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[00:00:28] **Speaker 1** Turning back to higher ed cuts, he calls it the Friday Night Massacre of the Verifiable Truth. A UW-Madison professor researching and amplifying accurate claims about vaccines saw his $5 million federal grant terminated a week ago. The National Science Foundation grant was axed, quote, per the presidential action that the NSF will not support research with the goal of combating misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. That could be used to infringe on protected speech rights. Professor of Journalism and Mass Communications, Michael Wagner, is here. Ahead of this, we should note, PBS Wisconsin is part of UW-Madison.

[00:01:10] **Speaker 2** Hi, good to see you.

[00:01:11] **Speaker 1** How surprised were you, shocked really, that your grant was terminated?

[00:01:15] **Speaker 2** Well, in the short term, I wasn't shocked. I mean, we've been under scrutiny from the federal government and even the weaponization of government subcommittee in the House for the last year and a half. And so we knew this day was coming. And so on the one hand, it wasn't that shocking, although we knew we didn't know exactly when it was going to happen, but more broadly to say that researchers in the United States who made, you know, grant proposals and had them vetted by a series of experts that were blind to us, so we don't know who was evaluating us, said this is a project worth doing and that could really help people. And then to have the government say, we're not so interested in sharing things that are true, that's really shocking. And what's even more shocking is that it's not just happening to us. I mean, it's a big deal to us and our team and the grant we have, but this is happening all across campus and all across the country.

[00:02:01] **Speaker 1** So describe your research now that is on hold. What were you looking at and why?

[00:02:07] **Speaker 2** So we were really interested in ways that we could try and improve the information environment without engaging in content moderation. So one thing that's really controversial, and there are experts who study this, is to say if some things are false, and especially if they're dangerous, maybe platforms should be pressured to take them down. That's not what we do. What we say is we want to identify networks of conversation online that are sharing information that might be false. Then we wanna see are there independent fact checkers and independent research studies that have been done, at least three, that confirm this thing that's being shared online isn't true. If that's the case, then we wanna create messages that say here's the stuff that's true, and then we want to use the platform's advertising mechanisms to buy ads and show them to the people who saw the false stuff. So put simply, if people are seeing things that aren't true, we wanna make a message about something that is true. Share it with people so that the truth can compete with the falsehood. We don't want to take any content down we just want those two things to compete and then we want to see does sharing the truth make things better for people?

[00:03:13] **Speaker 1** So as you said, yours is not the only sizeable grant eliminated at UW-Madison. At least $12.6 million in direct research funding has been canceled. What are you hearing from your colleagues about all of this?

[00:03:27] **Speaker 2** We organized a teach-in for our undergraduate students last week, and in that conversation, one faculty member from the School of Human Ecology noted more than a dozen. Grants related to social security studies. So this is not just for seniors, but for lots of other folks who get social security benefits, people with disabilities, children of people who have died and don't have parents anymore. All kinds of folks who, we need to understand how well are these benefits helping them? Is it the right amount? Are they being distributed in the right way? All those kinds of things. All those got immediately killed. We've heard from people in the medical school that in some cases there are hiring freezes, even at the VA, so that new staff can't be hired and new research assistants can't be hired. This is especially hard for undergraduates who say want to go to med school because you really need to have experience in a lab to make your application to med. School sing and now it's getting harder to do those kinds of things on our campuses. It's happening all over social sciences, hard sciences, humanities, everywhere.

[00:04:25] **Speaker 1** Can you begin to kind of understand the motivation?

[00:04:29] **Speaker 2** There seems to be a coordinated war on universities and their mission, right? Because universities are places where we have really hard conversations about complex things. There are places were the truth is iterative and we learn more over time and sometimes things that we thought were true change in the face of new evidence. Sometimes the new evidence turns out to be wrong and the scientific process is slow and messy and controversial. And sometimes scientists don't communicate it as clearly as they ought to. But I think there's a coordinated war on folks who are interested in studying these kinds of things. And I think it's worth citizens asking, who is to gain by stopping misinformation research in the United States? Who is to gained by stopping social security research in the Unites States? Whose pockets are getting lined and whose are getting fleeced?

[00:05:19] **Speaker 1** So having just spoken to Congressman Tom Tiffany, he says that people upset about these kinds of cuts, all they have to do is make a case, and maybe they can be restored. So what's your case?

[00:05:32] **Speaker 2** Our case is that we have a scientifically vetted process that actually went through two phases. The NSF, for our grant, had a phase one that was a much smaller award, still a lot of money, $750,000, which is a lot money, especially in social sciences. And it gave us a year to demonstrate a proof of concept that we can do this. We did that, we submitted our $5 million grant, and the scientists who evaluated it said, yes, we think you can do it. We've also been making a ton of progress that we regularly share with the NSF every year. And so we turn in our yearly reports about here are the new things we've learned, here's how we're changing what we're doing. And so, we're simply trying to learn things that are true and share them. And I don't think it's in the interest of the United States to stop doing that.

[00:06:14] **Speaker 1** Professor Mike Wagner. Thanks very much. I mean, it's because people are claiming that the Trump administration will cut Social Security.

[00:06:33] **Speaker 2** No, I think it's that if you want to kill a university, take away their research fund. Like 30% of our budget is federal.

[00:06:41] **Speaker 1** Right, but social security, like I almost get misinformation about vaccines.

[00:06:47] **Speaker 2** But so, what I understand happened is many agencies, DOD, Social Security Administration said we're no longer going to fund social science research. Social science is bad, we shouldn't fund it, and so they're just killing it all.

[00:07:02] **Speaker 1** Cross the board.

[00:07:04] **Speaker 2** It's efficient. It saves money.

[00:07:06] **Speaker 1** Yeah. Easier to just, then, consider it. Yeah, than to parse.

[00:07:10] **Speaker 2** Because then they open themselves up to, well, why did they hurt this group of disabled kids but not that group of, you know, that's a harder thing for them to try to do. Just to say, we just don't want it done because we don't trust it.

[00:07:19] **Speaker 1** Who is that professor I'd be interested in?

[00:07:21] **Speaker 2** Michael Collins. J. Michael Collins, okay, not the Michael Collins who flew Apollo 11, but the economist Michael

[00:07:28] **Speaker 1** That's interesting. My husband is a...

[00:07:30] **Speaker 2** He was on Wisconsin Today a couple weeks, three weeks ago, maybe about that.

[00:07:36] **Speaker 1** Marissa says I've interviewed him. I just can't remember. Oh, Nathan did. Anyway, my husband is a social security administrative law judge, so he might be interested in colleges. Oh, yeah.

[00:07:49] **Speaker 2** Research. Yeah. And Miriam Shaleff was the medical one who's like, I can't hire people to work with me at the VA on our projects because we have a hiring freeze because of these things. Yeah, yeah.

[00:08:02] **Speaker 1** It's keep coming. Well, thank you. Yeah, you bet. Thanks for sharing story. Yeah. Thanks. Have a good weekend.