Remove Richard Stallman: Appendix A

The stories of thirty years of MIT women alumni.

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My original post, "Remove Richard Stallman", has received over 180,000 views at the time that I am writing this. Since then, I've spoken with a few reporters, and even more information has been released that I thought would be useful to add, but too much to fit on that initial post. I leaked the full email thread, with names and contact information redacted, to Vice.

What I did not know when I wrote this post (again, being a software-ignorant mechanical engineer) was how it would touch a nerve with women in the free software community and computer science in general.

I had no idea that Richard Stallman has been so problematic, in so many different ways, for so long. I did not know that Richard Stallman has been making MIT a worse learning environment for decades, and that somehow, that behavior went on completely unchecked.

I am increasingly appalled that no one said anything, or perhaps more accurately that complaints did not get far more attention until now. I feel that the response to my post had little to do with me personally — it was somehow an alignment of the stars between all the media attention on MIT, the modern political climate, and some well-timed writing. The real heroes, I'm beginning to understand, are all the MIT women alumni from the 80's and 90's, especially in Computer Science, that had to put up with this.

I have also received a lot of questions and comments from friends, family, reporters, classmates and everyone marginally interested. They ask me what Richard Stallman did exactly, and many wonder if this was possibly an isolated incident that got overblown.

Let's walk through, now, a more complete review of why he should be removed.

I'm writing this both for those people that I spoke with in the past few days, and because this is a teachable moment, a good case study of what institutions should do going forward, how we can sustainably purge and rebuild.

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1. Richard Stallman has problematic opinions.

The original email thread *is not an isolated incident.*

I hope this gets through to everyone who has responded saying we "should not jump to conclusions" or "be less punitive". We have been lenient—in fact, we have been negligent—for decades.

Others have already dug up a good chunk of Stallman's public history. This Daily Beast article does a great job covering his long history of problematic views on child pornography and statutory rape:

Renowned MIT Scientist Defends Epstein: Victims Were 'Entirely Willing'

While MIT engages in damage control following revelations the university's Media Lab accepted…

www.thedailybeast.com

Some people have described Stallman as "controversial"—this could mean a few different things, but I do not think that Stallman's *opinions* are controversial. "Controversial" implies that 40% of the public thinks one way and another 40% the other, and some 20% are in-between. If there are a large number of people in the United States who think that child pornography and sexual intercourse with minors should be legalized, this is the first I'm hearing of it, and please show me the evidence. Since it is not controversial, I'm not going to argue why these opinions are problematic. Having to "prove" this would give legitimacy to Stallman's ideas.

MIT, by endorsing Stallman, also gives legitimacy to these ideas.

I would also like to clarify that in some headlines, including this Daily Beast one, Stallman is said to have defended Epstein, **which is not technically true.** Rather, Stallman was defending Marvin Minsky. I directly emailed and corrected reporters who used that language if I myself had given them any comments or information. I say this to show that I never intended to "inflate" anything, because there was absolutely no need to.

The truth by itself was far, far more than enough.

2. Richard Stallman has been contributing to a negative environment for women at MIT for over thirty years.

In this section, I acknowledge that I do not have as many photos, emails, or written records as evidence. I do, however, have witnesses.

Long before this incident, Stallman was contributing to an uncomfortable environment for women at MIT in a very real and visceral way. Alumni from as far back as the 1980's reached out to me and told horrifying stories, such as:

> *I recall being told early in my freshman year "If RMS hits on you, just say 'I'm a vi user' even if it's not true."*

— Bachelor's in Computer Science, '04

> *"He literally used to have a mattress on the floor of his office. He kept the door to his office open, to proudly showcase that mattress and all the implications that went with it. Many female students avoided the corridor with his office for that reason…I was one of the course 6 undergrads who avoided that part of NE43 precisely for that reason. (the mattress was also known to have shirtless people lounging on it…)"*

— Bachelor's in Computer Science, '99

> *"When I was a teen freshman, I went to a buffet lunch at an Indian restaurant in Central Square with a graduate student friend and others from the AI lab. I don't know if he and I were the last two left, but at a table with only the two of us, Richard Stallman told me of his misery and that he'd kill himself if I didn't go out with him.*
>
> *I felt bad for him and also uncomfortable and manipulated. I did not like being put in that position — suddenly responsible for an "important" man. What had I done to get into this*

> *situation? I decided I could not be responsible for his living or dying, and would have to accept him killing himself. I declined further contact.*
>
> *He was not a man of his word or he'd be long dead."*

—Betsy S., Bachelor's in Management Science, '85

This plainly shows that students were feeling the negative effects of people like Richard Stallman around the campus as long as thirty years before this email incident — even those like Betsy, outside of CSAIL.

