



Renewable Freedom
Foundation

European Digital Rights Fund

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<https://digitalrights.fund/>



European Digital Rights Fund

Final Report

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Introduction: The Digital Rights Fund

Strengthening European Digital Rights

The European digital rights community is highly engaged, well-connected in its own field, and surprisingly successful when their bleak funding situation is taken into account. In other words: the community is doing its best to fight for digital rights, to engage the public, and to counter an efficiently organized and often downright aggressive corporate lobby, but it is struggling on all ends.

Many organizations are either entirely made up of volunteers or of a very small team of professional staff and have neither the time nor the resources to connect with other civil society organizations. They are the first to track and fight emerging issues in digital rights, the leading expert voices in their communities, but too rarely capable of properly supporting activities and joint campaigns with NGOs and other actors in neighboring fields or countries. While there is outside support for larger and multi-year projects, both the scope of such grander projects and the associated commitment of time and resources to the often long-winded processes of application keep NGOs from being able to address, on an ad-hoc basis, time-sensitive matters and often prevent them from adequately forming effective temporary coalitions around common issues.

Introducing the European Digital Rights Fund

We have invited over 100 leading digital rights experts from the European Digital Rights (EDRi) network to participate in an innovative peer-driven support platform: Each expert can put forward proposals for third parties, and quickly assess and vote on proposals submitted by the rest of the group. Our processes are designed to be lightweight, transparent, and quick.



A small-grants program, based on peer-led decisions from the digital rights community and with ease of applications and distribution of funds at its heart, significantly strengthens the field. It allows for small, yet important projects to be undertaken by individuals, organizations and joint initiatives, and especially for ever-more important connections with other rights and civil liberties movements. Small grants allow the community to identify and connect with potential allies in the fields of activism, research, consumer protection, litigation, and others, and will empower them to quickly address and investigate upcoming issues. It also helps them plan and prepare larger initiatives without having to stretch their already all too thin core budgets.

Scope

The European Digital Rights Fund is open to initiatives in the space of digital rights, but also specifically encourages collaboration and cooperation with other civil society and civil liberty organizations. This will have impact across areas, build lasting connections necessary in the face of strong and well-connected enemies, and overall strengthen the community.

Digital Rights Fund: Start and Activities

Platform development

Before any grants could be distributed, a grant application web platform had to be developed that allowed for the Digital Rights Fund's specific requirements for peer-driven decision making to be met. This platform was developed in January 2017, and has since received a number of minor improvements as well as an overhaul of the peer-led decision process based on community feedback.

Other funders and initiatives have already expressed interest in our platform, planning on adopting it for similar peer-driven funding schemes. We gladly



help them in this regard. The platform is of course itself an open source development: <https://github.com/muesli/polly/>

Initial clarifications

The Fund serves the European digital rights community. This community was mostly very familiar with *Renewable Freedom Foundation* (RFF) and its proposed Fund before its launch, but a small number of individuals and organizations felt uncomfortable to submit (and vote on) proposals initially. For them, minor issues had to be clarified. These issues concerned mostly the eligibility of third-party projects and the specifics of deliverables. One major issue was the perceived role of EDRi office as possible recipient of funds. We made clear that EDRi office itself is not (and was never) eligible to receive funds, and that all distribution of funds is handled by RFF. This alleviated concerns a few members had about the Fund's independence.

General overview of proposals

A small number of proposals were submitted almost immediately after the fund started taking applications. This suggests that these submissions were based on already existing projects that may have not received funding otherwise. During its first monthly grant periods, the Fund also received small-scale submissions for travel grants for activists and journalists. The Fund then saw a period of lower submission numbers, most likely due to organizations having to formulate (joint) proposals now that our program specific to their needs was available. As many of these organizations are entirely volunteer-based, proposals take longer to develop. Towards May and June, a number of micro grants proposals was submitted and granted, and the last weeks of May also saw four small grants proposals compete for two funding opportunities.



July and August saw a high number of proposals, while the period after received slightly fewer. The turn of the year brought some more applications in December, but the break and new year in all organizations was visible in very low proposal numbers in January. With available funds becoming visibly smaller (all participants can see the available budget on the platform), the community seems to have been setting stricter standards on proposals, especially on more experimental ones. While the number of proposals rose again in February, their success rate was therefore significantly lower.

