



Research Fund

Navigating misinformation and trust erosion in the digital age

Postdoctoral call for proposals

March 2024

Navigating misinformation and trust erosion in the digital age

The World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Risks Report¹ in January 2024 identified the proliferation of false and **misleading information as the most significant immediate risk to the global economy**. While this phenomenon is not new, the influence of digitalization, and particularly the accelerated advancement of artificial intelligence, has fundamentally transformed its reach and impact.

With the ability to create highly realistic yet entirely fabricated images, videos, and audio recordings, **AI-generated deepfakes can be used to spread misinformation, manipulate public opinion, and even defame individuals or public figures**. This development strikes in the context of an **alarming rise of societal and political polarization, at a global scale, often already fueled by misinformation**.²

The growing spread of misinformation by AI and other technologies poses a significant threat to citizens' trust, exacerbating divisions within society. As society becomes more polarized and divided, **the widening gaps lead to a decline in a sense of common purpose and the erosion of social cohesion**³, seriously **threatening the foundations of democracy that depend on informed citizens making free and responsible choices**.

Polarization also inhibits the functioning of governments, undermines economic stability, and can further increase conflicts, protests, and even violence. For instance, it can lead to situations where political parties or groups are unwilling to compromise or work together, resulting in an **inability to pass laws or make progress on important issues**. As a result, this could have negative impacts in a range of areas, strengthening resistance and **hindering advancements on critical issues**, including efforts to **tackle climate change, ensure public health and implement economic policies**⁴. Furthermore, it intensifies **uncertainty and unpredictability for businesses and investors, creating instability in financial markets**.

Academic research is instrumental in addressing the challenges of an **increasingly polarized** world amidst the emergence of artificial intelligence and its impact on changing information flows and what can be considered 'truth'.

In view of this identified risk, **the AXA Research Fund is seeking to support postdoctoral research geared towards assessing, identifying, quantifying, and understanding the socio-economic impact of misinformation and exploring solutions to mitigate it**.

We will look for innovative and transdisciplinary research projects which will focus on the following areas:

1. Investigating AI's impacts on media and information ecosystems, the actors at play, motivations, and strategies;
2. Examining the societal and economic impacts of AI modified information ecosystem (on public health, economic growth, climate policies, social cohesion, and political stability...);
3. Exploring the implications for democratic institutions and processes as well as other political regimes
4. Investigating the role of private sector firms in operationalizing AI in a safe and ethical way;
5. Investigating ways on how to best regulate new emerging technology systems to avoid increasing polarization;
6. Assessing the effectiveness of different mitigation and prevention strategies (including digital literacy as a proactive strategy and practical tool to combat misinformation).

¹ [WEF The Global Risks Report 2024.pdf \(weforum.org\)](#)

² [The Polarizing Impact of Political Disinformation and Hate Speech: A Cross-country Configural Narrative - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)

³ [Facts not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity | OECD iLibrary \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](#)

⁴ Ibid

AXA Fellowships Guidelines

AXA Research Fund

The AXA Research Fund's mission is to support outstanding researchers and it is committed to improving peoples' lives through innovative research in areas of Climate & Environment, Health, and Socioeconomics.

AXA Fellowships aim at supporting promising early-career researchers, **defined as no more than five years past the completion of their PhD**,⁵ on a topic aligned with AXA's priorities and societal challenges. The support of the AXA Research Fund should be transformative for the researcher and the advancement of their field. To apply for a grant, **researchers must not have a permanent (tenured or tenure-track) position.**

Duration

An AXA Postdoctoral Fellowship is awarded for **a period of 2 years.**

Institution Eligibility

The project calls are global. However, the AXA Research Fund partners with academic institutions only; thus, NGOs, governmental bodies, foundations, independent research centers, cultural institutions (such as museums), and hospitals are not eligible.

Each institution can present at most ONE CANDIDATE (for the entire institution, *not* one per department, faculty, or laboratory).

In case of several Expressions of Interest submitted from a single institution, all applications would be disqualified.

Institutions hosting an AXA Chair cannot request an extra post-doctoral fellowship for a researcher working on the AXA Chairholder's team.

