



WASTE REPORT for October 4, 2016

One Small Step for Waste, One Giant Leap for Wastekind

When Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon in 1969, he uttered certainly some of the most famous words in human history: **“That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.”** Or did he? **Armstrong said that he was misquoted by having an “a” omitted from his statement, claiming it should have been “step for [a] man.”**¹

Quite the earth-shattering controversy we have on our hands here. Nope? Not interested? Don’t care? Well, maybe you will care about this: **the National Science Foundation helped fund a study which brought together researchers from four major universities² to find the missing “a.”** To explain the mystery, researchers even sought out subjects with dialectal familiarity to Armstrong – people from Ohio.³

The study drew on two NSF grants totaling more than \$700k.⁴ Though the research was just published this month, one of the grants came from the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.⁵ “Shovel ready” indeed.

So, did they solve the mystery? Well, no. In the end, researchers believe that the speed at which one part of a sentence is said, relative to the rest of the sentence, affects identification of words like “a.”⁶ Listeners in experiments did not universally miss the “a” and certainly not to the extent it was apparently missed by listeners of Armstrong’s statement on the moon and in recordings. Thus, **“[t]hese results demonstrate that substantial ambiguity exists in the original quote from Armstrong.”**⁷ Truly groundbreaking.

So, why did NSF think this study deserved your tax dollars? Well, they might not have. As *The Waste Report* has noted in the past, once a grant goes out the door, there is no further accounting of where that money winds up and how much goes to a given project.

In this case, **the intended purpose of these grants was to help improve and understand communications for persons with conditions that may affect speech, such as autism, stuttering, and Parkinson’s disease⁸ - not what Neil Armstrong said on the moon.** The grant synopsis makes no mention of Armstrong, nor does the paper assert that he suffered from a condition that would affect his speech.

Sounds like NSF funds might be getting lost in transmission

¹ <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article/asset?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0155975.PDF>

² University of Oregon, Ohio State, Michigan State, and George Mason University.

³ <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article/asset?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0155975.PDF>

⁴ NSF award numbers: 0847653 and 1431063

⁵ NSF award numbers: 0847653

⁶ <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article/asset?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0155975.PDF>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ NSF award numbers: 0847653 and 1431063