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Steve Ballmer's Plan to Make America Great Involves Excel Spreadsheets.

The ex-Microsoft CEO is working on a project that aims to make government data more accessible.

Steve Ballmer is pretty bummed out about the election. A self-proclaimed “numbers guy,” Ballmer said the truth is getting lost in the political rhetoric, and he wants to arm citizens with data to defend against lies by the campaigns. “Nobody seems to care about the facts,” he said.

When not jumping around on the sidelines of Los Angeles Clippers games, the former Microsoft Corp. chief executive officer has been spending his retirement on the inside of an Excel spreadsheet. Ballmer and a team of about 25 data geeks have been poring over more than three decades of government documents to create a comprehensive accounting of U.S. spending. The goal is to treat the nation like a company and create what Ballmer describes as a “10-K for the government,” like the one publicly traded businesses are required to file with regulators each year.

Ballmer's project, called USAFacts, exists in the form of hundreds of Excel files and 385 PowerPoint slides, many of which require a magnifying glass to read. While the complete report won't be ready in time for Election Day, he's using the research as the basis for a class he teaches at Stanford University. His group of 19 sophomores are getting a peek at what Ballmer plans to publish early next year in the form of a 10-K filing, investor presentations, charts, graphics and a dedicated website.

Mary Meeker, a partner at venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers, undertook a similar effort called USA Inc. that Bloomberg Businessweek published in 2011. Two years ago, President Obama signed the Data Act, designed to make federal spending information more accessible, while OpenGov and other venture-backed startups have sprung up with the goal of increasing transparency. While any effort toward greater visibility is a good thing, the government shouldn't be analyzed in the same way as a business in some cases, said Alex Howard, a senior analyst at the Sunlight Foundation, an advocacy group for government openness who hasn't seen Ballmer's report.

In Ballmer's worldview, data trumps all. “I just think it's important if you are going to make your case, for you to make your case in the context of numbers,” Ballmer said at his office in Bellevue, Washington. “Here are the numbers. You don't have to be a rocket scientist. You don't have to be an economist. You decide what you believe. And when things come up that you need to vote on, you need to opine on, you'll have the view of a citizen that's informed by facts.”

A childhood veteran of math camp with an undergraduate degree in mathematics and economics from Harvard University, Ballmer tends to mentally organize his life into rows and columns. He has a superhuman memory for numbers that would impress, and sometimes terrify, his lieutenants at Microsoft. He'd frequently ask detailed questions about a manager's business unit, sometimes reciting metrics off the top of his head that no one else in the room knew. “Steve sees the world as

an Excel spreadsheet,” said Kevin Turner, who Ballmer hired as Microsoft chief operating officer in 2005 and is now CEO at financial firm Citadel Securities.

Ballmer’s obsession with government data originated from a disagreement with his wife. Almost three years ago, Connie Ballmer told her newly retired husband that he should focus more on philanthropy. His wife has dedicated herself to child welfare and other causes, and there’s plenty left to give: Ballmer’s estimated net worth is \$25.1 billion, according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index. “I said, ‘Eh, why do you worry about it so much?’” Ballmer said. “At the end of the day, the biggest philanthropy in the U.S. is the government. So as long as we pay our taxes, we’re doing our part.”

It was an unusual argument to make, and as with many Ballmer debates, it turned into a research exercise. He scoured the web for a summary of government spending at all levels. He started with Bing and then tried Google. Neither had what he was looking for. So he decided to build it.

Working with data, design and academic experts at Stanford and in the Seattle area, Ballmer runs the project from the 20th floor of a high-rise overlooking Lake Washington. One challenge they faced early on was figuring out how to divide the government into business units. After several failed approaches, a staffer suggested a look through the Constitution. “The Constitution!” Ballmer recalled, suddenly speaking many decibels louder as he got up to diagram the segments on a massive Microsoft Surface Hub touchscreen computer. “It’s the perfect way!”

USAFacts breaks down government operations into four main segments based on the preamble to the Constitution. For “establish justice, insure domestic tranquility,” they chose police, workplace safety and child welfare; another includes military, defense, foreign affairs and immigration; the third has the economy and caring for the poor; and in the last, civil rights, environmental sustainability and education. The 10-K has a section on risk factors, an essential part of public company filings. It includes war, interest rate hikes, civil unrest and climate change. The draft report also talks about America Corp.’s customers, using copious amounts of demographic data on U.S. citizens.

Researchers collected information from 55 government or nonpartisan sources, including from state and local municipalities, going back to 1980—the year Ballmer joined Microsoft. They kept analysis and interpretation to a minimum. Ballmer’s goal is to be completely unbiased. The billionaire said he’s an independent and has been an active political donor in recent years, with a tendency to give to both sides. He won’t say who he’s voting for.

Ballmer said the idea that the U.S. is getting worse mostly isn’t true. Infrastructure, such as road and bridge safety, is better than or comparable to 1990. The government doesn’t seem as big as some people say it is, either. Of about 24 million government workers, teachers account for some 11 million jobs; police, firefighters and the like for 3 million; and military for about 2 million. Add in public hospitals, waste management, prisons and other workers, that leaves just 1.7 million or so bureaucrats.

Mark Duggan, a Stanford economics professor who is teaching the course with Ballmer, said this project is especially important as Americans consider the need for spending cuts or other changes to Medicare or Social Security. “What Steve is trying to do is to make it possible for people who want to make an informed decision to do that,” Duggan said.

Staff working on USAFacts said Ballmer already knows unusual factoids about government spending and demographics by heart. Ballmer, 60, said he doesn’t recall as much as when he was 40.

The project has helped settle Ballmer's dispute with his wife. Government funding accounts for a larger share of many social-services organizations' budgets for aiding children than private donations, he said. But economic mobility remains largely unachievable for America's poorest families. The data helped convince the Ballmers to focus their philanthropy on impoverished kids in U.S. cities with the lowest chances of improving their situations. Ballmer will continue making political contributions as well. He still believes influencing public policy is one of the most effective ways to effect change, he said. "We were both right."

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- *With Emily Chang*