Editorial: Censoring the scientific enterprise, one grant at a time



Misinformation research matters

This work is critical on its own. Results of misinformation research inform how we handle education, public service announcements, weather warnings, emergency response broadcasts, health advisories, agricultural practices, product recalls, and more. It’s how we get people to integrate data into their work, whether their work involves things like farming, manufacturing, fishing, or something else.

Understanding how speech on technical topics is perceived, drives trust, and changes behavior can help us ensure that our speech is more effective. Beyond its economic impact, research on misinformation helps create an informed public—the foundation of any democracy. Contrary to the president’s

executive order, it does not “infringe on the constitutionally protected speech rights of American citizens.”

Misinformation research is only a threat to the speech of people who seek to spread misinformation.

Politics and science

Political attacks on misinformation research is censorship, driven by a dislike for the results it produces. It is also part of a larger threat to the NSF and the economic and social benefits that come from publicly funded research.

The NSF is a “pass through agency”—most of its annual budget (around $9 billion) passes through the agency and is returned to American communities in the form of science grants (80 percent of the budget) and STEM education (13 percent). The NSF manages these programs via a staff that is packed full of expert scientists in physics, psychology, chemistry, geosciences, engineering, sociology, and other fields. These scientists and the administrative staff (1,700 employees, who account for around 5 percent of its budget) organize complex peer-review panels that assess and distribute funding to cutting-edge science.

In normal times, presidents may shift the NSF’s funding priorities—this is their prerogative. This process is political. It always has been. It always will be. Elected officials (both presidents and Congress) have agendas and interests and want to bring federal dollars to their constituents. Additionally, there are national priorities—pandemic response, supercomputing needs, nanotechnology breakthroughs, space exploration goals, demands for microchip technologies, and artificial intelligence advancements.

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