I have never called for jailing anyone or denying freedoms of speech. Richard Stallman is free to campaign for his beliefs in this country, even if many disagree with them, so long as he does not violate the law. But MIT is a privileged place. We have the right to choose who we admit, hire, or endorse. We do not let just anyone on our campus; we demand high standards of achievement. We should demand high ethical standards equal to our high standards for achievement. I do not think Richard Stallman ever met even a low ethical standard for being at any university, and I am questioning mostly why this was allowed to continue for so, so long.

In February of 1983, female graduate students and research staff in CSAIL compiled this report about sexism in the lab:

Barriers to Equality in Academia: Women in Computer Science at MIT

In my view, this is the most useful report ever written in terms of its potential to improve the…

homes.cs.washington.edu
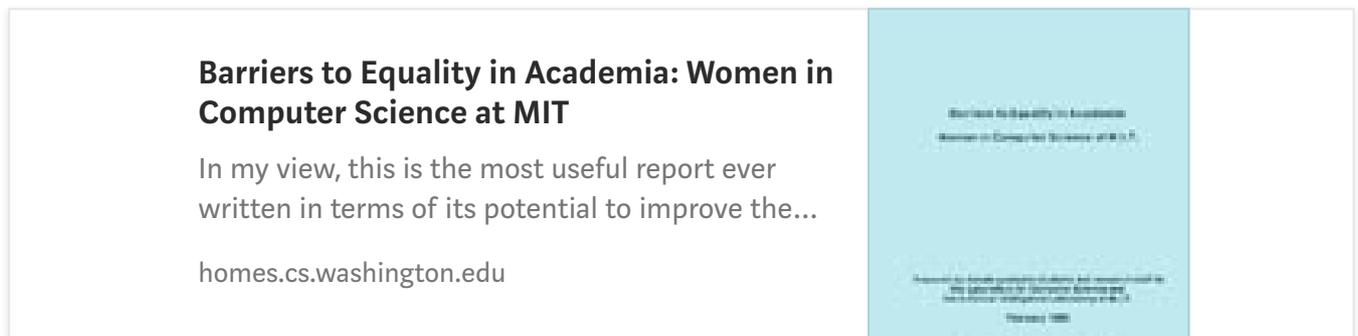
One alumn from that time period wrote:

> *Many, many years ago, women in the AI and CS labs met to deal with the problematic atmosphere for women in the labs. We met as a group, discussed the issues, complied examples, presented them to the labs, then wrote a report. In the early 80's, it was a pretty big deal but it would seem it did not have lasting effects.*
>
> *I wish we could have done more.*

They wrote an entire report. They still feel that they could have done more. They risked their reputations. On the contrary, I find it absurd that they had to do so much and receive so little.

Thursday I was angry about my friend, a graduate student in CSAIL who was affected by an email thread. Today I'm angry about *over thirty years* of MIT women, and I truly did not expect that.

For a moment, let's assume that someone like Stallman is truly a genius. Truly, uniquely brilliant. If that type of person keeps tens or even hundreds of highly intelligent but not 'genius' people out of science and technology, then they are hindering our progress despite the brilliance.

3. Going Forward, be proactive instead of reactive.

A few people asked me how to avoid this, what to do now, what "burning everything to the ground" means.

The answer is that we should be proactive instead of reactive.

A great example is actually what MIT did at the beginning of the #MeToo movement. The administration, motivated by the national conversation, performed its own investigation of MIT's sexual harassment policies, and realized that there was no real, concrete policy in place. Finding this giant hole, the administration created a very specific and well thought out policy, which basically says that any relationship where two people are in different positions of power (professor-student, director-staff, etc.) cannot coexist with a sexual/romantic relationship or any type of sexual activity.

A second example is the investigation into MIT and slavery. MIT felt it had not done enough to address its own relationship with that horrific past, so an undergraduate research project was created to address it. This research is done by current undergraduates with support from faculty, so it includes many members of our community in the conversation. We are able to uncover these facts in a collaborative, respectful manner, acknowledging the ways they may affect our modern-day place of learning, and we seriously discuss how to address that.

