

Terms of Reference

Looking back at Civitates' work on fostering a healthy digital public sphere

Civitates would like to commission an independent consultant to prepare a report looking back at our work focused on fostering a healthy digital public sphere in Europe.

About Civitates

Civitates is a philanthropic initiative for democracy and solidarity in Europe. It provides funding for civil society actors to come together, revitalise public discourse, and ensure that all voices are heard. The pooled fund supports cross-sectoral coalitions that strengthen the resilience of the civil society sector, initiatives that push for a healthy digital public sphere, as well as independent, public interest journalism in Europe.

Since becoming operational in 2018, Civitates has **supported 50 organisations for total amount of around € 9,750.000, covering 18 countries in Europe**. In addition to providing funding, Civitates has a Funding Plus component, through which the fund provides capacity development and networking opportunities to its grantees.

Civitates, which has an annual budget of approximately 3M EUR, is supported by [a group of diverse foundations](#), of different shapes and sizes, which bring in a wealth of expertise and different perspectives. The initiative, which is hosted by the [Network of European Foundations \(NEF\)](#) and housed in the [Philanthropy House](#) in Brussels, builds on lessons learned from other pooled funds.

Civitates and the digital public sphere

The initial focus for Civitates (2019-2020) was to address disinformation online, and the characteristics of the digital information ecosystem and infrastructure that enable the manipulation of public discourse.

Through the first cohort of grantees, Civitates funded a wide variety of initiatives to better understand commonalities across Europe: initiatives which aimed to analyse the effect of digitisation on the quality of the public discourse, expose issues impacting the quality of public discourse and democratic fabric in Europe; and advocate for improving the functioning of the digital information ecosystem and its regulatory environment. The first projects focused on specific issues including monitoring disinformation on platforms (such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter or WhatsApp), impact of political microtargeting, research about foreign interference, social media monitoring in election time, algorithmic decision making, monitoring of digital threats and reporting on digital freedom violations and engaging broader civil society and policy makers on the fundamental rights aspect of the digital public sphere.

After this initial phase and an evaluation of this line of work and considering the policy momentum at the EU level to regulate the digital public sphere, Civitates has decided to focus more specifically on supporting advocacy efforts from civil society organisations. **The goal of the second phase of Civitates' work is to civil society organisations that advocate for improved checks and balances, accountability, and transparency through regulation at the EU and Member State level to shape a digital public sphere that is conducive to democracy and fundamental rights.**

To achieve this goal, Civitates supports to civil society organisations that:

- advocate for policy approaches towards a healthy digital public sphere
- build the capacity and constituency of civil society to engage in the debate and address the current, emerging, and future challenges of the digital public sphere.

Following a targeted call for proposals, Civitates supported for a total of €1.6 million, 8 organisations with core or programmatic support for a period of around 2 years. The grants started between August 2021 and January 2022. In addition to that, Civitates also opened in 2022 an additional ‘opportunity fund’ for a total of €500 000 which aims at supporting with smaller project grants (around €30 000) activities that complement the work of the cohort of grantees and contributes to the objectives of the sub-fund, allowing the fund to intervene on emerging opportunities and challenges throughout 2022 and 2023.

These combined and aligned efforts have contributed to recent wins with two major milestone legal acts for platform regulation (DSA and DMA) adopted by the EU before the summer 2022, including many recommendations and text amendments issued by civil society including Civitates grantees. This is the result of a hard advocacy work to educate and influence key regulatory debates and convince EU law makers to introduce effective rules applying to big platforms to support democracy and fundamental rights.

Furthermore, since the beginning of its operations, Civitates incorporated in all its lines of work a capacity building element referred to as “[funding +](#)” in addition to the grantmaking. Civitates regularly offers opportunities in several formats to build the capacity of its grantees (individually through small capacity building grants or collectively) and foster synergies and networks, enabling them to learn from, be inspired by and exchange with their peers and the field in general, and to identify potential opportunities for collaboration.

In total, between the start of this line of work in 2019 and November 2022, Civitates has committed around € 3.64 million to civil society organisations working towards a healthy digital public sphere.

More information about this line of work can be found [here](#).

The list of grantee partners and a short description of their work can be found [here](#).

Objective of the report

This report is not foreseen as an impact evaluation or an assessment of individual grants but more of a communication piece to share the lessons learnt from our journey so far, showcase stories of impact from grantee partners, draw from the latter to inform our future interventions and serve as a useful resource for funders and civil society interested in fostering a healthy digital public sphere.

The objectives of the report, which will be shared with foundations, civil society organisations and other relevant stakeholders are as follows:

- Document the work of Civitates on fostering a healthy digital public sphere by looking at its practices and the progress it contributed to in the field
- Serve a basis to share learnings with the broader philanthropic community and engage new foundations on the topic
- Inform Civitates’ practices as grant makers and help define the niche for Civitates including the complementarities with other NEF collaborative projects such as the [European AI Fund](#).

Methodology and approach

We envisage the report, which would be based on desk research and interviews, to encompass elements listed below. These are indicative and can be refined and discussed with the person that will be carrying out the work. It should be noted that

The questions to be addressed by this report are:

- What did Civitates bring to the field of civil society advocates?
- How did Civitates, through its grantees, contribute to policies that foster a healthy digital public sphere in Europe and highlight the policy progress we have contributed to?
- How are the practices Civitates (grantmaking, capacity building or governance) perceived by grantee and foundation partners?
- What added value did it have for foundations participating in this collaborative endeavour?
- What were the gaps in the approach of Civitates and was there anything that could have been done differently?

The report should:

- Gather input from a representative sample of:
 - Grantee partners supported through this sub-fund since the launch of Civitates
 - Partner foundations of Civitates
 - Other relevant external stakeholders (e.g., other funders and CSOs involved in this area or policy experts)
- Present an analysis of this input and reflections on the questions mentioned above
- Identify the lessons learnt and present recommendations relevant to Civitates, the broader philanthropic community and CSOs.
- The consultant will work closely with the Civitates team and draw from internal documents including strategic documents, summary of grantee reports or evaluations.

Timeline

- The final report should be delivered by latest **Friday 31 March 2023**
- Ideally the research would be carried out between mid-January and February 2023.

Application Process

Interested candidates should submit a proposal and a CV to Roy Virah-Sawmy (roy.virahsawmy@nef-europe.org) by **Monday 2 January 2023**.

The letter of Interest and CV should clearly reflect the competencies of the candidate required to complete this task and be accompanied by an indicative budget in Euro (stating either the consultant's daily rate and indicating the number of days estimated for this work or a lump sum for the services indicated above). Where applicable, VAT should be budgeted.

As an indication, Civitates envisages this report, which should be around 10-12 pages to require between 12-13 days of work.