are focused on content regulation, and thereby likely to criminalize certain forms of speech and expression, negatively impacting freedom of speech.

The societal discussion on this topic is expanding, with a wide variety of stakeholders raising their voices. Among them are authorities (e.g. the European Commission's high-level expert group on fake news and disinformation), media organizations, technological and commercial companies, and a range of civil society organizations (e.g. freedom of expression groups, digital rights groups, etc.). Each actor brings its own perspective but coordinated efforts to deal with the challenges at hand are few. Moreover, additional knowledge is crucially required to fully understand the implications for the digital public sphere.¹

Fund goal

Civitates aims to empower and enable civil society to address the way in which democracy is impacted by the fundamental changes in the way information of societal importance is produced, distributed and consumed. These changes are affecting the democratic fabric in Europe by contributing to a corrosive public discourse and undermining EU values.

Civitates is interested in supporting ways in which these challenges can be mitigated. Civitates therefore aims at a better understanding of commonalities across Europe and a stronger field. The fund provides European civil societies with the financial and non-financial means to build on knowledge and work across a range of initiatives that can help identify and advocate for targeted responses to specific problems of the current and future digital environment.

A strong cohort of civil society actors across Europe that informs the debate and drives a reform agenda for the digital public sphere will also indirectly help people in Europe to understand how the digital news and information ecosystem works so they can make decisions about their 'information diet' and have access to a plurality of media, new sources and news content.

Application guidance

Civitates welcomes proposals from independent organizations for projects that seek to:

- Analyse the effect of digitization on the quality of the public discourse in Europe;
- Expose issues impacting the quality of public discourse and democratic fabric in Europe; or
- Improve the functioning of the digital information ecosystem (role of e.g. the technology platforms, the digital advertising industry, political actors) and its regulatory environment through advocacy initiatives.

¹ For an overview of existing research and key gaps, see: Tucker, Guess, Barbera, Vaccari, Siegel, Sanovich, Stukal, and Nyhan, Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature (March 19, 2018). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3144139> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3144139>

Civitates particularly encourages applications from organizations that:

- Engage in constructive advocacy, broadly shared by a diverse set of actors, and resulting in feasible policy proposals;
- Partner with other civil society organizations, including those that are already active in this field as well as with those that are (relatively) new to it but understand the importance of the issue;
- Propose initiatives that think critically about how to solve not just today's problems of disinformation, but also those of tomorrow.²

Supported activities could include, but are not limited to:

- Documenting and exposing the manipulation and corrosion of the public discourse (including through media / investigative journalism);
- Bringing together different players in a joint effort to improve our digital information ecosystem, including tech companies, newsrooms, research institutes, policy-makers, politicians, governments and civil society organizations;
- Advocacy campaigns driving a reform agenda for the digital public sphere; or
- Action-oriented research.

All projects should contribute to the shaping of the agenda for a digital environment that has a positive impact on the public discourse in Europe. For example, think of research that concludes with a specific policy ask or research that can point to a direction where a policy ask could be.

Moreover, the proposed projects should address the digital information ecosystem as a whole. For example, initiatives that address the (lack of a) regulatory framework which allows for hate speech to occur will be considered for funding, while initiatives against online hate speech as such will not. Similarly, funding could be provided for a project monitoring propaganda around upcoming elections, as long as its overall aim is to address challenges related to the framework of the digital environment rather than to simply address the integrity of those elections. Funding could also be considered for projects challenging different aspects related to the dominance of tech companies. Additionally, given the difficulty for researchers to access data from platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Snapchat, we welcome research projects on alternative ways to gather data from those sources.

Please note that this specific Request for Proposals does not cover support for projects limited to (or focusing mainly on):

- general awareness-raising;
- web / media literacy training;

² For example, disinformation through images and video, which differs from the spread of disinformation in text, is something that needs to be examined more and taken into account when looking at how to improve the digital environment.

- fact checking, the moderation of content, or the production of counter narratives;
- improving journalism business models; or
- seed funding for the creation of apps.

Who can apply

Through this Request for Proposals Civitates funds non-profit non-governmental organizations, which may include civic organizations, associations, independent media, and other similar organizations. Non-governmental organizations are welcome to submit a proposal with a for-profit organization as a partner, however this Request for Proposals does not cover funding to individuals, governmental bodies, or state-supported institutions.