Generally, larger organizations within the community voluntarily leave available funds to smaller organizations and their projects, especially in the case of micro grants. While this solidarity is laudable, we have to stress further that collaborations between different partners are possible and encouraged, and that any member organization can also sponsor third-party applications as long as they serve the community's interests.

Thematic scope of proposals

34 grant proposals have been received, 24 of which have been accepted and 10 rejected. Among the 34 proposals, 27 were applying to the micro grants program (below 2.000€) and 7 to the small grants program (between 2.000 and 5.000€).

Micro Grants

Among the 27 micro grants proposals, 3 are significantly below 1.000€, 5 requested roughly 1.500€, and 19 are just under the € 2.000 ceiling for this grant category.



3 micro grant proposals (2 of which were successful) were meant to pay for travel costs for activists and journalists to events such as community meetings and conferences:

- Participation of a human rights and technology expert in several panels at a leading Internet Freedom conference, including a panel on comparing public policies involving the use of biometric data from various countries, and a session on the political influence of online platforms through censorship, profiling, and filtering. Possible ways of action were discussed with legal experts, researchers, journalists and other activists.
- Participation of an investigative journalist in a roundtable at a leading conference on digital rights, speaking on fake news, “post-truth”, and the role of algorithms in social media. The session and subsequent discussions covered access to social media as the public's right to information and dissemination, contesting the possibility to create algorithms for social good, and avenues towards reclaiming netizen rights in a consensus based ethics and philosophy of digital/social media platforms.
- Participation of a staff attorney at a leading Internet Freedom conference to speak on the government surveillance of activists. This proposal was rejected, presumably on the grounds that the requesting organization had access to sufficient other means to cover this action.

10 micro grant proposals (8 successful) were for campaign support or legal challenges:

- Development and hosting of a website to campaign on an issue related to the European Commission's proposal for a new copyright directive.



The EU proposal includes measures to weaken the existing intermediary liability protections in European law and would help build a system where users will face internet platforms blocking the uploading of their content, even if it is a perfectly legal use of copyrighted content. The campaign sought to inform the public about this issue and to campaign against its implementation. This initially successful proposal met with organizational issues, and the grant was returned to the Fund.

- Purchase of technical equipment for producing good quality video materials for promoting and better explaining Open Internet principles. This equipment was immediately used to produce a series of mini-interviews / copyright-related testimonials on the draft EU copyright directive. The equipment will also be used to produce multimedia content to explain in simpler terms the highlights of digital rights and to create an online digital rights crash course available to the public.
- The organization of several meetings to form a campaign on digital rights issues in Belgium. This includes meetings of volunteer activists, the recruiting of new volunteers, and the organization of public events to raise awareness for digital rights in Belgium, such as those touched by new data retention law.
- General support of a campaign against a package of broad and unprecedented surveillance measures in Austria. The campaign sought to educate the public about the proposed measures and their impact on citizen's rights and freedoms. The campaign provided legal analysis of the legislative proposals in question, produced and distributed info material, and organized volunteer roundtables to coordinate the campaign.



- Support for a constitutional complaint against data retention legislation in the Czech republic. The funds were mainly spent on the costs of an attorney, necessary legal software, and a small fraction of associated administrative costs. The constitutional complaint was accompanied by an information campaign on the issue of data retention.
- General support for an alternative media center to the official coverage of the G20 summit in Hamburg. The funds would have been used for the production and setup of the media center. The center itself would have been free and open for participants and media. The proposal was rejected.
- Support for a Free Culture Campaign in Estonia that maps the problems in free culture both in general and in particular fields. The campaign is aimed at the general public, especially people working in areas relevant to free culture: those handling our cultural memory in institutions (museums, libraries and archives); authors creating potentially free culture; people developing tools or services using free culture in start-ups and the ICT sector in general; professional and citizen journalists, etc.
- Support for increasing the impact of a privacy campaign around a national Big Brother Awards event. The proposal would have developed and strengthened strategies and tools for BBA campaigns and awards in two languages. This proposal was not successful.
- Support for a campaign that reveals targeting mechanisms to the public by using Facebook's own targeting. The main goal of the campaign is to 'shake' the audience and make them more informed and concerned about targeted advertising than they currently are. The campaign



includes research as well as the production of info material for the wider public.

