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Two Researchers Resign in Protest Over MIT Media Lab's Ties to Jeffrey Epstein

“Privilege can be blinding, and can cause people to ignore situations that should be simple matters of right and wrong.”

By Edward Ongweso Jr

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RICK FRIEDMAN / CONTRIBUTOR

Two researchers have cut ties with MIT Media Lab over its connections to Jeffrey Epstein, the multimillionaire sex offender who died of an apparent suicide earlier this month while awaiting federal charges for the sex trafficking of minors. Ethan Zuckerman, the head of the Media Lab's Center for Civic Media, published a Medium post detailing why he is leaving the research institute by May 2020, the end of this academic year. J. Nathan Matias, a visiting scholar, also announced his intention to leave the research institute. MIT Media Lab is an "antidisciplinary" research institute that tries to blend technology and media together into innovative products or services, relying heavily on close collaboration with corporate and military partners.

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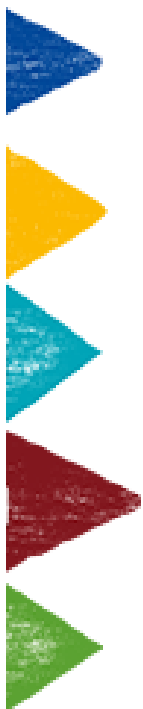
On August 9, the night before Epstein's death, an unsealed deposition revealed a list of men Epstein allegedly forced a young woman to have sex with. The list included the late Marvin Minsky, an MIT scientist and early AI pioneer who was a founding faculty member of the Media Lab. Zuckerman had a conversation with Joi Ito, the Media Lab's current director, about the institute's relationship to Epstein. Zuckerman wrote that "Joi told me that

evening that the Media Lab's ties to Epstein went much deeper." The next day, on August 10, Zuckerman informed Ito that he would leave the Media Lab.

A week after his conversation with Zuckerman, Ito wrote "an apology regarding Epstein." In it, he revealed that he had a business relationship with Epstein, allowed the financier to invest in startups that Ito's venture capitalist fund had a stake in, and allowed Epstein to provide gifts to the Media Lab. He had also allowed Epstein to visit the Media Lab and had visited several of Epstein's residences himself.

This comes as a reversal from five years ago when MIT Media Lab rebuked accusations that Epstein had provided funding to help the Media Lab teach toddlers computer programming. Ties between the Media Lab and Epstein may go even further than that: Ito's tenure at Media Lab began in 2005, but technology writer Evgeny Morozov unearthed a 2005 dissertation with Marvin Minsky as a thesis advisor that listed Epstein as one of the Media Lab's sponsors.

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Wednesday, Matias wrote that he too would be leaving the research institute by May 2020. For the past two years, he has worked with CivilServant, a behavioral science nonprofit that has done research that includes work on “protecting women and other vulnerable people online from abuse and harassment.” After learning of Epstein's ties to Media Lab, he wrote: “I cannot with integrity do [my work with CivilServant] from a place with the kind of relationship that the Media has had with Epstein. It's that simple.”

In his personal apology, Ito pledged to return the money and raise an equal amount to be given to non-profits focused on supporting survivors of trafficking. MIT, however, has not issued an apology nor has it promised to return any of the money received from Epstein.

“I’m aware of the privilege that it’s been to work at a place filled with as much creativity and brilliance as the Media Lab,” Zuckerman wrote in his Medium post. “But I’m also aware that privilege can be blinding, and can

cause people to ignore situations that should be simple matters of right and wrong.”

In an email to Motherboard, Zuckerman declined to comment further: “My focus right now is on helping my staff and students work through their academic and professional next steps,” he said. MIT Media Lab and Matias did not immediately return a request for comment.

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