No change of host institution will be possible after submission of the application

Researcher

Candidates should be of the highest caliber and have demonstrated outstanding research achievements, as evidenced by the usual indicators for assessing academic excellence such as research outputs (e.g., publications, citations), research activities (e.g., organizing networks, being involved in communities) and research impact (e.g., policy reports, specific recognition through awards, etc.).

AXA Fellowships aim at supporting promising early-career researchers who have been holding a PhD no longer than five years.⁶ **Candidates must be awarded their PhD before they submit their Expression of Interest. Candidates must have already defended their PhD certification before applying.**

Research Program

The research program should demonstrate its scientific originality and innovative nature and have the potential to contribute to a step change in the field considered. It is the applicant's responsibility to demonstrate the relevance of the proposed research topic to the AXA Research Fund.

Engagement and Obligations

Researchers are required to be proactive in engaging science with society when supported by the AXA Research Fund and use an open-data framework when applicable. Our researchers commit to sharing their project and communicating their research to a broad audience, supported by the AXA Research Fund. In addition, funded

⁵ There is a flexibility of 6 months regarding PhD date (i.e., PhD max 5 full years + 6 months), at the Expression of Interest date (i.e., March 25, 2024) i.e., **PhD defended after October 25, 2018**

⁶ There is a **flexibility for maternity/paternity leave: 6 months per child**. (For example, a candidate who has three children can consider 18 months).

researchers agree to provide both an annual and a final project report, as well as committing to sharing their research through speaking engagements in collaboration with the AXA Research Fund. Annual and final financial reports will be requested as well.

AXA Support for Dissemination and Career Development

The AXA Research Fund will provide support through proposed training sessions related to science communication, media, finance, and management. Furthermore, attention will be given to the opportunity for the grant to deliver a significant step-change in the career of the grantee.

Diversity

Diversity will be an important criterion in the selection process, as applied to the research topic, gender and geography.

Budget and Grant Allocation

An AXA Fellowship is awarded for a maximum amount of **140,000€ in total, to be spent over two years**. It is the applicant's responsibility to submit a carefully calibrated budget, appropriate for the ambition of the research program and justified in a detailed and coherent manner. The budget will help cover:

- Annual salary of the researcher (based on institution internal policy)
- Equipment/resources (databases, survey costs, consumables, etc.), academic activities (conferences, workshops, fieldwork, etc.)
- Outreach activities (beyond academic audiences).

Any other type of costs not listed above should be justified in the application template. **No overhead costs are eligible**. No additional budget will be granted. Budget reallocation during an ongoing project must be strongly justified.

Host institutions will be expected to participate in the AXA Fellowship's general funding with studentships, PhD support and material resources related to the research program. There is no minimum requirement on the institution's contribution. However, a larger contribution naturally makes the proposal more attractive. The institution's participation should be detailed in the budget section of the application form. Grants should not substitute for the host institution's responsibilities vis-à-vis its researchers. As a result, the grant cannot be used to procure basic laboratory equipment.

The AXA Research Fund will formalize its support through a **sponsorship agreement to be signed with the host institution**.

Ethics

The AXA Research Fund places extremely high importance on the ethics of the work it supports. Programs are required to comply fully with all relevant ethical review processes and for this compliance to be evidenced. Cases of scientific misconduct (such as fabrication, falsification, plagiarism or inappropriate behavior towards staff or other parties) will be considered as breaches of the AXA ethical principles⁷ and will be excluded from funding.

Intellectual Property

The researcher and the host institution remain fully independent to conduct the research project. AXA will not claim any right to the ownership or use of the results.

⁷ AXA Group Compliance and Ethics Code, 2019: [Compliance and Ethics Code | AXA](#)

Timeline & Application process

The AXA Research Fund's evaluation process has been designed to assess scientific excellence. The evaluations are monitored to ensure transparency, fairness, and impartiality in the treatment of proposals.

The AXA Research Fund partners with independent external providers to carry out the peer review process in accordance with criteria defined by the AXA Research Fund, the results of which are submitted to the Scientific Board for final selection. Please note that:

- The complete application must be submitted in English, on time, and online. It must respect the template structure and the page limit.
- The research topic must fall within the scope of the eligible topic focus.
- The candidate must submit a free-standing independent research project involving full-time work for the duration of the fellowship (with the possible exception of up to 20% time dedicated to teaching).

