COSSA
CONSORTIUM of SOCIAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATIONS

Setting the Record Straight on
"Wasteful Research"

Love at First Swipe?
A Conversation with Dr. Stephanie Tong

Support for fundamental, basic research has been an essential function of the federal government for decades. The National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, and other federal agencies invest in scientific research that has led to some of our country's most important innovations. Support for basic research has the potential to change the way we live, create new knowledge, solve societal challenges, and help us to better understand our world.

Still, some policy makers routinely dismiss projects as "wasteful" without attempting to fully understand their potential benefits to society or the progress of science. Through this series, COSSA is providing an opportunity for researchers to set the record straight about the value and potential of their work, and confronting misconceptions about social science research funded by the federal government.

THE PROJECT:
The Impact of Online Technologies on Interpersonal Communications and Perceptions[1] (2015)

FUNDING AGENCY:
National Science Foundation

AWARD AMOUNT: $851,462

FIELD(S) OF STUDY:
Communication, Social Psychology, Information Science

SOURCE OF ATTACK:
Sen. Jeff Flake's (R-AZ) *Wastebook: The Farce Awakens* (2015)

"Online and mobile dating platforms are silently altering people's attention, changing expectations about potential partners, and subtly influencing their decisions about which partners to pursue."

- Dr. Stephanie Tong

COSSA: Describe your research project in your own words.

STEPHANIE TONG: Our project examines how people perceive and react to the technology embedded in online dating websites. Online and mobile dating systems are changing the ways in which people form romantic connections, either by giving them access to a large pool of potential partners, or by making recommendations on whom to date. With over 30 million people using online or mobile dating in their search for love, these systems have an immense potential to affect the process of romantic relationship formation. Online and mobile dating platforms are silently altering people's attention, changing expectations about potential partners, and subtly influencing their decisions about which partners to pursue. If a culture is dependent on its social bonds, then we must know more about how these systems are changing the ways that people are forming those bonds—and whether or not the users of these systems are aware of the effects on their own relational behavior.

COSSA: How did you first learn that your project had been singled out?

TONG: We were first notified of our attack from the executive offices of COSSA. Unfortunately, none of the three investigators on the project knew about the attack.

Stephanie Tong, Wayne State University, is an assistant professor in the communication studies area. Her research interests lie at the intersection of interpersonal communication and new media. She studies how people initiate, maintain, and terminate relationships using computer-mediated communication. Her research has appeared in a variety of top journal outlets including, *Human Communication Research*, *Journal of Communication*, *Communication Research*, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, and *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. She teaches communication theory and quantitative research methods at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.
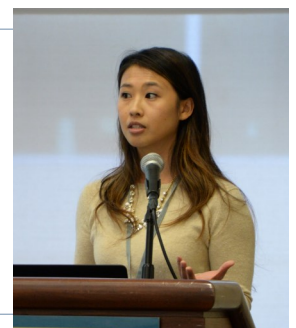
COSSA: What are some of the potential benefits, impacts, and/or applications of the project (keeping in mind, Reader, that this is basic research)?

TONG: We think this research will raise the public's awareness on how dating technology affects relational decision making and dating behavior. As online dating is now entrenched in our social consciousness, the effects on our behavior are important to uncover and understand. Additionally, we think the findings from this project will lead to improvements to the design of popular forms of social computing technology (e.g., online search, social network websites, etc.). These findings may also shed light on ethical questions that designers and developers should ask themselves when creating these systems—what effect do these systems have on human behavior? How are these systems influencing human emotions, thoughts, and feelings? Lastly, as the main research site is located in Detroit, MI, this project has had an impact on the local urban community. It has helped create small jobs for individuals who live in and around the Detroit area, as well as provide key educational research experience for several graduate and undergraduate students. By nature of the topic, it has also stimulated interest in basic social science research among college students—helping them think critically about how the technology they use every day affects them on a deeper, and more subtle, level.

COSSA: How could your project contribute to further progress of science?

TONG: We wanted to provide an interdisciplinary framework to examine our research questions. Currently, scholars across the social and technical sciences are exploring online dating behavior, and we wanted to unite these efforts. Our project integrates specific theories from decision sciences, social psychology, computer-mediated communication, social media, and human-computer interaction. We hope to begin a more inclusive conversation with scholars across multiple areas, encouraging them to share their work with others outside of their home disciplines. The challenge has been to develop a language and vocabulary that investigators across disciplines can access and understand—we hope that this has been useful for the progress of science.

COSSA: What did the critics get wrong/right about your research?

TONG: Senator Flake's report was accurate about the funding source, the amount, and the location of the project. The 2015 Wastebook report suggested that we were studying the popular mobile dating app *Tinder*, which would be a waste since *Tinder* "keeps its own tabs on those who decide to swipe right" (p. 59). Oddly, we never mention *Tinder* in our grant proposal—nor are we specifically interested in any single platform. Our research actually transcends specific platforms, focusing more on how users react to online dating technology more generally.

COSSA: Was any effort made to contact you to gain clarity about the project prior to publicly singling it out?

TONG: Our research was attacked without our knowledge. We were never contacted by any representative of Senator Flake's office before or after the publication of the Wastebook.

COSSA: What impact, if any, has this attack had on you, your research, your collaborators or this project?

TONG: As a result of this attack, our team has discussed the importance of advocating for social science research. We have also discussed this issue with our PhD students, highlighting the potential for such critiques to appear in their own work, should they ever choose to apply for federal funding in the future. We have also embarked on a new research agenda into science communication. First, we have documented the trends involved in these attacks by content analyzing five editions of the Wastebook publication from 2011 to 2015. We have also begun systematically exploring the most effective ways for investigators to present their work to the public at large.

COSSA: Is there anything else about this experience you wish to share?

TONG: We would like to add an additional note, specifically for Principal Investigators: When this attack came, our team was blindsided. We didn't expect it and also didn't know how to react. We have since learned that while such attacks rarely affect the day-to-day operations in the lab or in the field, such attacks are not to be taken lightly. We took them as both a challenge and an opportunity; it became a chance for us to explain to the public and to ourselves how and why our research matters. If investigators can be brave enough to withstand the scrutiny, then we can continue to move the field forward.

[1] *http://nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward?AWD_ID=1520723*