

DIGITAL /INFRASTRUCTURE /INSIGHTS FUND

2026 REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

USD 5,000 PER REPORT/QUESTION // UP TO 10 PAGES // PROPOSALS DUE 7 SEP 2026

Note: With this RFP we are looking for new areas of inquiry / research questions, not insights.
Please read the full description incl. AI policy before applying.

PRACTICAL DETAILS

AWARD USD 5,000 per report (fixed).

FORMAT A short exploratory report of up to 10 pages, plus a summary blog post for the D//F website, exploring a prevailing issue in the field or new area of inquiry.

AUDIENCE Funders, practitioners, and policy actors — not only academic readers.

ELIGIBILITY individuals / affiliated researchers / practitioners; single and co-authored.

SUBMISSION via Screendoor platform.

PROPOSALS DUE Monday, 7 September 2026.

TIMELINE Call published: Thursday, 27 August 2026; proposals close 7 September; selection mid-September; reports and blog posts delivered by mid-October 2026.

This will be D//F's final limited open call in the current form of the program.

As the Fund moves from open research grant-making toward a role as knowledge partner and advisor to public and private technology funders, the call will support a small set of exploratory reports on future areas of inquiry — similar in spirit to its inaugural [2018 RFP](#): **pointing to the questions that now need closer attention when supporting, building and deploying open technologies.**

2026 RFP

The 2026 RFP invites ideas for short exploratory reports — up to 6–10 pages, accompanied by a summary blog post for the D//F website.

Each of those briefs should take up one underexplored or newly emerging question at the intersection of open digital infrastructure, criticality, sustainability, governance, and the public interest — written for practitioners, researchers, and fellow funders in the field.

The aim is not to revisit the whole field or to fund large standalone projects, but to close the open-call phase with a small set of focused pieces that name gaps, register recent shifts, and flag what merits follow-up.

WHAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR

Strong proposals will:

- Name a specific, manageable question rather than a broad topic area.
- Explain why the question matters now, and what answering it would enable.

- Show awareness of existing work in the field, including prior D//F research where relevant.
- Match the scope to the format — focused and well argued rather than overextended.
- Be written with funders, practitioners, and policy actors in mind, not only academic audiences.
- Indicate, where relevant, how the findings could inform a framework, prototype, policy discussion, funding strategy, or other practical intervention.

POTENTIAL AREAS OF INQUIRY

The examples below are prompts, not a closed list. Applicants are welcome to define their own question.

// Sovereignty, geopolitics, and fragmentation

Digital sovereignty, industrial policy, and geopolitical competition now shape open-technology debates far more directly than in 2018, as state actors reposition open source as a tool of strategic competition. This raises new questions about trust, contribution scrutiny, and the coherence of a shared commons. What does such fragmentation mean for globally distributed communities, for decolonial perspectives, and for the boundaries of openness?

// Public funding and institutional design

Public investment in open infrastructure is becoming structural: the German Sovereign Tech Agency now invests over €24 million across more than 60 projects, and a 2025 feasibility study proposes an EU-wide Sovereign Tech Fund of €350 million in the next Multiannual Financial Framework. What can these maturing experiments teach about governance, accountability, and impact measurement? How do funders avoid concentrating support on the most visible projects at the expense of the critical mid-tier infrastructure beneath them — and how does corporate participation, through Open Source Program Offices or procurement policy, complement or complicate public investment?

// Global Majority perspectives and asymmetries

Open digital infrastructure is built and relied on globally, but resources, recognition, and decision-making power remain unevenly distributed (although centers of production changed significantly). What barriers, governance asymmetries, or overlooked forms of labor persist across geographies, languages, and communities — and which existing counter-practices deserve greater attention?

// Knowledge and research infrastructure

Repositories, metadata standards, and scholarly communication systems are a distinct and often overlooked layer of open infrastructure, with their own funding models, governance structures, and enclosure risks. What can their sustainability challenges teach the wider field about resourcing, governance, and resilience, and where do enclosure and commercial capture pose distinctive risks for the future of science?

// The boundaries of openness

Licensing controversies, supply-chain regulation, SBOMs, and open-washing in AI all point to shifting boundaries around openness. The EU Cyber Resilience Act (in force 2024, fully applicable 2027) exempts non-commercial FOSS but shifts compliance to manufacturers that integrate open source, leaving unresolved what it means to be an “open-source steward.” The 2024 XZ Utils backdoor — an attack enabled by a single burned-out volunteer — showed how underfunded maintenance is itself a security vulnerability. And the legal status of AI outputs trained on copyleft code remains genuinely contested. What frameworks — technological, legal, economic, or normative — are emerging to stabilize the meaning of openness under these pressures?

