

Digging into data for research

Canada is proud to co-lead efforts to internationalise social sciences and humanities research across the Atlantic – and back again. Here Ted Hewitt, President of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada explains why to [Adjacent Government](#)...

The social sciences and humanities research environment in Canada has always been a vibrant one. We are fortunate to have a large pool of talented researchers examining critical questions, and constantly exploring unseen avenues through which to innovate and, ultimately, improve the lives of Canadians.

But as the global landscape changes, and new digital research methodologies take hold, Canada is increasingly reaching beyond our borders to advance knowledge. Our interconnected world means that research that was once regionally focused may now be applicable an ocean away.

The [Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council](#) (SSHRC), as a research funding agency of the government of Canada, is in a good position to help mobilise our scientists and academics to make a big contribution to the world. An important foundation has been built through the establishment in 2013 of the [Trans-Atlantic Platform](#) (T-AP). A collaboration between key funders of social sciences and humanities research from the Americas and Europe, T-AP is meant to establish a sustained basis for cooperation and coordination between granting agencies in the social sciences and humanities. The goal is to open doors and remove barriers to international collaboration among researchers.

As co-chair of the EU-funded Trans-Atlantic Platform and president of SSHRC, I am proud of SSHRC's role as co-lead in this partnership. SSHRC is lead for the Americas, and the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research serves as the lead for Europe.

A concrete example of what T-AP can accomplish is the [Digging into Data Challenge](#). SSHRC is a key funder of this program. As information and research materials



Ted Hewitt, SSHRC President

increasingly become digitised, the fundamental information that social science and humanities researchers need can get lost in the sheer volume of materials now available.

The question of how best to tap “big data” in search of key insights, and how to develop and apply computer-based tools to help social sciences and humanities researchers access it, has been explored since the competition's inception in 2009. The relationships built through T-AP – now embracing 16 agencies representing 11 countries – have allowed this initiative to be expanded to an impressive array of funders and researchers.

Specifically, the T-AP Digging into Data Challenge offers funding to international teams of researchers to explore new methodologies and techniques for harnessing “big data” to address their research questions. The latest competition closed in June with an unprecedented 109 applications received. Each of these proposals has at least 3 T-AP countries participating. Winners are expected to be announced early in 2017.



Past funding award winners have delved into, and shared knowledge about, accessing and compiling data on a variety of topics. Some examples of winning projects are:

- A study of the 1918 Spanish flu outbreak in the United States and how media shaped public opinion around it;
- An examination of Twitter data to see how words are used by men and women in different regions of the United Kingdom and the United States;
- A project that brought together political scientists from Canada, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom to conduct a large-scale analysis of the proceedings of their countries' respective parliaments from the 1800s to present day to create a dataset to facilitate the study of them.

Building on the success of the Digging into Data project, T-AP aims to develop other international funding opportunities to further the ability of social sciences

and humanities researchers around the world to work together to advance scholarship in key areas of pressing global concern.

Closer to home, our goals at SSHRC are increasingly complementary to those of T-AP. We will continue to invest in developing next-generation researchers throughout Canada's postsecondary institutions who are equipped with the latest research tools. And we will continue to connect decision-makers in all sectors – public, private and not-for-profit – with the evidence-based knowledge that builds strong communities and innovative societies. ■

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