

Charles Phelps Taft Research Center
at the University of Cincinnati
Research Support Application

Each section (I-V) should be placed at the start of a new page. All required materials must be included in a single document, uploaded to the electronic submissions system, no later than 5PM on the published day of the deadline. Departmental review is not required for this program.

I. General Information

- a. Name: XXXXXXXX
- b. M#: XXXXXX
- c. Department: XXXXX
- d. Position: XXXXXX
- e. Project title: Countering Information Warfare in the Digital Age: Winning the War on Truth.
- f. Time Period: November 20-23, 2019.
- g. Probable Results of a Grant (such as external funding, publications, and presentations):
 - i. Research talk for all interested UC faculty, students & community (immediate)
 - ii. Course visits/ guest lectures by collaborator (immediate)
 1. POL 1010 – Introduction to American Politics
 2. POL 3001C – Quantitative Research and Data Analysis
 3. POL 7050 – Research Methods & Design
 - iii. 3 publications (submissions beginning in Spring 2020)
 - iv. Research presentation at International Studies Association (March 2020)
 - v. Research plan for project development based on our previous collaborative research (to be executed in lead up to 2020 election)
 - vi. External funding applications (grant submission in Spring 2020)
- h. Other Funding Applied For or Received for This Project (list source and amounts requested and awarded): This project is currently being supported using faculty startup funds with some departmental assistance.
- i. If applying for a Cost-Share grant, please indicate whether or not Cost-Share is required by grant giving organization and/or the budget items are necessary for the project but not covered by grant. N/A

II. Budget:

Item	Rate	Days	Total:
R/T airfare WAS to CVG	\$175 ¹		\$175
Hotel	\$140 ²	3 Nights	\$420
Per Diem	\$76 ³	2 Days	\$152
		Total:	\$747

¹ Average of 5 lowest fares found using Kayak.com for 11/20-11/23

² Based on U.S. Federal per diem lodging rates: <https://www.federalpay.org/perdiem/2019/ohio/cincinnati>

³ Ibid.

III. Internal & External Grant History

- 1) National Asia Research Fellowship (2019- Present)
- 2) Fulbright Scholarship (2016-2017)
- 3) Leifur Eiriksson Foundation Scholarship (2014-2015)
- 4) Smith Richardson Foundation – World Politics and Statecraft Fellowship (2014-2015)
- 5) Moody Research Grand – LBJ Library (2014)
- 6) Ford Presidential Research Grant (2012, 2014)
- 7) Junior Fellow - Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (Institute for Human Sciences) (2013-2014)

IV. Project Proposal

The emergence of the internet as a central facet of modern society has enabled information warfare to gain new and frightening characteristics (Watts, 2018). Although individual practices such as propaganda and disinformation are all well-established tools of statecraft, the growth of platforms like Facebook and Twitter have radically enhanced their effectiveness. They allow individuals anywhere in the world to mask their true identities and rapidly disperse manipulative content under a guise of authenticity without obstacle or consequence. Episodes like the weaponization of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum illustrate both the potent capability of such methods and their deleterious effects on society (Singer and Brooking, 2018). By expanding access while eroding checks and editorial controls, social media has allowed information warfare to turn the idea of truth itself into a contested space (Pomerantsev, 2014; 2019).

Concerned by the growing use of fake news and its prominent role in the 2016 election, the Stand Up Republic (SUR) foundation, a nonpartisan civic affairs organization, commissioned a study in 2018 into how such exploitative practices might be countered. To conduct this study, SUR partnered with Evolving Strategies a political consulting firm that specializes in behavioral science and survey experiment methodology. The two organizations produced a slate of three advertisements designed to inform individuals about the dangers of fake news and nurture greater civic resilience against information warfare. Specifically, the three ads were fielded as part of an experiment prior to the 2018 midterm election and evaluated by their ability to engender skepticism within respondents and blunt the effectiveness of spurious media claims. This was tested by asking participants to assess the veracity of a series of fake news items. In July 2019, SUR and Evolving Strategies signed a data use agreement with the University of Cincinnati (UC) affording UC proprietary access to the data from this experiment with the goal of initiating a research collaboration and spurring future research on fake news.

