European Digital Rights Fund

Interim Report

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Table of Contents

1. 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 Initiative (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 single 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.

2. Digital Rights Fund: Start and Activities

2.1. 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.

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/

2.2. 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 issues 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.

2.3. 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.

Meanwhile, larger organizations within the community seem to voluntarily leave available funds to smaller organizations and their projects, especially in the case of micro grants. While this solidarity is laudable, we may 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.

2.4. Thematic scope of proposals

So far sixteen grant proposals have been received, ten of which have been accepted, four rejected, and two still in voting period. Among the sixteen proposals, eleven were applying to the Micro Grants program (below 2.000€) and five to the Small Grants program (between 2.000 and 5.000€).

2.4.1 Micro Grants

Among the eleven micro grants proposals, three are significantly below 1.000€, two requested roughly 1.500€, and six are just under the € 2.000 ceiling for this grant category.

Three micro grant proposals 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.

Six micro grant proposals were for campaign support:

- 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 seeks to inform the public about this issue and to campaign against its implementation.

- Purchase of technical equipment for producing good quality video materials for promoting and better explaining Open Internet principles. This equipment will be 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 seeks to educate the public about the proposed measures and their impact on citizen's rights and freedoms. The campaign provides legal analysis of the legislative proposals in question, produces and distributes info material, and organizes volunteer roundtables to coordinate the campaign.

- Support for a constitutional complaint against data retention legislation in the Czech republic. The funds will mainly be spent on the costs of an attorney, necessary legal software, and a small fraction of associated administrative

costs. The constitutional complaint will be 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, presumably because the community thought the project could raise funds otherwise. Also, the prospective recipients did not reply to questions raised by the community.

Two micro grants proposals are still in voting period. They would focus on a free culture campaign in Estonia and on the general political dimension of technology.

None of the accepted proposals received any negative votes, while the two rejected ones had just the minimum for it to not pass (5 downvotes) after the two weeks voting period. While this suggests remarkable openness in the community to all kinds of projects, it does currently not display specific appreciation of each project, as positive votes are not counted in the micro grant scheme. We are considering counting (and displaying) positive votes as measurement of support for specific actions in the community.

2.4.2 Small Grants

Small Grant 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. Due to the start of the Fund in February, only two rounds of the Small Grants program fall into the period covered by this report.

Only one proposal was submitted in the first round and it was, therefore, "automatically" accepted.

The proposal covered 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 will work 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 will hold several coordination meetings, carry out initial research, and build the basis for further joint action.

The second round of the Small Grants program saw four proposals, two of which were granted because they received the highest number of votes.

One successful proposal promised to bring international participants to the leading conference on social and economic aspects of copyright in Europe. Funds are 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 will conduct a workshop accompanying the conference.

The other successful proposal in this round sought funding to create an installation on Facebook's algorithmic processes and to organize 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. The first pop-up installation will be presented in Berlin. It can then travel to other locations and events world wide.

One proposal gathered a significant number of votes, but did not make it into the top two of proposals. It would have dedicated funds to starting a process of internal capacity building for better communication in English about digital rights issues. It had planned to identify internet communities where articles on these matters are published and then to recruit and train volunteers in translating these articles in a professional manner for the international (English-speaking) community. It would also have created shared online resources and shared best practices.

The other unsuccessful proposal had planned to create 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. The proposal indicated it may be able to raise funds from other sources as well.

Note: In our program, unsuccessful proposals can be resubmitted at any time, so we expect to see some of these ideas come up again, maybe in adapted form.

3. The Fund and the European Digital Rights Community

3.1. Community Feedback

As the European Digital Rights Fund is a new and experimental program, open to adjustments and improvements based on community feedback, we collected feedback and remarks on the general program as well as on the specifics of the submission and decision process. While the Fund generally received positive reception, 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 are not clear enough in some aspects. This leads 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 cannot 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 currently not serving its main purpose, as only little discussion has arisen around the different proposals so far. While it has been very valuable in gathering feedback on the mechanics of the fund, we should find ways to further encourage discussions about submitted proposals.

3.2. 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.

4. Outlook

4.1. Procedural adjustments & Survey results

Our 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 current model and initial feedback from the community, we will make 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 will implement the changes accepted by the community in the next internal grant period.

4.1.1. 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.

4.1.2. 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.

4.1.3. Proposed adjustments

Based on our experience so far and the survey results, we propose 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 (see financial projections)

4.2. Financial projections

In the period covered by this report, the Fund has not disbursed all available funds for grants in the period (€ 5.000 undistributed in Small Grants; also available funds in Micro Grants). This is due to only two Small Grants periods falling into the report period (and the first period only awarding one Small Grant instead of two), and a slump in received proposals especially in late March and early April. The smaller number of received proposals is likely due to especially smaller organizations taking longer to formulate and submit proposals, and to larger organizations withholding their applications in order to leave room for smaller ones. We expect change in both areas, moving actual proposals closer to our projections.

Currently, the Fund has disbursed EUR 24.776,50 in grants, which is roughly half of its overall grant budget. Based on current participation, the Fund will not distribute a similar amount in the only three months remaining in its original set-up (running until September). The rise we expect and in part perceive in number of applications will most likely not entirely mitigate this.

We therefore propose an extension of the program to December 2017 in order to distribute the available grants over a longer period of time. This will not increase administrative costs.

5. Timeline

January 2017

- Development of Small Grants Platform for peer-based decision making.

- Set-up of internal and external (public) website.

- Community informed of imminent launch of the fund.

February 2017

- Launch

  134 people from the EDRi community received a personal invitation with their credentials to join the platform hosted at https://grants.digitalrights.fund/. The email explained the basic functioning and gave them also access to the mailing list in which every proposal will have their own thread and the discussion with the other participants could take place.

- First submissions

  A week after being launched, the list reaches 37 participants who have signed up. 3 micro grants proposals have already been submitted.

March 2017

- One day before the General Assembly (GA) of EDRi, the list reaches 49 participants. 2 more micro grants proposals and 1 small grants application have been submitted.

- During the GA, the fund is briefly presented during a lightning talk and its functioning and possible changes discussed with the attendants of the fundraising session.

April 2017

- The list reaches 60 participants.

- The fund has reached a total of 8 proposals (7 micro grants, 1 small grant; 7 granted, 1 rejected).

May 2017

- The list reaches 65 participants.

- The fund has reached a total of 12 proposals (7 micro grants, 5 small grant; 9 granted, 3 rejected).

June 2017

- A survey is sent to community, results integrated into the program.

- The fund has reached a total of 16 proposals (11 micro grants, 5 small grant; 10 granted, 4 rejected, 2 still in voting).