

EXHIBIT 20

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EXCLUSIVE

Hours after NIH director confirmed, the agency tackles one of his priorities — ending ‘censorship’ in science

Email directs NIH staff to identify grants related to ‘fighting misinformation’



Jay Bhattacharya testifies during his Senate confirmation hearing earlier this month. JIM WATSON/AFP via Getty Images

By Anil Oza March 26, 2025

General Assignment Reporter

In October, Jay Bhattacharya, then a health economist at Stanford University, posted on X: “If you favor government control of misinformation, you are an enemy of free speech.”

On Wednesday, on the morning after his confirmation as director of the National Institutes of Health, the agency directed staff to compile a list of grants and contracts related to “fighting misinformation or disinformation” — a step that in recent weeks has preceded the termination of research funding in areas that run counter to the Trump administration’s priorities.

The early morning email, marked “URGENT,” asked contracting officers at the NIH to respond by “noon today” with information on any contract that “may be related to any form of censorship at all or directing people to believe one idea over another related to health outcomes.” It goes on to list examples including contracts to promote vaccine uptake, or public health messages about the “dangers of Covid or not wearing masks.”

Staff were also instructed to search for keywords such as media literacy, social media, social distancing, and lockdown. “This should address any contract that could be used to ‘censor Americans,’” the email concluded.

Public health and misinformation researchers told of the memo were concerned the move will make vaccines less accessible to those who are susceptible to misinformation, but were largely unsurprised by the targeting of their work because Trump’s appointees, including Bhattacharya, have publicly derided efforts to study misinformation.

“One critical component of public health is to work with the public to help them understand how to keep themselves safe and how to keep their neighbors safe. That’s one of the most important things that we do in public health,” said Carl Bergstrom, a biologist at the University of Washington. “This notion of conflating censorship with basic education and basic public health is very frightening, and very dangerous.”

While there’s no indication that Bhattacharya, who has yet to be sworn in, had a role in the email, it is consistent with his views. “For the past couple years, Jay Bhattacharya has portrayed himself as a victim of censorship,” said Jonathan Howard, a physician who wrote a book on the anti-vaccine movement throughout the pandemic, and has written about Bhattacharya for the blog Science-Based Medicine.

During his confirmation hearing earlier this month, Bhattacharya stated one of his goals for his tenure was to foster a culture of dissent and free speech. “I personally was subjected to censorship by the actions of the Biden administration during the pandemic,” he said. “Science, to succeed, needs free speech, it needs an environment where there is tolerance for dissent.”

Bhattacharya was accused of spreading misinformation when he was at Stanford, including the publication of The Great Barrington Declaration, an open letter that he co-authored that challenged the need for most social distancing efforts and called for less stringent public health measures in the first year of the pandemic. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Bhattacharya’s new boss, has also spread misinformation regarding the risks of vaccinations. He has sued a number of media companies alleging that he was censored, and sued Meta over censorship of anti-vaccine posts by Children’s Health Defense, an anti-vaccine organization that he founded.

“Misinformation has found a home in this presidential administration, and that’s why they are taking action to make it difficult for us to do this research,” said Matthew Motta, a political scientist at Boston University who has researched anti-scientific attitudes.

In recent weeks, the NIH has begun purging its grant portfolio of topics that the Trump administration does not support. On Tuesday, the agency began terminating grants related to Covid-19, and earlier it terminated grants related to researching vaccine hesitancy, and the health of LGBTQ+ people, and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Researchers who study vaccine misinformation stressed that their work is not akin to “censorship,” as the NIH email suggests, but an integral part of ensuring that people have access to the latest medicine and are aware of potential concerns.

“So much of what we do as vaccine promotion researchers, is trying to understand what real and perceived access barriers get in the way of people vaccinating, and then try to do something to fix that, to provide people with the information they need to make informed decisions,” said Motta. He noted that during his confirmation hearing, Kennedy stated he would not take away people’s access to vaccinations. But, “by taking away this research and by making it impossible for us to understand why it is that some people don’t vaccinate, we really are harming vaccine access. That, to me, does represent breaking the promise that he made under oath.”

The field of studying health misinformation took on a renewed importance during the pandemic, when people could see the effects of false or misleading information. In 2021, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued an advisory on health misinformation and the World Health Organization created resources to mitigate the “Covid-19 Infodemic.” Throughout that time, however, there was pushback from conservative figures who felt that they were being disproportionately targeted by this work and by social media companies cracking down on misinformation. However, research published last year found that in recent years conservatives were more likely to share misinformation.

There has been a “broad smear campaign” targeting misinformation researchers, said Tim Caulfield, a health policy researcher at the University of Alberta in Canada who studies misinformation. He and colleagues have felt a chilling effect from this administration, even before it has directly cut funding for this research. In planning for a talk in the U.S., Caulfield said the organizers of the talk recommended removing the word “misinformation” from the title given how controversial the term has become.

Several researchers also pointed out the hypocrisy of the administration censoring the terms researchers can use in grants while accusing misinformation researchers of censoring others.

There is “irony in the administration putting this out at the same time that they’re themselves on this massive censorship campaign,” said Lisa Fazio, a cognitive psychologist at Vanderbilt, who was part of a panel that published a National Academies report on misinformation about science. “They’re trying to control the speech that universities and students can and can’t use. They’re trying to do a lot of things to control free speech, and yet they keep talking about this misinformation, censorship industrial complex.”

Fazio and others worry that young researchers will leave the country or stop studying misinformation entirely. Others pointed out targeting this research will ultimately make the NIH’s goal of enhancing health more difficult.

“Why do biomedical research if you’re not going to tell people what worked and what didn’t?” Bergstrom, of the University of Washington, asked.

Correction: The story and headline have been updated to reflect that Bhattacharya has been confirmed as NIH director, though not yet sworn in.