Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia - Program for Excellent Projects of Young Researchers (PROMIS)

Project Grant
Summary Report

Project Reference No:

6066339

Project Acronym:

MIDI

Title of Proposed Project:

Media Distortion Index

Score Summary:

Excellence Assessment	Reviewer 1 (R1)	Reviewer 2 (R2)	Reviewer 3 (R3)	Average score (points)
Are the specific objectives for the Project clear and measurable? (1-5)	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
Are the specific objectives realistic and achievable within the duration of the Project? (1-5)	4.00	3.00	4.00	3.67
Is the proposed research scientifically well founded? (1-5)	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
Is the proposed research beyond the state-of-the-art and ground-breaking? (1-5)	4.00	3.00	4.00	3.67
Are the results of the proposed research significant and applicable? (1-5)	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
Does the proposed research have perspective? (1-5)	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
Total (max 30 points)	**24.00**	**22.00**	**24.00**	**23.33**

Impact Assessment	Reviewer 1 (R1)	Reviewer 2 (R2)	Reviewer 3 (R3)	Average score (points)

Does the proposed research contribute to the development of new research groups, improvement of professional capacities of young scientists in the Republic of Serbia, and launching research in new areas and directions? (1-5)	4.00	5.00	4.00	4.33
Does the proposed research have an impact on the society, economy and environment? (1-5)	4.00	4.00	3.00	3.67
Are the proposed measures for dissemination and application of the results adequate and well planned, including open research and open data issues? (1-5)	2.00	4.00	4.00	3.33
Total (max 15 points)	**10.00**	**13.00**	**11.00**	**11.33**

Implementation Assessment	Reviewer 1 (R1)	Reviewer 2 (R2)	Reviewer 3 (R3)	Average score (points)
What is the quality of credentials of the principal investigator, including his achievements during his/her higher education, verified scientific achievements and promotions in his/her career? What is the quality of credentials of other members of the Project team? (1-5)	3.00	4.00	5.00	4.00
Is the implementation plan realistic and is the risk management properly implemented? (1-5)	3.00	2.00	4.00	3.00
Are the working conditions (space and equipment), provided by the Scientific institution(s) in which the participants will be employed during the implementation of the Project, adequate? (1-5)	4.00	5.00	5.00	4.67
Is the budget realistic and well balanced? (1-5)	3.00	4.00	4.00	3.67
Total (max 20 points)	**13.00**	**15.00**	**18.00**	**15.33**

Total score	**47.00**	**50.00**	**53.00**	**50.00**

Do the average scores of the Project Proposal pass the qualifying thresholds:

− 60% of the maximum numbers of points for excellence (i.e., 18 points), impact (9), and implementation (12), respectively,	**Yes**

− 70% of the total maximum number of points (i.e., 45.5 points).	**Yes**
Does the Project Proposal qualify for further evaluation based on the scores given (conditions for all thresholds need to be fulfilled)?	**Yes**

Peer Reviewer's judgement is that (Place an X next to the relevant option)**:**	Reviewer 1 (R1)	Reviewer 2 (R2)	Reviewer 3 (R3)	Summary
This proposal is scientifically or technically flawed				
This proposal does not meet one or more of the assessment criteria				
This proposal meets all assessment criteria but with clear weaknesses	x	x		x
This is a good proposal that meets all assessment criteria but with minor weaknesses			x	
This is a strong proposal that broadly meets all assessment criteria				
This is a very strong proposal that fully meets all assessment criteria				

Please summarize the main arguments provided by all three Project Proposal reviewers, focusing on argumentation supporting a positive or negative assessment of the project proposals, for each category (Excellence, Impact, Implementation), in 1−2 sentences for each category. Please stress if a consensus assessment has not been reached among three reviewers.

