



U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Subcommittee on Federal Spending Oversight

Senator Rand Paul, M.D. (Kentucky), Chairman



WASTE REPORT for February 1, 2015

Subject: Missed Your E-mail on Waste

From transacting business, to making social plans, to sharing information, e-mail has become a fast and convenient way to communicate. Sometimes, e-mails get ignored. **What should not be ignored is that the Federal Government spent taxpayer money to study people's e-mail response habits.**

A new, federally-funded study out of the University of Southern California (USC) identified all sorts of trends in how people respond to e-mail communication, including: 90% of replies come within two days, while almost half come within an hour of being received. People respond fastest from their phone, but those e-mails are often short. Men reply slightly faster than women, and the older you are the longer it takes to reply to an e-mail.¹

While all of this is fascinating information, the question remains, why is funding this in the taxpayers' interest? In fact, it is not clear how much funding this project even got or if it was the intent of the federal government do this research in the first place.

The problem is **this is a downstream project, funded by cobbling together money from several large federal grants.** The study cites three federal funding sources, the Defense Advanced Research Program Agency (DARPA), the National Science Foundation and the Air Force Office of Strategic Research (ADOSR). But the grant numbers cited are large (\$6.1 million from DARPA and over \$2 million from ADOSR)² and generically about human cognitive and social media behaviors. ADOSR's grant did not even go directly to USC, in fact this grant's primary recipient was cross-town rival, UCLA.³

E-mail responses do not even seem to be in the purview of the parent grants. In fact, the Social Media in Strategic Communication (SMISC) program at DARPA states that it, "...seeks to develop tools to support the efforts of human operators to counter misinformation or deception campaigns with truthful information."⁴ The NSF grant synopsis says, "This project will analyze patterns of citation networks in three domains -- physics papers, patents and federal court decisions -- to learn how scholars and innovators discover and evaluate knowledge."

But, instead of looking at Facebook memes that might incite social unrest, or physics papers, funding got shaved off and cobbled together from multiple federal grants to research e-mail response patterns. **This only goes to highlight a problem the federal government has with all sorts of large grants: difficulty keeping tabs on money as it moves downstream.**

Federal Grants, Out of Sight -- Out of Mind

¹ Kooti, Farshad, Aiello, Luca Maria, Grbovic, Mihajlo, et al. *Evolution of Conversations in the Age of Email Overload*; University of Southern California; Los Angeles, CA. May 2015

² Ibid and data from USASpending.gov

³ Data from USASpending.gov for Grant award number [FA95501010569](#) and sub award number [1295 G NA276](#)

⁴ *Open Catalog*; Defense Advanced Research Agency; Arlington, VA; January 2016