These examples are why I am still proud of my institution, and why I arrogantly believe that we are better than our peer elite universities, including the one down the street. We have historically been more democratic than them, more transparent than them, and more willing to innovate.

These examples are also much different from pieces of a story being discovered and released to the press one at a time out of anger and fear, which, obviously, creates chaos.

This conversation about Epstein, Minsky, and Stallman should motivate other institutions too. Even if they are certain they took no money from Epstein or never hosted Minsky or Stallman, this is a broader conversation about politics and ethics in universities, STEM institutions, and the nation and world at large. Who else has gone unchecked? When else have staff or administration felt like what they were doing was morally wrong?

If you want to avoid the chaos, then the time is now. First, accept that it is likely your institution also has these types of people, or ties with them. The older and more prestigious, the more likely. Investigate. Make complaint pathways real and actionable, so that the "whistleblowing" can happen internally. This will make people feel valued, listened to, and invested in your community. This will make them feel that by providing constructive criticism, they are helping to improve the organization, and the organization will not respond by trying to silence or punish them. Address every red flag raised like it will get released to reporters tomorrow, especially if it is coming from historically disadvantaged people.

For those that are lower-level members of these institutions, raise the flags. Find solidarity in community. You don't have to do it by yourself. Find the people who will listen, and band together with them. Support those who are vulnerable, and listen to them, especially when more senior people will not.

We learn in freshman year physics that it is much harder to stop something already in motion than to continue on the same trajectory. It will take all of our contributions to make science and technology more equitable, the same way it has taken all of our contributions to make scientific progress. I am confident that so many smart people can do this, the same way they have been collaborating on their research and work for centuries.

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A lot of people have asked me, over the past week, how I was feeling about all the negative comments on my initial blog post and any negative emails or direct messages I

was sent. I realized most of my friends were actually more upset about these comments than I was.

I remember a conversation I had my sophomore year with my mother, where I was expressing dismay about the additional obstacles women, minority, and low-income people faced at MIT and in life in general. She told me something I was very uncomfortable with at the time, which was essentially that I should feel lucky. Rich and privileged people would never be able to grow through adversity. Those people, she said, should worry a lot, and think of ways to expose their children to difficulty that would strengthen them. This is the Chinese philosophy of "吃苦", or "eat bitter". Eat bitter medicine to grow stronger.

Since the age of 10, people told me that I wouldn't be able to get into MIT. I remember vividly one comment from when I was very young, maybe 6th grade, not the face or the name or the scenario, just the comment: "You're gonna be so disappointed when you don't get in."

In high school, people joked frequently that I was good at math, "nerdy", and played in the orchestra because I am Asian. I did not like this because it implied I did not have to work to achieve those things. When I was accepted to MIT, they then told me that I was admitted only because of affirmative action, since I am African.

Writing online for the past 7 years, on a personal blog and then the MIT Admissions blogs, I received many, many hateful comments. So many that at this point, I am entirely desensitized to them. I do not know if this is a good thing, but right now it is, at least, useful.

This is simply life as a mixed woman of color. A lot of bitterness. A lot of strength. When my initial post started to take off, I thought a lot about what I would do if it continued to escalate. I thought about if I had to ever be in the same room with Richard Stallman, how I would handle it, and how I could keep myself composed. I steeled myself for whatever was to come, some scathing response from him or some effect of fighting on the internet leaking into my real life.

Today, I found out that Stallman had issued a rather weak and confusing apology to the CSAIL mailing list:

> *"I want to respond to the misleading media coverage of messages I posted about Marvin Minsky's association with Jeffrey Epstein. The*

> *coverage totally mischaracterised my statements.*
>
> *Headlines say that I defended Epstein. Nothing could be further from the truth. I've called him a "serial rapist", and said he deserved to be imprisoned. But many people now believe I defended him — and other inaccurate claims — and feel a real hurt because of what they believe I said.*
>
> *I'm sorry for that hurt. I wish I could have prevented the misunderstanding."*

For everyone who has ever been afraid to speak out about seemingly powerful people, consider for a moment that maybe they do not know what real strength is. They have existed in a system designed for them, circles of power that benefit and never question them, while you may have had to fight your way into those circles.

Maybe they are not even half as strong as you are.

Tech   Richard Stallman   MIT   Jeffrey Epstein   Women In Tech

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