- Publication of a hundred principles of campaigning, relevant for all human rights activists, but especially also for those active in privacy and digital rights. The research into successful information gathering and campaigning throughout history translates into a printed book (also available as free download) and will form the basis of a wiki-type website.
- Creation of a toolkit for social media campaigns, including an overview of ethically and legally sound technologies and techniques to promote privacy and digital rights. The project includes research, analysis and the publication of a final report for the community and other interested parties.

9 micro grant proposals (7 successful) covered workshops and conferences or parts thereof:

- Inclusion of a conference element on the political dimensions of technology at a hackercamp in the Netherlands. This element hosted a series of talks, discussions and workshops about the future citizens want to build in light of fast-evolving technology.
- Securing a high-profile host for a national big Brother Awards ceremony, including development and delivery of a show that demonstrates to the audience the problem of giving up privacy.
- Partial support of a four-day open event on media in the digital era, bringing together 300 representatives of online media, information explorers, and digital rights enthusiasts. The event aimed to push the



boundaries of understanding of Internet freedom, business models and comprehensive distribution patterns of networked media.

- Organization of a panel debate at a hacker conference in Denmark on GDPR. The panel discussed GDPR as a constraint for Big Data monopolies, and especially as an opportunity for sharing data between private and public entities: using GDPR as a tool to redistribute Big Data power in the market and to increase volumes of online data. Panel members came from a variety of backgrounds, such as advocacy group representatives, journalists, academia, and the private and public sector.
- Creation of a new visual identity for a national Big Brother Awards event, improving the look and feel of the event and hence its public visibility.
- Support of a dedicated space for digital security training at an international festival on videojournalism. The project would have set up a hacking bar that helps people interested in learning how to increase online security and protect their personal digital devices. This proposal was not successful.
- Support of an augmented reality installation at an international festival on videojournalism. The project would have set up an installation in order to investigate how the digital revolution is remodeling journalism, reporting and documentary and how civil rights are challenged by physical and virtual realities. This proposal was not successful.
- Support for two separate privacy-centered conferences in Italy (organized by the same team and granted through two separate grants). The conferences bring together legal, technological and civil



rights arguments through 15 to 25 speakers and are open to the public without charge.

5 micro grant proposals (2 successful) covered research projects or legal challenges:

- Support for a monitoring endeavor of EU censorship, using probes to find and monitor cases of blocked pages. The results of the investigation are being made public on a website that also includes additional legal information on blocking and censorship.
- A project to increase the number of Bridges in the Tor network. Because more and more countries are actively blocking direct access to the Tor network by implementing countrywide DPI (Deep Packet Inspection) and other obscure privacy invasive methods, this project wanted to deploy more Tor Bridge nodes that can circumvent most of these approaches. This proposal was unsuccessful.
- A research project on monitoring government surveillance capabilities, This project would have used transparency tools – such as information requests on public procurement – to analyze and map government surveillance capabilities. This proposal was not successful.
- A research project on the privacy impact of connected smart objects (Internet of Things) and possible monopolization of IoT service/framework providers. This proposal was not successful.
- Support of a legal challenge on US access to data stored on servers in Ireland through the Stored Communications Act, because the extraterritorial effect of the act would have major implications for data protection in Europe and globally were it upheld.



Small Grants

Small grants proposals are collected over a two-month period (February-March; April-May; June-July, etc.) and the two proposals with the most positive votes receive funding. The Small Grants program was put on hold after three periods in favor of the apparently more popular micro grants range, and funds originally intended for small grants have thus been disbursed as micro grants.

