News Item

Facebook, Foundations, and Democracy: Putting the 'R-word' Back Into Philanthropy | PhilanTopic

By Bradford K. Smith
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Bradford K. Smith take a look at the [Social Data Initiative](link), a collaboration between a bipartisan group of philanthropic foundations and the Social Science Research Council* to conduct social science research using Facebook data. He argues that this is a risky move. But he also says that risk a part of philanthropy that has been ignored of late, and that revisiting it might be necessary to address contemporary challenges.

> Facebook and its fellow tech giants live in a very different world than the one inhabited by foundations and social science researchers. Exposed by the minute to competition and disruption, they are constantly evolving — adding new features, adjusting algorithms, and trying to solve the mysteries of user behavior on their platforms. They voraciously acquire patents that often provide the only reliable clue to where they are headed in the future and lock them away under layers of intellectual property protection. There is a real risk that the research supported by this initiative will turn out to be largely historical, lending deep understanding to what happened, after the fact, at a particular moment in American political history. By the time the research is approved, carried out, peer-reviewed, and published — all of them essential steps in guaranteeing fairness and objectivity — Facebook and the tech world will have mutated several times over. In other words, the challenges that this research is intended to address will have long since been superseded by challenges we can't even imagine today. Perhaps the best of the research can transcend the temporal nature of technological change and explore the underlying issues of privacy, algorithmical bias, and the hacking of public opinion that are at stake here.
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> Undoubtedly, the seven foundations spearheading this effort thought of all of the above — and more — as they carefully weighed the pros and cons of taking on this

important work. This is philanthropy at its best — exercising independence, applying flexible resources, collaborating across sectors, and striving to shed light on a crucial societal issue where, at the moment, there is only heat. Is it just a courageous one-off initiative by seven foundations? Or is it a sign that risk is back in philanthropy? Only time will tell.

Source: [Facebook, Foundations, and Democracy: Putting the 'R-word' Back Into Philanthropy | PhilanTopic](#)

*The Social Science Research Council's Media & Democracy program runs the Media & Democracy Network.