Forbes

Most Government-Sponsored Research Is Simply Wasteful, But "Truthy" Is Menacing To Boot

By George Leef
October 22, 2014

The federal government has become a vast cornucopia for people who know how to play the system. If you do, you can enjoy showers of money for doing things that few if any Americans would willingly pay for.

Just to point to a recent instance that made headlines, after Democrats griped that the Center for Disease Control had been crippled in its ability to deal with Ebola because of budget cuts, quite a few writers scrutinized the research that the CDC had been paying for. As Michael Tanner of Cato Institute showed in this column, CDC bureaucrats have been funding research into such crucial questions as why lesbians tend to be overweight while gay men do not, why reruns of *Seinfeld* are so popular, and how quickly husbands and wives make up after a fight.

Wasteful stuff that doesn't do anything to combat disease, but at least such research doesn't threaten our freedom.

But now consider a research project that's being funded by the National Science Foundation. The project purports to detect what the team of researchers label "social pollution" on the Internet. Specifically, the research focuses on Twitter use with the goal of learning how ideas spread through our culture.

Keep in mind that the mission of the National Science Foundation is to "promote the progress of science; to advance the national health, prosperity, and welfare." Putting aside the question whether there is any constitutional authority for broad brush spending for the "general welfare," (Madison would have said there wasn't), does this research come close to doing so?

The research team (professors at Indiana University) say that their investigation of Twitter usage will be useful in distinguishing between memes (ideas that propagate in popular culture) that arise "in an organic manner" and memes that are "manipulated" into existence. Even if we make the heroic assumption that analysis of Twitter accounts can enable them to make that distinction, how does it make anyone better off – other than the researchers themselves?

What takes this research out of the "what a waste of money" category and puts it into the "menacing government nosiness" category is the fact that the project, named "Truthy" after TV personality Stephen Colbert's term "truthiness," has a clear and chilling ideological slant. Truthy zooms in on tweets including hashtags like "teaparty" and estimates the "partisanship" of their senders.

This is reminiscent of the IRS's "Be On the Lookout" words, which led to scrutiny of groups presumed to oppose the continuous expansion of the federal government. Using words like "constitution" or "tea party" led to exceedingly minute and slow review of applications for tax-exempt status by IRS officials. Similarly, in this project, only the "truthiness" or partisanship of Twitter users who aren't on board with the reigning big government philosophy is to be examined.

Just what is the objective of this research? According to the award abstract for the project, it could be used to "mitigate the diffusion of false and misleading ideas, detect hate speech and subversive propaganda, and assist in the preservation of open debate."

Stop right there. It is no business of the government to do any of that, except to preserve open debate, which calls for it to merely abide by the First Amendment's prohibition against laws that abridge the freedom of speech or the press.

Unfortunately, many Americans these days are not dedicated to free speech. That freedom allows the spread of ideas they dislike, ideas that could undermine confidence in the "progressive" project of turning the United States into a centrally planned, tightly regulated social welfare state. Instead of free speech, they're fine with restrictions so that whatever speech is allowed is "fair" and not harmful to anyone's tender feelings.

Censorship by good people with good intentions appeals to many modern "liberals."

Politicians — and even worse regulators appointed by them — might put the findings of this study to use in Orwellian ways, shaping social discourse by declaring that ideas they don't like are "hate speech" or "subversive propaganda." Statists always pay lip service to free and open debate, but their goal is power and they are loath to chance that over concern about the importance of a mere abstraction: free speech.

In his recent Washington Post article, "The government wants to study 'social pollution' on Twitter," Federal Communications Commission member Ajit Pai got right at the heart of the problem here. "To those who wish to shape the nation's political dialogue," Pai wrote, "social media is dangerous. No longer can a cadre of elite gatekeepers pick and choose the ideas to which Americans will be exposed."

Precisely. Remember how indignant Dan Rather and the establishment news industry were when people they disparaged as "bloggers in their pajamas" easily refuted Rather's big story about President Bush and the Texas Air National Guard during the 2004 election? The great, unregulated marketplace of ideas on the Internet is bad news for the "elite gatekeepers" of public

opinion. Government should not spend one dollar on "research" that might be used to control what some people regard as "social pollution."

Barack Obama's successor in the White House should choose as his cabinet heads only people who will root out all wasteful and unconstitutional expenditures and let them know that continuance in office depends on their doing so. Bye, bye, Truthy.