The purpose of this proposal is to fund a trip to Cincinnati by Dr. Alex Oliver who is chief data scientist and director of experimental research at Evolving Strategies. This will be a 2-day visit on November 20-23, 2019.

Dr. Oliver's visit to UC will consist of 5 distinct components:

1: *Research Collaboration*: with Dr. Oliver on campus, we will have the opportunity to organize the existing data from 2018 and finalize the key findings and arguments from that portion of the study. This will be turned into an academic article that will be initially presented at ISA 2020 and subsequently submitted to an academic journal in spring 2020.

2: *Future Research*: The 2018 study was just the initial stage of a much larger research project on countering fake news. With the opportunity to freely discuss existing findings and uncertainties – we will be able to develop a strong research agenda to be carried out in the lead up to the 2020 election and beyond. This includes developing new theories and hypotheses based on our initial findings that can be tested as well as new design elements for future experiments.

3: *Funding Strategy*: Currently, this project is being funded through my faculty startup funds. These have covered the costs to date and are also being used to support one of our graduate students, Jelena Vičić, who is also a collaborator on the project. With Dr. Oliver on campus, we will be able to identify external funding sources and grant opportunities that can be pursued. Specifically, we'll hold meetings with UC's Office of Research to plan a grant application strategy for the coming year that will allow us to expand the project.

4: *A Research Presentation*: Dr. Oliver will publicly present the fake news experiment conducted with SUR in 2018. This presentation will be open to the entire UC community and can either be hosted at the Taft Center or elsewhere on campus (like the Innovation Hub). This will be promoted to a wide range of departments including political science, communications and journalism.

5: *Class Visits*: Lastly, Dr. Oliver has also offered to make course visits and presentations in several political science courses – particularly those concerning U.S. politics and experimental methods in political science. These include: POL 1010 – Introduction to American Politics; POL 3001C – Quantitative Research and Data Analysis; POL 7050 – Research Methods & Design. Dr. Brian Calfano, who teaches research methods and holds a joint appointment in political science and journalism, is particularly interested in having Dr. Oliver speak to his classes.

Fake news and the leveraging of social media as a tool for information warfare represents a growing national security threat that strikes at the core of a democratic society. This research project represents not only one of the first studies to examine the challenge posed by fake news – but also how such tactics might be overcome. Currently the project is in a critical stage and the opportunity to work closely with my collaborators will allow us to both capitalize on the work completed in 2018 and place UC at the forefront of an important public policy debate agenda heading into the 2020 election.

V. Curriculum Vitae

Please see attached:

Alex Oliver

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Updated 9/13/2019

Summary

Alex Oliver is Cofounder at ES Partners, a leading research firm in Washington, DC that specializes in using the scientific method to understand human behavior and opinion. He is also Chief Data Scientist at its sister firm, Evolving Strategies.

He works with Fortune 500 firms and independent political expenditure organizations. Since 2016, he has led over 30 major research engagements that have involved over 50,000 participants and have impacted over 50 million people.

His research has been covered in The New Yorker, Adweek, Politico, The Washington Post, The Hill, Roll Call, Campaigns & Elections, The Drum, and Real Clear Markets, among other media.

He has taught graduate seminars on campaign strategy, voter behavior, and public opinion at Boston University and Brandeis University.

He has a PhD in Political Science from Boston University, an MA in Economics from Tufts University, and a BA in Economics from Merrimack College.

Alex Oliver

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Education

2017 PhD, Political Science, Boston University, Boston, MA
2009 MA, Economics, Tufts University, Medford, MA
2007 BA, Economics, Merrimack College, North Andover, MA

Experience

2016 Cofounder, ES Partners, Washington, DC
2014 Chief Data Scientist, Evolving Strategies, Arlington, VA
2013 Data Scientist, Evolving Strategies, Arlington, VA

Appointments

2014 Lecturer, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
2012 Lecturer, Boston University, Boston, MA
2009 Teaching Fellow, Boston University, Boston, MA
2007 Teaching Assistant, Tufts University, Medford, MA

Teaching

2014 The American Congress, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
2014 Campaign Strategy, Boston University, Boston MA
2013 Legislative Behavior, Boston University, Boston, MA
2012 Voter Behavior, Boston University, Boston, MA
2012 American Politics & Use of Force, Boston University, Boston, MA