Fact Sheet: The Office of Technology Assessment

From 1974-1995, the Office of Technology Assessment served as a legislative branch support agency tasked with providing Congress with *technology assessments*: multi-disciplinary, authoritative analyses of science and technology issues. While OTA still exists in statute, its funding was zeroed out in the 104th Congress as part of a political pledge to significantly reduce the number of staff in the legislative branch.

About the OTA

- OTA was authorized by the Technology Assessment Act of 1972 ([2 U.S.C. §§ 471-481](#)) to provide Congress with reliable, unbiased information about technology—especially its economic, social, political, physical, and health implications. OTA received its first appropriation in the FY 1974 appropriations [bill](#), and its last in the FY 1996 appropriations [bill](#) (to close down the office). While its funding was stopped, its authorization was never repealed.
- In 1995, OTA had a $22 million budget ($37 million in 2019 dollars) and 143 FTE employees. By comparison, in FY 2019, CRS received $125 million (543 employees) and GAO received $589 million (3,250 employees).
- OTA [produced](#) nearly 750 technology assessments, background papers, and other materials over its life. These covered many topics, including healthcare, education, defense, telecom, computing and information technology, biotechnology, space, and energy.
- OTA studies were typically initiated by requests from committee chairs. They were approved by its bipartisan, bicameral oversight board made up of six Republicans and six Democrats.
- OTA's work provided policy information and analysis. It did *not* build, test, or deploy information technology or digital services, and it did not play a technology support role for the legislative branch.

What was OTA's value proposition?

- OTA focused on producing "technology assessments"—multi-disciplinary, expert-reviewed studies that informed policymakers about the probable short and long-term effects of emerging and established technologies, and the tradeoffs of different policy approaches. This made its reports distinct from CRS products, which focus on short responsive issue briefs and summaries of existing literature.
- OTA's role was to empower legislators with information to make value choices. It provided information about where consensus existed and where open questions remained, and it evaluated the implications of different policy approaches. It did not make policy recommendations.
- Full OTA studies took an average of 18 months to complete. The agency convened experts on a topic, surveyed the relevant research, and evaluated the resulting information to provide a book-length analytical product.
- At least as important as the reports it generated was OTA's "shared staff" model—where its staff were available to work informally with congressional staff. This provided Members of Congress with access to expert networks beyond the institution, as well as deep in-house expertise on a wide variety of issues.

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What was OTA's practical effect?

- OTA filled a gap in congressional expertise on scientific and technical issues, providing Congress with an objective source of information based on an understanding of Congress's unique needs and operations. While it would be impossible to calculate all of OTA's impacts on policy, this included advancing the adoption of spectrum auctions at the FCC, leveraging medical advances to reduce Medicare costs, deregulating the nuclear power industry, and others recorded here.
- OTA's assessments routinely supported policymakers as they evaluted federal S&T programs and expenditures, leading to significant cost savings. This included a study of the Social Security Administration's IT strategy, which led to $368 million in savings; and raising red flags about the Synthetic Fuels Corporation, worth at least $60 billion in savings. OTA's work also contributed to the adoption of spectrum auctions at the FCC, which have generated billions in revenue.

OTA's defunding

- OTA was defunded in November 1995. The primary motivation was to give the new Republican majority moral authority to make deeper cuts elsewhere in government. Its defunding came as part of a series of deep budget cuts to Congress, including chopping thousands of staff from GAO and congressional committees. OTA was viewed as providing useful information, but some viewed its work as "nice to have" not "need to have." Here's how the conservative Heritage Foundation advocated for its defunding at the time: OTA did "good work and useful work" but killing it "will make the job of eliminating other government functions far easier."
- OTA's defunding was enabled by its political vulnerability and utility as a symbol to fiscal conservatives, but it was not done purely along partisan lines. In 1995, OTA had strong supporters on the right such as Sens. Chuck Grassley (R-IA) and Ted Stevens (R-AL), and strong critics on the left such as Sen. Harry Reid (D-NV). There were several close votes on saving it.
- While short-term political symbolism was by far the primary reason for OTA's elimination, other reasons were proffered. Those included a suspicion that OTA was biased toward particular ideologies or approaches to problem-solving, or against programs supported by some members of Congress. These criticisms (and others) are explored in detail here.

The legislative landscape

- *The FY 2019 appropriations* bill charged the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) with producing a report on whether and how to restore OTA, which is expected to be released on October 31, 2019. The bill also provided additional funding for a nascent science and technology assessment capability located inside GAO — now the Science, Technology Assessment, and Analytics team — and required GAO to provide a plan for scaling this unit, which was released in April 2019.
- *The FY 2020 legislative branch appropriations bill*, favorably reported by the full committee in the House, would appropriate $6M to restore funding for OTA, to be spent by 2021. The Senate markup did not include funding to restart OTA, but commended GAO's STAA unit, which is undertaking similar work. As of this writing, it remains to be seen whether funding for OTA will be included in the conference bill.
- In July, 2019 the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress issued a unanimous, bipartisan recommendation to reestablish and modernize OTA.
- In September, 2019, bipartisan bicameral legislation was introduced to update and modernize OTA, and rename it the "Congressional Office of Technology."

Additional resources: www.futurecongress.org/resources