

A return to the Dark Ages

Trump administration forces shutdown of critical public health websites

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3 February 2025

Last Wednesday, Charles Ezell, the Trump administration's Acting Director of the US Office of Personnel Management (OPM), issued an ominous memorandum to "Heads and Acting Heads of Departments and Agencies" demanding they take prompt actions to end all agency programs that were not in accordance with Trump's fascistic executive order, "*Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological truth to the Federal Government (Defending Women)*."

All agencies were instructed that they had to send a response they would comply with the draconian order by 5:00 pm Friday. Furthermore, they would have until 12:00 pm EST on February 7 to report on all steps taken to implement the guidance.

These included a review of all programs, contracts and grants, and the termination of any that "promote or inculcate gender ideology." Those investigators or employees whose position "involves inculcating or promoting gender ideology" were to be placed on immediate administrative leave. All documents, directives, orders and regulations that could be construed as promoting "gender ideology" were to be withdrawn. All training on and resources for such programs were to be immediately canceled and disbanded. The word "gender" is to be removed from all government forms and substituted with "sex," while staff must remove all pronouns from their email communications.

The memorandum also stipulated that "all outward facing media (websites, social media accounts, etc.) that inculcate or promote gender ideology" were to be taken down. This has led to numerous important websites going dark, including the erasure of entire public health datasets that are used by researchers to understand the social landscape and the determinants of health that impact communities across the US and internationally, under the fraudulent auspices that they contain or identify with terms that represent "gender ideology."

For instance, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued instructions to its staff that they had to retract or pause publication on any research manuscript irrespective of its consideration for publication in any medical or scientific journal. Any terms that included "Gender," "Transgender," "Pregnant People," "LGBT," "Transsexual," "Non-binary," "Assigned male at birth," "Assigned female at birth," "Biologically male" or "Biologically female" had to be scrubbed.

Many webpages which include guidance for contraception,

factsheets about HIV and transgender people, as well as information on surveys showing transgender students suffer from higher rates of bullying, depression and a broad assortment of social problems, have been taken down. The CDC was also forced to temporarily remove its data repository, data.cdc.gov, before bringing it up again with the caption: "CDC's website is being modified to comply with President Trump's Executive Orders."

For the first time in the CDC's seven-decade history, the agency has not published the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* in over a week, underscoring the seriousness of the efforts by Trump to eviscerate public health in the US. Significantly, at least one of the reports in the publication was centered on the ongoing risk of H5N1 bird flu infection among veterinarians tending to sickened cows.

Moving forward, one must question the veracity of the data that epidemiologists and public health experts have depended on to conduct their work on behalf of the population. Also, access to many important health-related issues for the public has been rescinded, leaving many in the lurch who are seeking objective information about their conditions or medical/social concerns.

The deepening censorship imposed on the CDC and all agencies in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) takes place amid the tenth wave of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as well as major surge of seasonal flu, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and norovirus.

The danger has never been higher that bird flu could coinfect individuals with seasonal flu and potentially reassort genes, thereby developing the capacity for human-to-human transmission. In fact, for all we know such a dire event could be unfolding at present, with the American and world population kept totally in the dark.

Beside the immediate impacts on the CDC and other public health agencies, the Associated Press listed missing pages seen on many other government websites. Although some have returned since being taken down, some have noted changes that attempt to comply with Trump's dictates, including:

- National Park Services pages related to the internment of Japanese Americans, the Tuskegee Airmen and the Stonewall Uprising for gay rights have been affected.
- The State Department has removed the X gender marker and replaced "gender" with "Sex" on its online consular form. Tips for

LGBTQIA travelers were altered.

- The US Census Bureau’s homepage was down and queries on topic pages referring to gender identity and sexual orientation returned error messages.

- In line with Trump’s firing of 17 inspectors general and independent government watchdogs, reports by the Intelligence Community Inspector General have been erased from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence’s website.

- ¶The Bureau of Prisons webpage has eliminated the term “Inmate Gender” and the statistics of the number and characteristics of transgender people are no longer available.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth ordered the US Armed Forces to end recognizing identity months that celebrate Black History, Women’s History, Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage, National Hispanic Heritage, National Disability Employment Awareness and National American Indian Heritage.

Centering their fascistic propaganda on “gender ideology” is a cover for carrying out sweeping attacking on public health and the working class as a whole.

Speaking anonymously to the *World Socialist Web Site*, a public health doctorate student in California, who studies the social factors that increase risk of cardiovascular diseases among people in the Southeastern US, characterized the censorship as “reckless” with “potentially devastating consequences not just for Americans, but people across the world.”

The website for the US Agency for International Development (USAID) went offline on Saturday and the organization’s \$42.8 billion budget for global humanitarian operations is being brought under State Department control. Also, last week, United States Secretary of State Marco Rubio said the 90-day foreign aid spending freeze issued by Trump would affect the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) which have significant impact on USAID’s mission. Each year the State Department distributes \$6.5 billion through PEPFAR to fight HIV in 50 countries worldwide. The program has saved more than 26 million lives since its launch in 2003.

The above public health doctorate student confided that a Kenyan colleague told her that shipments of HIV and TB medications to sub-Saharan Africa had stopped or were being curtailed. Moreover, the shutdown of these sites raises the more immediate threat posed by infectious diseases, especially bird flu, she noted. Daily coordinated discussions and sharing of reports and data are critical for public health experts to offer advice and make policy decisions grounded on objective facts.

In the long term, academia and public health are reliant on federal grants, which are being forced to conform to the far-right prerogatives of the Trump administration. “These will,” she lamented, “pressure researchers to censor themselves” if they wish to remain in their field. She then observed that these developments represent an extension of the issues raised by the Palestinian genocide and the attack against protesters. These reactionary political decisions will have a “destabilizing” effect, although she hopes that these events will forge a more politically conscious perspective among scientists.

The issuance of the memorandum on Friday led to a frenzy of action on the part of many in academia in the US and

internationally to begin downloading federal health databases before they completely disappear from government websites. At Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, several researchers from the Krieger Research group began the day in a Herculean effort to preserve data by making it available in repositories such as the Harvard Dataverse.

Data scientist Jonathan Gilmore at the Chan School said of the current developments, “In my lifetime, in the United States I don’t know of another situation where researchers have been this concerned about losing access to data that they’ve had access to their whole career. It’s dire.”

Gilmore explained, “It’s really important to understand that we can’t have a full picture of what’s going on in the United States and around the world if we stop making data available,” He added. “I don’t want to start thinking about or listing the risks if we don’t have this data, because it imperils our way of life ... There is no way of knowing how much has disappeared so far.”

Given the attempt by Trump and company to dismantle large swaths of the federal government, and with the looming confirmation of the anti-vaccine zealot Robert Kennedy Jr. as Health Secretary, the road will be cleared for the ascension of the Great Barrington Declaration author Jay Bhattacharya at the helm of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). This will have untold and catastrophic consequences for public health and research in the US and across the globe.

The scraping of the public health edifice is also making room to infect the entire population with unscientific quackery, while crippling the institutions of research, academia, and scientific publications. These last two weeks of the Trump administration, bolstered by the quiescent Democrats, demonstrates in the most dire sense the dangers posed by the capitalist descent into barbarism.



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