

# WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

## Because It's Proliferating

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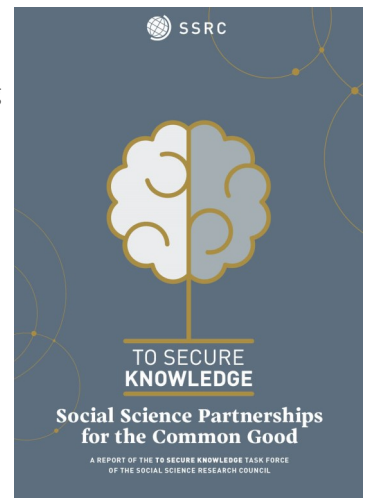
By Alondra Nelson, PhD, President, Social Science Research Council

Social scientists and the research we pursue with such passion are being buffeted on all fronts, a fact not unknown to frequent visitors to this space. Today social scientists confront scarcities: of funding, of career opportunities in academia, of public acceptance and respect, and of trust in the credibility and value of the work we do.

Yet, at the same time, social science seems to be everywhere—not only on our laptops and data repositories, but in government agencies, human rights organizations, media reports and, especially, in tech firms and other private companies. And social scientists, if not quite everywhere, are working at these institutions as well as in the academy—indeed, for certain types of work, the demand for social science skills is high.

While almost any moment can be characterized in a “best of times, worst of times” motif, this does feel like an inflection point. The unimaginable amounts of social data being collected make the potential for scholarly advancement and relevant impact exponentially greater. News stories such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal, with a social scientist at its center, demonstrate the multiple dangers—privacy violations, the use of social knowledge to manipulate democratic politics, deepened public skepticism as to what we are up to.

These types of challenges and opportunities led the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) to form the To Secure Knowledge Task Force in April 2017. Following 18 months of deliberation, discussion, and debate, consultations with experts and stakeholders inside and outside of the academy, and major investments of time and thought by its members, the task force's final report, [\*To Secure Knowledge: Social Science Partnerships for the Common Good\*](#), was released at an event in New York City last week. You can view the event presentations and the panel and public discussions [here](#).



The report examines the current environment for and changing institutional ecosystem of social science, including the factors mentioned above and others, making recommendations in the realms of funding, research quality, ethics, research training, and data.

Here I focus on what perhaps the Task Force spent the most time debating, and which is of course receiving considerable media coverage: data sharing and collaboration across private, government, and academic sectors to access data in ways that protect privacy. It is worth noting that this has been a longstanding interest of the SSRC, including in 1965, when the Council played a role in an effort to develop a National Data Center.

Data sharing has always been a concern for scholars, but a successful model of government-academic partnership and sharing of data has stood for decades—the US Census. This example of government-academic social research cooperation endures, despite the many political, technical, and budgetary stresses currently confronting the census.

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However, as the report states, “today’s information technologies have transformed the ways in which social scientists gather, share, process, and even conceive of data.” The impact of technology and other factors push us to urgently re-examine collaboration models and experiment with new ones.

In the report, the Task Force endorses the creation of a **National Secure Data**

**Service** (NSDS), first proposed by the **Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking** in its 2017 report. A NSDS would link data across the federal system, increasing accessibility, while protecting privacy. Such a resource has been needed for quite some time.

Of course, government data is but a portion of the data conundrum. The explosion in privately held data inspires vast new opportunities for social research, along with profound ethical concerns surrounding privacy and a divergence of incentives to share data given the centrality of intellectual property rights and profit-seeking for businesses.

The Task Force report encourages experiments in multisector data sharing that address ethical and privacy concerns, while affording new opportunities for knowledge production with broad public benefits. More pointedly, the Task Force, recommends the creation of “data commons” (of which NSDS is an example) that can preserve these principles: platforms in which publicly and/or privately held data could be brought together temporarily for research purposes, administered by a third-party entity.

The SSRC is currently involved in one such experiment, the [Social Data Initiative](#) (SDI). We are partnering with Social Science One and a bipartisan consortium of seven foundations to provide researchers access to previously unavailable Facebook datasets, while protecting privacy and maintaining scholarly independence.

The overarching conclusion of the Task Force, as presented in the report *To Secure Knowledge: Social Science Partnerships for the Common Good*, is that transformative changes in a number of sectors call for a new research compact, defined by collaboration between government, the private sector, philanthropy, and the academy. The forces re-shaping the social sciences emanate from many sectors, and it will require working with all of these to ensure social science research remains vital, vibrant, respected and influential, and committed to the broad public good fostered by informed public debate and policymaking. A new research compact along the lines contained in this report, pursued in earnest and with both flexibility and focus could, as the report says, “secure knowledge in a way that distributes both benefits and responsibilities across the institutional infrastructure.”

In the coming months, the Social Science Research Council will convene collaborators and develop initiatives that will help bring this new compact to fruition. The Council will also aim to foster research that examines the social implications of the spread and use of data, including shifting conceptions of privacy and risks of surveillance, even in the most rigorous social science research. And we will also deepen collaborations in our innovative research and capacity-building programs in the areas of social inequality, democracy and politics, peace and security, and digital culture, among others.

**If social science is everywhere, then the answer to “Why Social Science?” is, in one sense, self-evident. More and more, for better or worse, knowledge of the social world is the air we breathe.** Thus, the question for our task force was more “how” than “why”. How can social science as a vocation advance the understanding and use of this knowledge effectively and responsibly, how can institutional arrangements best benefit the common good, and how can all the relevant actors work together to support and realize this effort? The new research compact proposed in *To Secure Knowledge* is one key part of the answer.

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We welcome your feedback on the report. Please email [ToSecureKnowledge@ssrc.org](mailto:ToSecureKnowledge@ssrc.org).



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