

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

2321 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6301

(202) 225-6371

[www.science.house.gov](http://www.science.house.gov)

November 25, 2014

The Honorable Lamar Smith  
Chairman  
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology  
2321 Rayburn HOB  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Smith,

We write to express our alarm at the direction you are continuing to take the Science, Space, and Technology Committee in your actions regarding the National Science Foundation (NSF) and merit-reviewed scientific research at our nation's great research universities.

There is one grant in particular that has garnered particular attention in recent weeks, "ICES: Large Meme Diffusion through Social Media," awarded by NSF's Algorithmic Foundations Program in 2011 to several faculty in the Indiana University School of Informatics and Computing. You offered several opinions about this grant in your November 10 letter to NSF Director Dr. France Córdova that are strikingly similar to opinions offered by others in some recent sensationalist media coverage of the grant. Since neither we nor our staffs have the relevant expertise to weigh in on the scientific merits of any of the 60 or so grants that you have pursued so far in your campaign against NSF's gold standard merit-review process, we have refrained from offering our own opinions on any given grant. However, the real experts have spoken up publicly on the ICES grant, now commonly known as "Truthy." In fact, representatives of the entire U.S. computer science research community have spoken up in defense of this grant, and we are happy to quote them to you.

In a November 3 article in *Science* magazine, one of the lead researchers on the grant is quoted as saying, in response to erroneous coverage by Fox News and the *Washington Free Beacon*, and an op-ed by Federal Communications Commissioner Mr. Ajit Pai, "The headlines are saying something that is completely false and fabricated. We are not defining hate speech. We are not tracking people. We don't have a database."

In a November 4 letter to our Committee, the Computing Research Association, The Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence, The Association for Computing Machinery, The Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics, and the USENIX Association stated, "**This work is focused on significant research problems in computer science** [*emphasis added*]...The tools developed in the course of this research are capable of making no political judgments, no prognostications, and no editorial comments, nor do they provide any capability for exerting any control over the Twitter stream they analyze. The work is not a database tracking hate speech, or even defining it. It simply visualizes the patterns of flow of publicly available information in the Twitter stream."

Going back to earlier coverage, an outlet no less respected (and conservative) than the *Wall Street Journal* reported favorably on the Truthy research in a 2011 story entitled, “Decoding Our Chatter.” The project has also been covered in a positive light by CNN, *The New York Times*, BBC, *USA Today*, *The Atlantic*, *Newsweek*, and others. On September 3 of this year, the *Columbia Journalism Review*, in direct response to the erroneous reporting in conservative media, published an article titled, “How Misinformation Goes Viral: a Truthy Story”, in which the journalist carefully debunks all of the misinformation about the grant. *The Washington Post* (which had earlier published the Pai op-ed) published an extensive interview with the lead researchers describing the true nature and value of their research, which by the way has yielded more than 30 published research papers since its inception.

Your letter to NSF Director Córdoba was dated November 10, long after these many letters, interviews, and articles were published, fully debunking the misinformation about Truthy that is repeated in your letter. Surely your staff must have read some of this reporting, given your interest in this particular grant. In fact, some of these reports showed up in the “Daily Clips” shared with all Committee staff by your own communications staff. Yet you chose to selectively repeat the accusations that only appeared in the most negative coverage of the grant. Ironically, as many have pointed out, your actions are contributing to the viral spread of misinformation about a project that is designed to help us understand how information goes viral.

Given the content of your November 10 letter, while we hope it is not the case, it is difficult for us not to see your actions as a deliberately misleading attack on science for short-term political gain. You often speak passionately about the need to invest more in computer science research and education in particular; on that we agree. However, you then proceed to attack much lauded computer science research based largely on media mischaracterizations of that research. How do you suppose young students considering study and research in computer science might interpret your actions? More importantly, how many might turn away from critical but potentially high profile research for fear they too will end up targets of politically motivated attacks?

In pursuing this ill-advised campaign against NSF and its merit-review system, you are doing grievous harm to the ability of this Committee to carry out its legitimate oversight and legislative responsibilities, and those actions are surely doing significant harm to the nation’s scientific enterprise. And to what end, we ask? We cannot see a single upside for this nation or for this institution in which we serve.

As we wrap up the 113th Congress, we respectfully ask you to cease this crusade and reset this once-respected Committee on a more responsible path for the coming Congress. We stand ready to work with you in a bipartisan manner on a productive and legitimate committee agenda for the National Science Foundation and federal science policy in the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress.

Sincerely,

  
Eddie Bernice Johnson  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Science, Space,  
and Technology

  
Zoe Lofgren  
Member of Congress  
Committee on Science, Space,  
and Technology

CC: Dr. France Córdoba  
Director, National Science Foundation

Dr. Dan Arvizu  
Chairman, National Science Board