TA Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Peter N. Miller

Research is under greater threat than at any time in its history



If you learned that there was a tool that could expand your understanding of every aspect of the world you lived in, helping you lead a longer, healthier life and providing inventions that would make that life more pleasant and interesting, would you want it? Would you pay for it? Would you want your government to support it?

Of course you would. And yet, right now, that tool is under greater threat than at any time in its history.

Over the past 21 months, in the United States, the country that has leveraged research to greatest effect, the government is slashing funding for it, closing centers where it is conducted, replacing the professionals who manage it with non-specialists, and bullying its single biggest engine: universities.

Under changes proposed by the White House Office of Management and Budget, grant-making decisions will move from peer reviewers to political commissars.

One reason why research is so vulnerable, despite its importance, is that it operates almost invisibly.

There are more than 175 million items in the Library of Congress's collections but no subject headings for either "research—history of" or "research—meaning of."

No one studies research because those who conduct it believe they already know everything they need to know about it, and those who don't often fail to make the connection between its far-reaching benefits and what makes it possible. Everyone has a reason to take it for granted.

It might come as a surprise that research even has a history. But we can track the evolution of the values that research requires: curiosity, self-criticism, collaboration, and a commitment to endless questioning and effort.

Research is fluid, even slippery. Unlike knowledge, which can be memorized, collected, or catalogued for posterity, today's research can be made obsolete by tomorrow's.

And at its heart is the most slippery of all intellectual attributes, one that scholars share with artists: imagination.

The age of research

Though we can see some of these values shaping human action long ago, others didn't emerge until the 17th or 18th centuries, and they didn't all come together in a package until the middle of the 19th century.

Research arrived along with the Industrial Revolution, which means that we can call the period since then not just the Anthropocene but also the Age of Research.

In its first incarnation, research spoke German, reflecting the birthplace of what many consider to be the first research university, and it was driven primarily by the humanities, not by science and technology.

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Then came the second age of research, starting in 1942 with the Manhattan Project and continuing with Vannevar Bush's 1945 report, "Science: The Endless Frontier," delivered to US President Harry Truman.

The postwar era, the short "American Century," featured a compact that allocated government funding for basic research to universities, which the private sector would turn into goods and services.

But even then, the humanities were given an important role. As Bush wrote, scientific research was not to come at the expense of "the social sciences, humanities, and other studies so essential to national well-being."

America's dominance

There was also an implicit politics to research during this period, one captured in the philosopher Karl Popper's defense of the "open society."

The postwar American Century's defining moment came 61 years ago, when US President Lyndon Johnson—a month after signing the Voting Rights Act and just before signing the Immigration and Nationality Act—established the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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Creativity, political expression, and individual mobility defined the cultures of both US politics and research, which were two sides of the same coin.

Together they explain America's dominance in the second age of research, when it radically outperformed the Soviet Union.

There can be no breakthrough creativity—no true outside-the-box thinking—in societies organized to keep people boxed in.

Technology alone will not help us

All this ended in 2025. We have now entered a third age of research. Consider the report issued this summer by US President Donald Trump's science adviser, the business executive Michael Kratsios.

In "Science: A New Golden Age," Kratsios explicitly sets out to supplant Bush. In his vision, universities are sidelined, and the government's role is to support AI-driven private-sector research.

The "humanities" and the "arts" get no mention at all, while "science" appears more than 400 times.



Universities are sidelined, and the government's role is to support AI-driven private-sector research - Michael Kratsios (left)

We lose something when research becomes identified exclusively with science, and we will lose even more when "research" is replaced by "innovation," and "science" by "technology." Where has Bush's "national well-being" gone? What is it all for if not that?

In 1965, a Nobel Prize-winning chemist testifying to Congress foresaw the problem we are now facing and identified its solution: "We cannot afford to drift physically, morally, or esthetically in a world in which the current moves so rapidly perhaps toward an abyss. Science and technology are providing us with the means to travel swiftly. But what course do we take? This is the question that no computer can answer."

It is easy to say that the humanities are all rabbit holes with no rabbits. But as with a diamond whose many facets only add to its brilliance, the very endlessness of the task of grasping the complexity of the human world is its own reward.

Research in the humanities is also the best tool we have for giving true accounts of our relationship to the world.

Those charting our course and pondering the future role of AI must recognize that technology alone will not help us.

The bigger the role it plays in our lives, the more we need the humane sciences to help us make sense of our changing existence.

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