Timeline

Host institutions phase	Step 1 - Registration <i>Only if your institution is not already registered on the AXA Research Fund's online platform.</i>	March 25th, 2023 – April 10th, 2024 4 PM Paris time
	Step 2 - Expression of interest <i>On the AXA RF platform</i>	March 25th, 2024 – April 15th, 2024 4 PM Paris time
Researcher's phase	Step 3 - Research proposal submission <i>On the ESF platform, our partner organization (online link to be provided in due time)</i>	April 22nd, 2024 – May 16th, 2024 4 PM Paris time
	Step 4 - Rebuttal <i>On the ESF platform</i>	August 22nd, 2024 – August 29th, 2024 4 PM Paris time
AXA Research Fund	Results announcement by email to the candidates	December 2024

Projects selected for funding are expected to start between January 2025 and September 2025.

Application process

Step 1 – Registering

To apply for the AXA Fellowship grants, academic institutions must be registered on our platform: <https://institution.axa-research.org/>. You can check if your institution is already registered in the database via the above link. **If your institution is already on our database, skip the registration and your institution's operational contact can log in directly using the login details they defined.**

Institutions should appoint a single point of contact (“Operational Contact”) who will handle relations with the AXA Research Fund and be responsible for candidate’s application.

Step 2 – Expression of Interest ON OUR ONLINE APPLICATION PLATFORM

Only host institutions can apply, applications cannot be directly submitted by individual researchers.

To submit an online Expression of Interest, host institutions need to follow the steps below:

- 1. Log onto our online application platform:** <https://institution.axa-research.org/>
- 2. Go to the “Application” tab and click the “Post-doc” link to go to the “Expression of Interest” page**
- 3. Click “New” and fill in the online Expression of Interest form. Attach a short CV (3 pages maximum)**
- 4. Click “Submit”**

At the stage of Expression of Interest, you will be requested to provide the following information:

- About the candidate
 - Name
 - Birth date
 - PhD defense date
 - Current institution the candidate is affiliated with
 - Short CV (3 pages maximum)
- About the research program
 - Project description: 3000 characters including spaces

You will receive an email confirming that your Expression of Interest has been submitted. If you don’t receive the email, please check your spam folder, and, if needed, contact fellowships@axa.com.

You will be able to edit your Expression of Interest as long as you have not clicked on “Submit”. Once submitted, your Expression of Interest can no longer be edited. The Expression of Interest will be reviewed by the AXA Research Fund. You will be informed of the decision pertaining to your Expression of Interest by email.

Expressions of Interest received after the deadline, by email, or incomplete will not be considered.

Step 3 – Full Application

Academic institutions will be given access to the dedicated ESF platform to nominate their candidates by entering their name & email address online. Nominated candidates will be invited to submit their research proposals and will be provided with the necessary information to access the application form. Eligibility criteria of the application call will be screened by our partner organization.

Candidates will have 4 weeks to submit their proposals through the ESF platform. Please note that if the host institution doesn’t nominate the candidate on the ESF platform, the candidate won’t have access to the platform.

Applications received after the deadline, by email, or incomplete will not be considered.

Step 4 – Scientific Assessment

The evaluation of the scientific quality of research proposals is carried out in a fully independent manner by our partner peer-review organization.

Each application is reviewed by two relevant experts who will assess the candidate’s excellence and the research program’s scientific quality.

Step 5 – Rebuttal

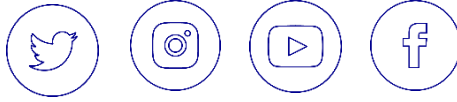
Candidates will have the opportunity to respond online to peer review experts' comments before their applications are reviewed by the AXA Research Fund. The main purpose of the rebuttal is to provide applicants with the possibility to comment on any potential misinterpretations or misunderstandings that may have been made by the experts while initially assessing their proposals.

Step 6 – Selection & Results Publication

The Scientific Board of the AXA Research Fund selects to fund applications based on strength of the scientific case, peer review assessments, the potential of the project, candidate profile and of the institution and overall impact. The AXA Research Fund informs the candidates of the decisions by email. Results will also be made available on the AXA Research Fund's website <https://www.axa-research.org/en>.

The Scientific Board's decision is final and cannot be appealed. It can neither be disputed nor subject to explanations or justifications, no feedback will be provided.

Participation in the call for applications implies acceptance of the above-mentioned rules.



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