



Stanford PACS  
Center on Philanthropy  
and Civil Society

# REFLECTIONS ON PHILANTHROPY

**FROM THE 2017 PHILANTHROPY INNOVATION SUMMIT**

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# ABOUT STANFORD PACS

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Stanford PACS is a research center for students, scholars, leaders, and practitioners to explore and share ideas that create social change. Its primary participants are Stanford faculty, visiting scholars, postdoctoral fellows, graduate and undergraduate students, and philanthropists, nonprofit, and foundation practitioners.

Stanford PACS has relationships with five schools at Stanford University (Humanities & Sciences, Engineering, Education, Business, and Law) and more than 15 departments, and we leverage the intellectual assets of a diverse, world-class faculty across the university. This provides a unique platform to create knowledge and share it with the nonprofit and for-profit communities in Silicon Valley and globally.

Stanford PACS offers postdoctoral fellowships, PhD fellowships, and financial support for undergraduates completing honors thesis work. Additionally, Stanford PACS sponsors regular public speaker programs and symposia and philanthropy salons that include speakers who are well-known public intellectuals, philanthropists, and academic, foundation, and nonprofit leaders.

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# ABOUT STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

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*Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR)*, published by Stanford PACS, informs, energizes, and motivates social change leaders from around the world and from all sectors of society —nonprofits, foundations, businesses, academia and government. Through an array of channels—daily online content, a quarterly print publication, monthly webinars, thematic conferences, podcasts, asynchronous learning assets, and more—*SSIR* bridges research, theory, and practice, and addresses a wide range of social issues (including economic development, human rights, public health, and education) and solutions (like impact investing, social entrepreneurship, and nonprofit business models). *SSIR*'s award-winning content is created for and by current and future social change leaders.

It is *SSIR*'s mission to advance, educate, and inspire the field of social innovation.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Every two years, the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society hosts a Philanthropy Innovation Summit. At this day-long event, peer philanthropists, Stanford faculty, scholars, and leaders share their inspiration and expertise, authentic stories of successes and struggles, and results-oriented approaches to social change.

At this international convening, individual and family philanthropists connect in order to brainstorm with one another, leverage Stanford PACS research to catalyze effective philanthropy, and take away actionable ideas, best practices, new strategies, and new networks with which to amplify one's impact as a philanthropist.

This collection of articles, written by individuals at the Philanthropy Innovation Summit, expresses key themes, learnings, and questions that emerged throughout the day. By sharing these reflections, we hope philanthropists and social change leaders around the world will be better informed and even more motivated to leverage strategic philanthropy in tackling society's most pressing challenges.

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*Videos and additional materials from the Philanthropy Innovation Summit are available at: [pacscenter.stanford.edu/summit2017learning](https://pacscenter.stanford.edu/summit2017learning)*

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# CAN PHILANTHROPY HELP PROTECT DEMOCRACY?

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By Lucy Bernholz

There's a lot of concern about the state of democracy these days. Elected officials in Turkey are jailing journalists, information networks are being influenced by bots, and elections and voting systems are vulnerable to hackers. There are many reasons for this concern, and it has many causes, but the role of digital networks, data manipulation, and an increasing unease with the security and trustworthiness of the Internet cuts through many of these. This is a striking change from just a few years ago, when most of the rhetoric surrounding the Internet and social media focused on its democratizing nature.

Human rights activists and journalists are two civil society actors who have long lived out on the double-edged knife of digital democracy. Ubiquitous cellphone cameras and social media trails make it easier to find and report on human rights abuses, but they also put witnesses and activists at ever-greater risk. Governments and corporations that wish to hide their activities from prying eyes, independent reporters, or self-organized responses can monitor digital networks and even shut them down as a means of controlling reporting or protest.

In a recent conversation with a dozen global philanthropists, many from countries that have long vacillated between dictatorship and democracy, I heard a number of interwoven concerns about democracy and human rights in the digital age. We also discussed opportunities for well-connected and informed donors, and ways to move more donors toward being well-equipped to help protect democracy in the digital age.

