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'Forbidden Words': Github Reveals How Software Engineers Are Purging Federal Databases

JASON KOEBLER

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A project called "Remove-DEI" shows the tweaks used to remove "forbidden words" from a database about childhood school readiness.



Code updates to a government database that helps track whether a federal program to get children ready for school at age five is actually working show software engineers are purging it of references to "forbidden words" related to DEI.

The updates, shown in Github commits, are to a database for the Department of Health and Human Services' Head Start program. They show a project called "Remove-DEI," which reveal some of the back-and-forth that is happening behind the scenes to align federal agencies with Donald Trump's executive orders that forbid almost anything having to do with race or gender within federal agencies. The Github pages show software engineers discussing amongst themselves how to best remove all instances of "forbidden words" from a specific database, and the code updates they used to do it. The changes also show that, while thousands of government datasets are disappearing from the internet, even ones that remain are having parts of their utility deprecated or broken in a way that may not be visible to those outside the government.

The Office of Head Start is a government agency that spends roughly \$12 billion per year to get families and children between birth and age five ready to succeed in schools, with a special focus on providing and administering grants to groups that provide assistance for "America's most vulnerable young children." Head Start centers were briefly impacted by Trump's spending freeze, leading centers to worry

about making payroll.



Are you a federal worker or contractor? Using a non-work device, you can message me securely on Signal at +1 202 505 1702. Otherwise, send me an email at jason@404media.co.

The changes show that the U.S. government or people working on its behalf are not just manually deleting references to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) but are also writing and tweaking code to remove references to DEI in a more blunt-force way. The HHS change is emblematic of hundreds that 404 Media has reviewed in recent days. At HHS, [a recent GitHub commit details a project called "Remove-DEI"](#) which removes the ability to search or filter in this HeadStart for information on how well programs that target "families affected by systemic discrimination/bias/exclusion" are actually working.


```
packages/common/src/constants.js

@@ -56,7 +56,6 @@ const TOPICS = [
56 56 'Disabilities Services',
57 57 'ERSEA',
58 58 'Environmental Health and Safety / EPRR',
59 - 'Equity',
60 59 'Facilities',
61 60 'Family Support Services',
62 61 'Fatherhood / Male Caregiving',

@@ -157,7 +156,6 @@ const TARGET_POPULATIONS = [
157 156 exports.TARGET_POPULATIONS = TARGET_POPULATIONS;
158 157
159 158 const EVENT_TARGET_POPULATIONS = [
160 - 'Children/Families affected by systemic discrimination/bias/exclusion',
161 159 'Children/Families affected by traumatic events',
162 160 'Parents/Families impacted by health disparities',
163 161 ];
```

The changes—which are among at least hundreds across the federal government—come to a database operated by the HHS’ [Office of Head Start’s Training and Technical Assistance Centers](#).

Remove DEI #2613

 Merged

merged 11 commits into `main` from `remove-dei` 5 days ago

Conversation 6

Commits 11

Checks 0

Files changed 21

commented last week • edited

Collaborator

Description of change

Review the option for equity:

- Removal of the equity topic from the topic drop down,
- Removal of the equity topic from all filters
- Removal the DEIA standard goal from the drop down
- "Families affected by systemic discrimination/ bias/exclusion" removed as a target pop from TRs

As part of this change, the topics filter select now queries the database for topics rather than referring to a separate string constant. This is simply a way of making sure that when we mark a topic as deletedAt, it is removed from all the relevant places.

How to test

Confirm equity has been removed from the places above.
I ask also that you scan the website for other places where we need to remove the forbidden words.

Issue(s)

- <https://jira.acf.gov/browse/TTAHUB-0>

Checklists

Every PR

- ☐ Meets issue criteria
- ☐ JIRA ticket status updated

This specific database is behind a government login wall, but allows government employees to search for information about grants and programs that had a focus on "Equity" and had a target population of "Children/Families affected by systematic discrimination/bias/exclusion."