Because Civitates wants to better understand commonalities across Europe, funding is provided for projects with a broader (EU) perspective. This does not mean that there is a minimum of a specific number of countries to be included in the proposal however. Great projects that have a potential to be replicated in other parts of Europe could be of interest too.

More specifically, Civitates welcomes proposals from organizations:

- in EU and EFTA countries, with either a national or a pan-European focus, as long as the proposal has pan-European relevance.
- outside EU and EFTA countries, as long as the proposal has pan-European relevance.

Budget and duration of grants

Grant amounts may vary depending on the size and scope of the projects. It should be kept in mind that for this first Request for Proposals a budget of 700,000 EUR has been set aside, out of which Civitates expects to fund up to half a dozen initiatives. Co-financing is not a prerequisite or an obstacle for funding. In cases of co-financing Civitates is happy to fund at least 65% of the project costs.

The duration of the grants can also vary but should stay within 18 months.

It should be noted that this Request for Proposals is part of a larger funding framework and that Civitates will be providing more funding on this topic in the future. The next Request for Proposals will be designed based on lessons learned from the first call and the needs in the field. The Civitates secretariat will try to connect the different cohorts of grantees.

How funding decisions are made

Decisions are made by a selection committee comprised of representatives of Civitates' partner foundations, who will be advised by external experts. The following factors are considered:

- how the proposal fits within Civitates' overall priorities,
- its relevance to specific needs and conditions in the field,
- the strategy and vision of how best to allocate its budget to allow for greatest impact, and
- the commitment, understanding, and experience of the applicant.

Application steps

This Request for Proposals will make use of a two-step application process. The first step consists of the submission of a short concept note. Applicant organizations must fully meet the eligibility criteria. The selection committee will shortlist candidates that will be invited to submit a full proposal. Applicants will be informed no later than by the end of January 2019 if they are invited to this second round. The deadline to submit the full, written proposals is expected to be the third week of February 2019. Additional guidance to successful applicants will be provided after the selection of the concept notes. Applicants will be informed of the outcome of the final selection not later than by the end of March 2019. For more details regarding the timeline, please see below.

Application requirements

All applications should be in English and must include the following items:

- **Proposal Narrative:** This form collects basic organizational information and the written description of the project to be conducted with Civitates funds. Applicants are required to use the Civitates template, available [here](#) or on the Civitates website.
- **Proposal Budget:** This is the financial description of the project, corresponding to the activities in the narrative document. For the concept note phase applicants are free to use their own format (a simplified budget will suffice), but the budget should be in Euros.

How to submit

Please submit your application by sending your filled application form and your budget proposal to secretariat@civitates-eu.org. Please include in the subject line the name of your organisation followed by "RFP-October 2018" (YOUR ORGANISATION-RFP-October 2018).

Application Schedule

Key Dates Event

- 30 November 2018** [Application deadline](#) for concept notes
- Early December 2018** Preselection of concept notes by the Civitates Secretariat
- Mid-January 2019** Assessments of concept notes by the selection committee and experts
- Late January 2019** Concept note selection completed and notifications sent, including invitations to selected candidates to submit a full proposal
- Late February 2019** [Application deadline](#) for full proposals
- Mid-March 2019** Assessments of full proposals by the selection committee and experts
- Late March 2019** Proposal review completed, and notifications sent to awardees
- Early April 2019** Due diligence and contracting
- Late April 2019** Awarded projects start date

Need help?

Please have a look at our Frequently Asked Questions provided in the annex. If you feel you haven't found what you were looking for please contact Roy Virah-Sawmy (Roy.VirahSawmy@nef-europe.org).