Excellence Assessment

Strenghts
This is an original and innovative research project proposal, which aims to apply comparative online research and analyse at first the psychological, therefore emotional effects of powerful mass media company's (MMC) social media accounts, with a particular emphasis on Twitter. Secondly, the researchers aim to develop a Media Distortion Index (MIDI) web application. Finally, they aim to establish a laboratory for digital sociometrics, where the researchers will mostly apply qualitative methods to measure social relationships. The comprehensive literature review positions this multi-disciplinary study at the intersection of media sociology, social media, computer mediated communication, information technologies, social psychology, society and social wellbeing. The methodology of the project is broadly appropriate. The main research hypothesis is well described. The proposed research project has future prospective. It is of international scope and will be useful in particular to researchers who study in the field of mainstream media, social media and news media institutions, but also broader areas of cultural studies, cultural sociology and psychology. The final goals and the expected results are useful to understand the main implications of the media (Twitter) distortion in many countries. The scientific foundation of the proposal is good, and it has some potential to reach ground-breaking results.
Weaknesses

1. Use of terms: The sub- objectives of the project are rather tasks or activities than aim or goals of the project.
2. Limitations related to Twitter: MIDI will be able to analyse texts from Twitter only (the reviewer presumes, that the reason for this is that only Twitter give permissions for this kind of data). This brings us to the dependency on Twitter. Twitter's policy solutions are not dependent on the project, the company can change its privacy guidelines at any time as Facebook or Instagram did in the past few years. The other problem with the Twitter is that its daily users are disappearing, it could happen, even during the period of the research that it will lose its importance and other platforms will be more important.
3. As the third task depends on the success of the web application, the function of the Lab could be explained more thoroughly.
4. "scientifically accepted psychometric dictionaries": Used dictionaries of LIWC have more than 9 languages. It is not clear which version is going to be used in the project, but the smallest count of languages starts from 10 (i.e.: Turkish, Hungarian are usually included). As a result, the project mentions mass media companies, but it is just the Twitter. The project would like to establish a laboratory, but it depends on Twitter's actual privacy policies. The project like to have 11 countries involved in the project, but the analysed platform's importance is unsure in the countries. (Not to mention here the different level of use in the countries.). Maybe the involvement of 11 countries is a bit too ambitious, but it is understandable. It could use the project if it could analyse the pros and cons of similar (or fairly similar) applications (e.g. Natural Language, StarSchema, SentiOne, and other softwares).
5. Difference of media systems: what is not really explained in the proposal is the question of the media systems in different countries. What is going to be the basic ground of understanding the results if there is no theoretical or empirical view on media systems or political systems or the interplay of the two, and the role of microblogging in these countries? This should need more elaboration from the research team.
6. Agenda – setting theory of communication: what is striking is that the project sounds more like a psychology research than a media research. Given the nature of the project focuses on (social) media's effect, I believe the third theory needs to be strengthened and elaborated more. Because from the agenda-setting theory (McCombs and Shaw), we already know that news media has the ability to influence what kind of topics will be circulated to the public. This means that MMC's influences their audience, MMC's do not necessarily tell them what to think, but they tell them what to think about. In sum, journalists have the capacity to influence what we think. Given the main objective of the proposed project is to first find out what kind of news MMC's spread to the public, and secondly find out the emotional reflections of these news, it would be better to reflect this fact on the literature review more thoroughly.

Impact Assessment

Strenghts

The results of the project can become a great novelty. This project has certainly possibility to impact on social level. The data gathered via MIDI project will later be used in social sciences. It will also lead to the development of new research groups. The scientific research on the impact of MMC's news distributions via their social media accounts is scarce. Therefore, scientific publications produced with the help of MIDI research project findings would certainly add to the academic literature.
The use of ERC H2020 Guidelines on Ethics in Humanities and Social Sciences and taking care of GDPR-rules are strengths of the proposal. It would be even stronger if the data handling policies and the readiness of project specific papers would be included in the tasks.

Weaknesses

1. Laboratory for Digital Sociometrics: Many similar software is available on this field, but the rapid developments and the ever-changing tendencies among the users allow more analytical tools to be created.