Overall, 7 small grants proposals were submitted, 5 of which were successful:

- The building of a coalition and the development of shared resources for a General Data Protection Regulation campaign. Several European digital rights organizations together with external partners such as consumer organizations worked together to serve the high demand for good quality, accessible information about the new data protection landscape in the wake of the implementation of General Data Protection Regulation. To this end, they held several coordination meetings, carried out initial research, and built the basis for further joint action.
- Bringing international participants to the leading conference on social and economic aspects of copyright in Europe. Funds were specifically earmarked for participants unable to finance the costs on their own and without alternative funding, and dedicated to people with the ability to contribute “in a neutral way to a multi-sided debate addressing the impact of exclusive rights on real-life issues in areas such as culture, education, science, government, technology, health, food, or security,” or who would conduct a workshop accompanying the conference.



- Creation of an installation on Facebook’s algorithmic processes and organization of events around the installation. The installation is prepared by an international team of EDRi members and is designed to “help people understand how algorithmic processes within Facebook work and, through that, grasp the broader notion of profiling”. The project also hopes to trigger critical thinking about the issue and to display the broader economic and societal context of the work done by algorithms.
- Redesign of the Big Brother Awards Campaign and international experience sharing. This proposal built on the national BBA campaign of an EDRi member and professionalized its PR, design, communication and production. It also specifically aimed to raise awareness of privacy relevant events and privacy friendly opinions among journalists. Most importantly, this project shares information, materials and experience summary as well as visual materials with other organizers of BBA (especially among EDRi members) for free.
- Internal capacity building for better communication in English about digital rights issues in organizations currently working in Romania and Macedonia. The project identifies internet communities where articles on these matters are published and recruits and trains volunteers in translating these articles in a professional manner for the international (English-speaking) community. It also shares online resources and shared best practices. This project was unsuccessful in a previous round, but then successfully resubmitted.
- Creation of a “media center for critical minds and committed hearts during the G20 summit in Hamburg”. The collective initiative behind it, consisting of twitterers, bloggers, editorial collectives, video activists



and established journalists, would have produced its own press conferences, live streams, essays and other media items and distributed them in critical distance to official news coverage of the event. This proposal was not successful.

The Fund and the European Digital Rights Community

Community Feedback

As the European Digital Rights Fund is a new and experimental program, open to adjustments and improvements based on community feedback, we immediately collected feedback and remarks on the general program as well as on the specifics of the submission and decision process.

While the Fund generally met positive reception right away, several issues were pointed out by the community. The following provides an overview especially of critical remarks:

- The difference between the mechanics of micro grants and small grants were not clear enough in some aspects. This lead to confusion, especially in the voting process.
- To more easily receive an overview of the small grants timeline (submission and voting period), the website should make this more visible to participants.
- Taking into account the current level of visible participation (micro grant proposals could not receive positive votes), requiring a minimum number of positive votes will give more legitimacy to the successful proposals and generally encourage participation.



- The mailing list is not serving its main purpose, as only little discussion has arisen around the different proposals.

Community Ethics

We have discovered interesting guidelines the community seems to adhere to in the use of the Digital Rights Fund:

- Large organizations voluntarily decided to not make use of their de facto right to veto proposals (having 5 individuals with voting rights in the program) by casting a consensually predefined single vote.
- The community reacts when they see a large organization asking for funds they do not consider they need.
- Most large organizations intentionally leave funds available in the micro grants program to smaller organizations.
- Some participants were critical of a possible involvement of the EDRI Brussels office in the disbursement of funds. We clarified that EDRI office was and will remain neutral, and that RFF steps in whenever funds have to be reserved and managed on behalf of third parties, distributing payments when due.



Adjustments

Procedural adjustments & survey results

The Fund's goal is to work closely with the community to continually improve regulations and procedures. This includes submission guidelines as well as the determination of successful proposals. Based on our experience with the initial model and feedback from the community (see above), we made adjustments to these processes. To keep these strictly in line both with the communities' preferences and RFF's and OSF's guidelines, we first conducted a survey of our proposed changes and implemented the changes accepted by the community in the next internal grant period.

Survey questions

Our survey included questions on active participation in the Fund, on satisfaction with current procedures, and on a set of specific proposed changes:

- Collecting at minimum number of upvotes for both micro- and small-grants proposals to make them eligible (instead of accepting them automatically in case of no or minimal objections).
- Activating an option in the web interface to allow participation in some respect but not receive any mails.
- Opening the Fund to the public (while adhering to the same general scope and funding guidelines).

