

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

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November 10, 2014

The Honorable France Cordova
Director, National Science Foundation
4201 Wilson Blvd
Arlington, VA 22230

Dear Dr. Cordova:

I am concerned that a National Science Foundation (NSF)-approved grant, "ICES: Large Meme Diffusion Through Mass Social Media" (Award #1101743), was intended to create standards for online political discussion. According to the grant abstract published on the NSF website, the research team planned to:

"... create a web service open to the public for monitoring trends, bursts, and suspicious memes. This service could mitigate the diffusion of false and misleading ideas, detect hate speech and subversive propaganda, and assist in the preservation of open debate."

The web service developed under the grant was named "Truthy," a term borrowed from political satirist Stephen Colbert. Truthy was used to target political messages and commentary connected to "Tea Party," "GOP" and "conservative."

While some have argued that Truthy *could be used* to better understand things like disaster communication or to assist law enforcement, instead it appears Truthy focused on examples of "false and misleading ideas, hate speech, and subversive propaganda" communicated by conservative groups. Whether by amazing coincidence or on purpose, it appears that several social media accounts that were highlighted by Truthy were subsequently terminated by the owners of the social media platforms, effectively muzzling the political free speech of the targeted individuals and groups.

In presenting and publishing the findings of their taxpayer-supported work, the research team proudly described how the web service targeted conservative social media messages. Their presentations featured examples of what they found to be online political speech "abuses" by supporters of these groups (e.g., "Abuse of Social Media and Political Manipulation"). The authors also alluded to instances in which they were aware that some of these individuals' social media accounts had been terminated.

It should be noted that there is significant and growing concern about the reluctance of owners of some social media platforms to limit or block free speech in any form, including threats to commit rape and murder. Against that backdrop, it would be truly shocking if NSF funds contributed to suppression of

online political speech. It is also of interest that at least one prominent federal official has called recently for the federal government to regulate and limit online political speech.

The Committee and taxpayers deserve to know how NSF decided to award a large grant for a project that proposed to develop standards for online political speech and to apply those standards through development of a website that targeted conservative political comments.

I request all information in the Foundation's possession about Award #1101743, "ICES: Large: Meme Diffusion Through Mass Social Media," a \$919,917.00 grant made by the Foundation in July 2011. This information should include:

- The application submitted to the Foundation for the above project.
- The Foundation solicitation for proposals that elicited the application; every internal and external e-mail, letter, memorandum, record, note, text message or other document that pertains to development of the solicitation; and a list of all applications received in response to the solicitation. (Please denote applications which were recommended for awards and which received awards.)
- For the above project, every e-mail, letter, memorandum, record, note, text message, all peer reviews considered for selection and recommendations made by the research panel to NSF, or document of any kind that pertains to NSF's consideration and approval, including any approved amendments to the grants.
- The annual and final reports received by NSF for the above project, as well as any interim reports and every e-mail, letter, memorandum, record, note, text message or other document received or sent by NSF about the project during its active phase or subsequent to the project's completion.
- NSF rules and other official guidance provided to its staff, external reviewers and grant applicants regarding use of taxpayer funds by NSF grantees that directly or indirectly supports political action and advocacy.

I would appreciate if the information described above could be forwarded to me as soon as possible. If your staff has any questions, please contact Cliff Shannon, Staff Director of the committee's Research and Technology Subcommittee at Cliff.Shannon@mail.house.gov or 202.226.9783.

Sincerely,



Lamar Smith
Chairman