2. Connections to the stakeholders: Press conferences are planned, different sections for legislators on the webpage are also mentioned, but meetings with potential users (from media to research institutes, from economy even to health industries) could give bigger impact on the project. Moreover, the expected encouragement and stimulation of MMC's seems a wishful thinking and should be reported more realistically.
Explanation: Mass media industry (MMC's) is connected and dependent to powerful political institutions with different ideologies. The daily production routine of the news is shaped by the ideological tendencies of these newspaper, by the individual journalistic preferences, which are in turn dependent on cultural background, political affiliations and by the interpretation of normative standards (McNair 2009). After all, news is socially constructed (Fowler 1991; Deuze 2005; Gans 1979; Schudson 2007, 2003), it is an industry with its own commercial self-interest. O'Donnell (1994), for instance, puts it clearly that "The news industry is, from an economic point of view, just one other industry within advanced industrial societies, and is as an institution – whatever the views of individual journalists – saturated with the values of those who have effective control over the economic and political system within which it operates" (p. 353). News, then, is never a mere recording or reporting of the world 'out there', but synthetic, value-laden account which carries within it the dominant assumptions and ideas of the society within which it is produced.
MMC's are, additionally, linked to private industry for the sake of profit. That is why, news produced by private MMC's is hardly objective, unbiased and realistic. News is not a neutral phenomenon emerging straight from "reality", but a product.
Journalists sweeten their material – or sometimes making it up – for the sake of a better narrative. Therefore, it can hardly be realistic. Honesty, truth and reality's market value is too little appreciated in the history of ethics. We are living in an age of misinformation, in the post-truth era of dishonesty and deception. We are surrounded by fake news, particularly in online social media platforms. In the contemporary digital capitalist world, we live in, the increasing impact of fake news is threatening the reality. Everyone, especially our political leaders, lies (Keyes, 2004). Truth telling is predictable, its entertainment value is nearly nil. Whereas, telling lies can be fun, fashionable, and far more entertaining than telling the truth (Keyes 2004). The book Life on the Screen by Turkle (2011) says that cyberspace gives form to post-modern values of surface over depth, simulation over reality, and playfulness over seriousness. Deception has always been with us, but the Internet, information, communication technologies and social media platforms makes it easier and more tempting. The Internet is a mishmash of rumour passing as fact, press releases posted as news articles, deceptive advertising, malicious rumours, and outright scams. In such a dirty and competitive global liberal economic system, expecting MMC's social media accounts to report more realistically sound a bit utopic.

3. Dissemination plan: There is no relevant information in which journals, the publications are planned. Precise information on journal (title, discipline, no of issues, etc) is missing. Due to important cost of conferences, it is recommended to present the more detailed information on conference output and predicted impact.
4. Too general description: Estimated economy and environment impact of the project were not mentioned though.

Implementation Assessment

Strenghts

The research team as well as PI have enough credentials to fulfil the project successfully. PI have numerous published works on topics covering communication, media studies, mass media usage, information theories, social networks, media addiction, old versus new media consumption, and the usage of Facebook. Also, PI's bachelors and master's degrees are in the field of communication and journalism, which is essential for this project. One of the researchers is experienced in the field of digital sociology and two of the researchers are expert in research topics such as sociology of everyday life, social theory, discourse analysis, cultural studies, media studies, and semiology. Their knowledge is important for the implementation of MIDI software and of LIWC software program that will analyse qualitative text files. One researcher, in the team, has a degree from the field of Electrical and Computer Engineering – Applied Computer Science. This researcher can help in the production of MIDI web application and MIDI website, as well as the formation of digital sociometrics laboratory.
PI has expertise in statistical software and speaks three languages out of 9 planned. The quality of the proposal show adequate preparation and scientific interests of all members are related to the project topic.
The implementation plan is clear and the research does not require specific working conditions – the desktop computers are adequate for API access and coding issues. The workspace and the conference room will be provided by scientific institution.

Weaknesses

1. Experience and language competences: According to the CV, the PI does not have any previous exercise in projects like this, but he has expertise in statistical software and speaks three languages out of 9 planned. The bigger question is how the group will implement the other 6 languages, since that is not visible from the CVs.
2. Poor risk management: the risk matrix is very general, the important analyses related to Twitter are missing. One aspect of this risk is mentioned in the project too, however, it gives no answer what would mean 'We have to be ready to gather data other way, even by employing different technology'. Would that different technology give the same inputs for the project?
3. Unclear budget expanses: Conference travels are important for international dissemination of the project. Some cost related to equipment (TV and supporter, tablet) are not explained.