Frequently Asked Questions

About who can apply

- [We are an organization from an EU accession country, can we apply?](#) Yes, but your proposal needs to have a clear pan-European relevance.
- [We are an organization from a non-European country, can we apply?](#) Yes, but your proposal needs to have a clear pan-European relevance and you should be able to demonstrate significant experience and expertise in relation to work in Europe.
- [We are a for-profit organization, can we apply?](#) You cannot be a sole or lead applicant, but you can partner with a non-profit nongovernmental organization and apply together (the non-profit organization being the lead applicant).
- [We are a small start-up organization and are looking for seed funding, can we apply?](#) You could, but we recommend you to wait until our next Request for Proposals, which will target small or upcoming organizations and include seed funding support.
- [I am an individual activist or researcher, can I apply?](#) No, please wait until our next Request for Proposals, which may include a limited number of grants to individuals.
- [Can we be a partner in more than one grant proposal?](#) In certain cases, you may submit more than just one application, for example if they relate to different types of activities or develop different ideas. But you should always report this in your applications to us.
- [Is there a minimum number of partners that should be involved in the proposal?](#) No, the collaboration simply needs to 'make sense' and be in line with the objectives of the proposal.
- [Do we need to be a coalition to apply?](#) No, while Civitates welcomes collaboration, especially amongst non-traditional partners, there is no requirement in relation to the level of formality of the collaboration.

About the eligible activities

- [Why is funding excluded for certain activities?](#) While there are many important activities aimed at improving the public discourse, Civitates has a limited budget. The activities excluded from this Request for Proposals are generally pursued by other charitable donors, and while they will remain on our radar, we decided to focus on the challenges related to the framework of the digital information ecosystem.
- [Why are fact-checking activities excluded?](#) Scaling disinformation is much easier than scaling anti-disinformation activities like fact checking (some experts suggest that it takes 8 to 15 hours of work to fact-check content that is created in just five minutes). While fact checking can be worthwhile, it is unlikely to solve what is in effect a structural, systemic problem. Initiatives that address the (lack of a) regulatory framework, which allow for fake news to occur, do fall into the scope of this Request for Proposals.
- [Why are web / media literacy training activities excluded?](#) Having the right skills to process the wealth of information available on the internet and social media is very important, but media literacy on its own is unlikely to solve what is in effect a structural, systemic problem. While this Request for Proposals aims to address those structural problems, future funding rounds at Civitates may cover web / media literacy.

- [Why are initiatives aimed at improving journalism business models excluded?](#) Independent journalism plays a key role in improving the quality of public debate and the sustainability of journalism is key to continue to offer high quality content to consumers, but Civitates' resources are limited, and projects aimed at improving journalism models fall outside of the scope of this Request for Proposals. However, initiatives involving elements of journalism as part of action-oriented research or the documentation and exposing of the manipulation and corrosion of the public fall within the scope of the Request for Proposals.

About the advocacy element

- [Is advocacy work expected to be done at the EU level?](#) No, the advocacy activities do not necessarily have to be done at EU level. In certain cases, advocacy related to regulatory frameworks at the national level could also fall within the scope of this Request for Proposals. However, initiatives with just one country focus must have a broader (EU) perspective in the sense that they can influence regulatory frameworks at the EU level or in other parts of Europe.
- [Is it acceptable if one of the project partners looks after the advocacy element or should all partners be involved in it?](#) Advocating for a better regulatory framework does not need to be the sole aim of the project and not all partners have to be engaged in the advocacy activities. However, there should be a clear intention to contribute to the shaping of the agenda for a digital environment that has a positive impact on the public discourse in Europe.
- [What type of regulatory changes does Civitates want to see?](#) Initiatives could aim at several types of regulatory change and improvement (e.g. improvement of data protection, regulation and enforcement; improvement and enforcement of anti-trust regulation; self-regulation). Initiatives working on regulatory responses in both the mid and long term are welcomed, as well as those attempting to make existing regulatory proposals more effective.
- [What type of advocacy work can be funded?](#) There are many type of advocacy activities and depending on what the strategic goal of the project is, different tools might come in handy. Civitates does not prescribe specific tools or methods, but rather assesses whether the proposed methods seem suitable to reach the desired objectives as stated in the proposal.

About the budget

- [Can we include staff and administrative costs?](#) Yes, Civitates recognizes that staff and critical infrastructure of organizations are of key importance for any project. For more details, please see the instructions for the budget template.
- [Is co-funding an absolute requirement?](#) No, Civitates, which wants to fund at least 65% of selected projects, is willing to fund up to 100% of a project's cost if required.
- [Will there be other rounds of funding?](#) Yes, Civitates will be providing more funding on this topic in the future. This will most likely be in the spring of 2019.
- [If we apply for a grant from Civitates, can we still apply for grants from one of Civitates' partner foundations?](#) Yes, there are no restrictions in this regard.