Code in the database was tweaked to remove the ability to search or filter according to these terms. A description of the change explained on Github reads "Review the option for equity: Removal of the equity topic from the topic drop down, removal of the equity topic from all filters, Removal of the DEIA standard goal, 'Families affected by systemic discrimination/bias/exclusion' removes as a target population."

The coder also explains that they tweaked how topics are filtered in the database as a way of "making sure that when we mark a topic as deleted, it is removed from all the relevant places."

The coder asked their colleagues to "confirm equity has been removed from the places above. I ask also that you scan the website for other places where we need to remove the forbidden words." The code was written by employees at a company called Ad Hoc LLC, a government contractor that works with HHS on the database. Ad Hoc is being paid \$7.2 million to manage the database, according to federal records.

Ad Hoc was created in the aftermath of the HealthCare.gov launch debacle, and describes itself as "a digital services company that helps the federal government better serve people." Ad Hoc declined to comment.

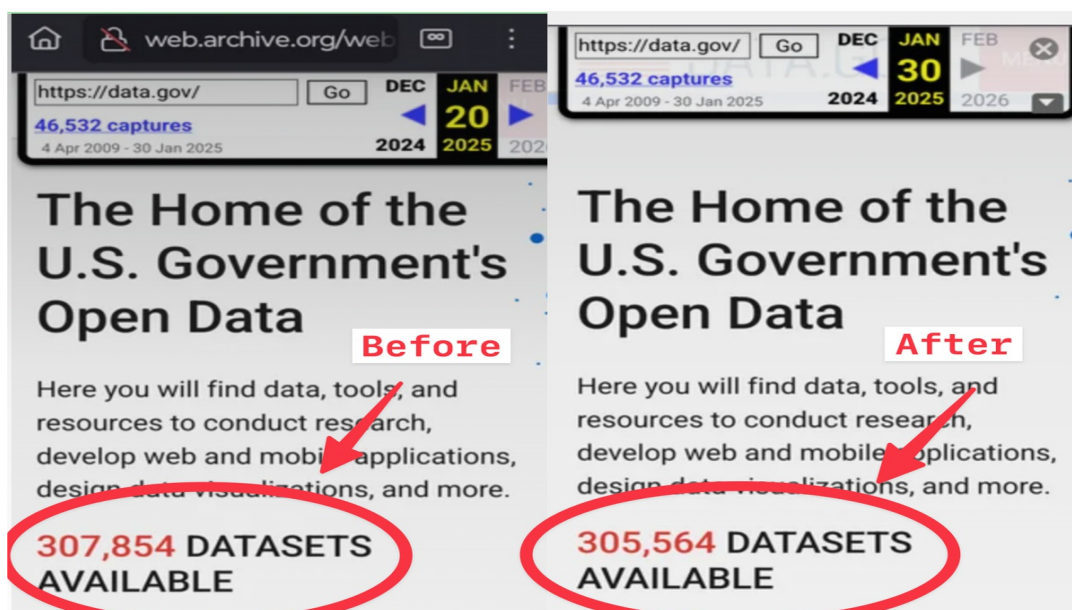
HHS told 404 Media that it is not allowed to comment: "HHS has issued a pause on mass communications and public appearances that are not directly related to

emergencies or critical to preserving health. This is a short pause to allow the new team to set up a process for review and prioritization. There are exceptions for announcements that HHS divisions believe are mission critical, but they will be made on a case-by-case basis.”

Archivists Work to Identify and Save the Thousands of Datasets Disappearing From Data.gov

More than 2,000 datasets have disappeared from data.gov since Trump was inaugurated. But analyzing exactly what happened and where it went is... going to take some time.

JASON KOEBLER



The tweak is one of hundreds that have been revealed across government via Github’s commit tracking, which shows version changes to code, websites, and other projects managed on the site. It also gives insight into how the hundreds of websites and datasets being deleted are actually being purged. WIRED reported earlier Monday that the federal government is now using scripts to forcibly remove gender pronouns from federal employee email signatures.

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