Budget issues and recommendations
State any comments of all three reviewers on the budget, as well as concrete recommendations for budget reductions or modifications

Strenghts

The budget is realistic and well balanced (personal costs, travels, investments, etc.), however some cost needs further explanation.

Weaknesses

The clarification why equipment (TV and supporter, tablet) is needed for project implementation is not provided. The description related to the conferences should be more specific.

Clarifications

State any issues to be resolved or clarified

Strenghts
Weaknesses
1. The use of the notion: “scientifically accepted psychometric dictionaries” needs further clarification. Taking into consideration the importance of the dictionary as a reference of pre-existing categories, it should be more precisely indicated why only LIWC is “accepted”, so taken into account. . It could use the project if it could analyse the pros and cons of similar (or fairly similar) applications (e.g. Natural Language, StarSchema, SentiOne, and other softwares). 2. Use of different project title: In one biography, the alternative title of project is used: Politics and Normativity of Affects instead of MIDI – it should be explained. 3. Number of countries covered by the research: The researchers aim to conduct a comparative online research analysis of MMC’s news tweets in 9 languages and in 11 countries. In the methodology section one aspect that could be outlined more clearly is the exact number of countries. As there are 12 countries mentioned in their proposal not 11 (see Page 4 on the project proposal): (1) Serbia, (2) Spain, (3) Italy, (4) France, (5) Portugal, (6) Netherlands, (7) the UK, (8) Germany, (9) the USA, (10) Brazil, (11) Russia and (12) Argentina.

Risks

State any significant risks which need to be considered

Strenghts
No strenghts.
Weaknesses

The important analyses related to Twitter are missing. MIDI will be able to analyse texts from Twitter only (the reviewer presumes, that the reason for this is that only Twitter give permissions for this kind of data). This brings us to the dependency on Twitter. Twitter's policy solutions are not dependent on the project, the company can change its privacy guidelines at any time as Facebook or Instagram did in the past few years. The other problem with the Twitter is that its daily users are disappearing, it could happen, even during the period of the research that it will lose its importance and other platforms will be more important. One aspect of this risk is mentioned in the project too, however, it gives no answer what would mean 'We have to be ready to gather data other way, even by employing different technology'. Would that different technology give the same inputs for the project?

Final recommendation

Strenghts

1. It will create a tool that could be used by various stakeholders.
2. The group has expertise in statistical software.
3. The PI and The group of researchers have lots of potential in the future.
4. GDPR rules and ethics are included in the proposal.
5. The budget is generally well planned.

Weaknesses

1. Some methodology assumption related to the use of psychometric dictionaries should be explained
2. The risk analysis is weak.
3. The project does not include any other major mass communication company just the Twitter - the MIDI tool depends on it.
4. The newly established laboratory depends on the above-mentioned points.
5. The common (theoretical or empirical) ground for the analysed countries is missing.
6. More detailed dissemination plan should be presented, especially focusing on stakeholders, conferences and publications,
7. The budget needs clarifications - some cost categories should be revised according to presented dissemination program.

Specific focus:

In the first phase of creating the MIDI application, researchers within the MIDI project must show that the data they gather use and disseminate to the academic community and beyond meets the highest methodological standards. Moreover, the data obtained from 11 (or 12) countries have to be collected using standardized and, therefore, comparable techniques. This will ensure the reliability of the collected data.

Again, to increase the reliability of the research project, a good estimate of 11 countries news media is critical to the success of this project. This means that its essential to draw an "informed picture" of the national media system. I suppose for many, if not all, of the countries included in the research, this information is available. One of the most critical parameters that the PI needs to know is the structure of the media system in terms of ownership and control or other relevant parameters.

Broadly speaking, this research project strives to investigate positive and negative emotions expressed in Twitter posts of powerful mass media companies. What is meant by "powerful" needs to be briefly elaborated. Are they talk about MMC's with high circulation rate, needs to be clarified?