// Ecosystem architecture as public policy

Governments increasingly intervene not just to fund open-source projects but to steer the ecosystem’s technical choices. Mandates for memory-safe languages, open standards in procurement, and industrial policy favoring particular stacks are all attempts to architect the digital commons from above. Who gains legitimacy and resources under these interventions, and who is left outside the frame? And what

accountability should apply when public authorities become active architects of shared infrastructure rather than passive funders of it?

// Automation and the infrastructure beneath it

AI systems build new dependencies on open infrastructure — from training data and model weights to the FOSS tooling underneath machine learning. What obligations and strains does this create for the communities maintaining it, and how do they intersect with materiality and power? One case is AI-mediated code generation: when agents assemble packages without anyone engaging the communities or documentation behind them, the reciprocity loops maintainers depend on are severed even as usage scales — extraction that is structurally invisible. How should governance, funding, and policy respond? Under which conditions and provisions could automation systems benefit underproduced open software systems and maintainer wellbeing?

USE OF AI AND ORIGINALITY OF INQUIRY

This call is about original thinking, your experience and expertise.

The value of the briefings lies in the judgment, framing, and lived knowledge that an author brings to a question.

Proposals whose core research questions or contextual framing are generated by AI systems will be excluded from consideration.

In practice:

- The question and its framing must originate with you. Where the framing reads as the product of a generative system the proposal will not proceed.
- Assistive use is fine and need not be hidden. Copy-editing, translation, summarizing literature you already know, or checking references — provided the intellectual substance is yours.
- Disclose material use. If AI tools played a role in preparing the proposal, note briefly where and how.

ABOUT THE DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE INSIGHTS FUND

2018 – 2026

The Digital Infrastructure Insights Fund (D//F) was established in 2018 (i.a. in the wake of the Heartbleed Bug) by the Ford and Sloan Foundations, on a shared conviction: that sustaining open digital infrastructure is a matter of public interest, and that it must be mapped, explained, and supported over time — not only in moments of crisis.

Since those early days, D//F has grown into a multi-funder collaboration — backed by the Ford Foundation, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Omidyar Network, Schmidt Futures, and others — granting roughly USD 6 million across dozens of projects (infrastructureinsights.fund/projects).

D//F was created not as a pooled grant first, but to help build a field: curating knowledge, bringing people together across sectors, and making the often-invisible foundations of open technologies more legible to broader publics and institutions.

From the outset, we treated critical open digital infrastructure as a digital commons with civic, economic, and political consequences: a distinct software layer within (open) technologies, bound up with people, norms, standards, and regulation, and relied on by public services, economies, research institutions, and everyday life alike.

Open Digital Infrastructure is a public good with personal, social, economic, and cultural-political significance. Our shared lives are built on its foundations, and maintenance and governance here are never only technical questions — they are always questions of power, accountability, and value.

Across four open calls between 2018 and 2024, the Fund has worked as a platform for knowledge, a field-builder, and a bridge across sectors.

Our portfolio spans governance, security, community sustainability, equity, legal frameworks, and the political economy of open source, bringing together researchers and practitioners from science, civil society, industry, and government.

Over time, new support systems have emerged around open digital infrastructure — a Great Leap Forward. As new actors entered the field — many of them trusted ecosystem partners (see infrastructureinsights.fund/co-commissions) — the Fund's original mission has evolved.

Initiatives such as the Sovereign Tech Fund, Invest in Open Infrastructure, and Open Technology Research point to a field that is maturing, and increasingly in need of research-based guidance.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Since 2018, the conversation has shifted and grown more complex.

The question is no longer whether open digital infrastructure matters, but how it should be governed, financed, secured, and held accountable in the public interest.

The Fund's original questions remain valid, but are easier to place: criticality can be read through dependencies and institutional reliance; sustainability is now a matter of governance, labor, and incentives rather than goodwill; and public funding has become a serious — if still incomplete — counterpart to philanthropy.

TRANSITION

As this phase of exploration and consolidation closes, D//F's work continues in a different form.

Going forward, the platform and its network will increasingly function as a knowledge partner and strategic advisor to funders, research networks, and public-interest institutions seeking to invest more effectively in the infrastructure on which our shared digital life depends.

To close the circle that began in 2018, after almost a decade, it is fitting to surface what's on the horizon for the ecosystems coming of age.

With love,

D//F DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE INSIGHTS FUND