First, the concerns. Top of the list is the way in which individuals and NGOs are now dependent on digital systems. As the director of the Digital Civil Society Lab at Stanford PACS, I see our dependence on commercially owned and government-monitored digital networks as paradigm shifting for democracy. Where we've long assumed an independent space for private discussion, peaceable protest, and free expression, we now "exist digitally" on systems that we don't control. Colleagues in the room who are active in human rights advocacy echoed this reality and noted the many ways that activists and journalists on the ground learn to cover their digital trails.



The second concern is what I'd call a naïve assumption of good will. Many of us assume that our fellow citizens value democracy as highly as we do. This is questionable at best, as many people may well prioritize the end goals of economic and personal security over the government form that provides it. The experiences of people who live in countries where they know they're being tracked are helpful. Our conversation participants shared personal practices of speaking in "social codes" online, language that doesn't attract the attention of state or corporate censors and can therefore be used to reach out. They acknowledged the "cat and mouse" nature of these discussions, shifting regularly as censors catch up. This day-to-day experience of looking over your shoulder is familiar to some communities in every democracy, but in the digital age it's a set of expectations that everyone needs to consider.

Finally, we talked about digital security. Donors, philanthropists, and nonprofits are slowly beginning to realize their responsibilities for keeping information secure. Those who desire to help vulnerable people need to make sure that their data-collection practices and their own organizational security systems don't make these people any more vulnerable. As many philanthropists are also active board members, a conversation about the specifics of their responsibilities in this area is critical.

Here's where we identified several opportunities for donors. Their access to financial resources, as well as pro bono or in-kind donations of digital security expertise and resources, is an important first step.

Several philanthropists in our recent conversation have direct connections to top-notch digital security providers and are eager to help make these resources available to the organizations with which they work. Those who don't have these personal connections realized that they could play a different role: first, helping initiate the digital governance conversations at the board level; and second, helping find financial resources to address these issues.

Two other opportunities, one quite granular and the other quite abstract. First was the issue of power differentials between donors and nonprofits when it comes to asking for data. Funders often ask nonprofits for data. Recognizing that some data-collection practices put organizations and the people they serve at risk, funders should—and some do—consider ways to shift those data-collection practices in ways that don't make people more vulnerable.

The second opportunity is for funders to pay more attention to digital policy issues. They can also support their partners to do this. Policies on data collection, intellectual property, and telecommunications access shape the digital environment within which both nonprofits and funders work. Understanding, and perhaps advocating for, digital laws and policies that protect the rights of individuals and civil society is critical to the health of an independent philanthropic and nonprofit sector.

Democracy doesn't defend itself. There are a number of ways in which situating philanthropy within civil society, and then practicing philanthropy with an eye toward safe and ethical digital practices, would

serve to improve the practice itself and practically equip donors and nonprofits to protect themselves in a digitally dependent world. These issues transcend the specific issues of human rights and democratic practice. Nonprofits and donors are dependent on digital communications, data, and infrastructure, so there are opportunities to consider the role of safe, ethical, and effective digital practice within almost any issue area that a funder might pursue.

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*Lucy Bernholz is the Director of the Digital Civil Society Lab at Stanford PACS (DCSL).*

*DCSL investigates the challenges and opportunities facing civil society organizations in the digital age, and develops resources to help organizations use digital resources safely, ethically and effectively.*

*DCSL aims to shape the future of civil society globally by fostering the creation of new mechanisms for using, governing, and donating digital assets for public benefit.*

*For scholars and academics, the Lab hosts workshops, conducts and publishes research, supports university student networks, and offers postdoctoral and non-resident fellowships. For practitioners and policymakers, the Lab runs the Digital Impact program (formerly Markets for Good), a suite of tools and resources for civil society organizations including a blog, grant program, data governance toolkit, and conferences.*

*Learn more at [pacscenter.stanford.edu/digital-civil-society/](https://pacscenter.stanford.edu/digital-civil-society/)*

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