The survey also allowed for general comments.



Survey results

- 80% of respondents had actively participated in the Fund. Satisfaction ranged from medium (5 out of 10) to perfect (10 out of 10) with a median value of 7.4.

According to the comments provided, participants particularly liked the quick decision times and subsequent smooth execution, while some professed confusion about the dual voting system in micro and small grants.

- Respondents oppose the opening of the Fund to the wider public with a 60% majority. Both proponents and opponents however agree that the difficulty would lie in ensuring external proposals still benefit the European digital rights community. Some opponents also see opening the fund as possible at a later stage, but would like the Fund to concentrate on the EDRi community for the time being.
- Respondents overwhelmingly support the introduction of necessary upvotes both in the small-grants (100%) and the micro-grants category (80%). According to comments, some respondents would like to combine this with a grouping of micro grants proposals to examine them jointly.
- The current mail- and notification load on the community seems to be o.k., only 30% would like an option to receive less mail.
- General comments mostly reiterated their general satisfaction with the Fund. Some requested periodic reminders of deadlines and an integration of basic (guideline) reminders in all communication.



Overall, comments were (very) positive. It should be noted that a considerable portion of these seems to come from successful applicants.

Adjustments

Based on our experience with the Fund and the survey results, we proposed the following adjustments:

- Collect a minimum number of upvotes both in small grants and micro grants
- Add minor improvements to the platform for automatic reminders on deadlines, etc.
- Keep the Fund restricted to directly EDRI-submitted projects (although even so, projects can be submitted on behalf of third parties), but evaluate options of opening the Fund in the future.
- Extend the program's run time to December 2017.

We have since implemented these changes and have been working with the new Fund structure and decision process for six months. Additional funds from other funding sources also allowed us to further increase the run time of the Fund (currently to March 2018).



Review & Outlook

Notwithstanding the number and overall high quality of the funded projects, we still see room for quite significant improvement. Of concern to us are especially the following points:

- The number of submitted proposals and also their success rate has been falling since November 2017. We believe this is at least partly due to low remaining funds (these are visible to all members) and ensuing stricter judgement of proposals by the community. This has had an explicitly negative effect on more experimental proposals and on ones submitted by actors not considered belonging to the core community.
- Generally, we would have expected more experimental proposals, including for support of projects that do not fall under the usual categories of events, campaigns, or research. The Fund was specifically also designed to foster community health, but we have not seen proposals addressing this. The general openness of the Fund seems to be undercut by expectations submitters have that they can only submit the “usual” proposals.
- Voting participation is significantly lower than expected. A possible explanation lies in the structure of the voting process (after a minimum number of up- or downvotes is reached, all further votes don’t change the outcome), but even taking this into consideration, participation should be higher.
- Proposal feedback and discussion is also not used enough in the community. Proposals can be discussed in dedicated mail threads, but apart from some general questions for clarifications, the community rarely provides comments, and especially almost no feedback after



voting down proposals. This leaves unsuccessful applicants with no basis to improve their projects or address and alleviate community concerns.

- The community is (understandably) concerned to keep funding within the group in order to foster digital rights. However, this seems to translate into skepticism towards both new members with not yet established track records and also outside partners (who would be eligible for grants if vouched for by members).
- We believe that generally opening the Fund to outside proposals (while decisions would still remain within the community) could be beneficial, especially also for community growth, resilience, and the general strengthening of the rights-activists sector. The community has voted against this. We hope that a partial solution (invite-links issued by members to external parties) can provide a bridge to such a more open structure of the Fund.

Overall, we are very satisfied with the quality of individual proposals and have seen that the Digital Rights Fund indeed addresses a gap in the support for digital rights and digital rights activists. However, we believe that the range of proposals could be broader and more experimental, and that community participation (voting, discussion, improvement, collaboration) needs to improve. We will continue to investigate reasons for this and possibilities of improvement to the Fund over the coming weeks (EDRi-assembly, 12-15 April) and in consultation with other funders employing similar participatory funding structures.