

2 top researchers quitting MIT Media Lab over Epstein ties

August 21 2019, by Frank Bajak



This July 25, 2013, file image provided by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement shows financier Jeffrey Epstein. The judge presiding over the federal sex trafficking charges against Epstein has invited his accusers and their lawyers to a hearing where he'll consider prosecutors' request to dismiss the indictment. U.S. District Judge Richard Berman said Wednesday, Aug. 21, 2019 he'll conduct a brief hearing Tuesday to consider the dismissal since the financier killed himself in his prison cell Aug. 10. (Florida Department of Law

Enforcement via AP, File)

Two prominent researchers are quitting MIT's Media Lab over revelations that the famed technology research hub and its director took money from Jeffrey Epstein after he'd served time for sex offenses involving girls and young women.

Ethan Zuckerman, director of the lab's Center for Civic Media, said director Joi Ito had failed to disclose the deceased financier's funding of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology incubator as well as investments Epstein made in Ito's personal venture capital fund.

Visiting scholar Nathan Matias, who works on the social impact of online platforms, said in a blog post Wednesday that he, too, was severing ties with the Media Lab over business relations that occurred after Epstein's "appalling crimes were already known."

Epstein was awaiting trial on federal sex trafficking charges when he killed himself in his New York City jail cell earlier this month. He had previously served time on solicitation charges.

An MIT spokesman did not respond to questions about how much Epstein contributed to the Media Lab, for how long or to what specific projects, if any, those donations were earmarked. The Boston Globe said public records showed he gave at least \$200,000.

Zuckerman said he spoke to Ito on Aug. 9, the day before Epstein was found dead and after he saw new details of Epstein's case.

"As the scale of Joi's involvement with Epstein became clear to me, I began to understand that I had to end my relationship with the MIT

Media Lab," Zuckerman wrote in a blog post he published Tuesday.

"The work my group does focuses on social justice and on the inclusion of marginalized individuals and points of view. It's hard to do that work with a straight face in a place that violated its own values so clearly in working with Epstein and in disguising that relationship," he said.



In this April 3, 2017 file photo, students walk past the "Great Dome" atop Building 10 on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology campus in Cambridge, Mass. Two prominent researchers are quitting MIT's Media Lab over revelations that the famed technology research hub and its director took money from Jeffrey Epstein after he'd served time for sex offenses involving girls and young women. Ethan Zuckerman, director of the lab's Center for Civic Media, said director Joi Ito had failed to disclose the deceased financier's funding of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology incubator as well as investments Epstein made in Ito's personal venture capital fund, Wednesday, Aug. 21, 2019. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa, File)

Zuckerman said Ito had asked him to meet with Epstein in 2014 and that he refused and urged Ito not to meet the financier either. He said the two did not speak about Epstein until last week.

Before his recent New York federal sex trafficking charges, Epstein pleaded guilty in 2008 to prostitution-related charges involving underage girls in Florida. He served 13 months in jail and was allowed out on work release almost every day.

Zuckerman said he would not leave the Media Lab until the end of the academic year in May because he cannot responsibly abandon his students.

The public controversy surrounding Epstein's donations to the lab date to 2015. In an apology he published last week, Ito said he first met Epstein in 2013 at a conference and had, in addition to inviting him to the lab, visited several of Epstein's homes.

"I was never involved in, never heard him talk about, and never saw any evidence of the horrific acts that he was accused of," Ito wrote. He said he regretted allowing Epstein to make donations to the lab and to invest in several of his funds, which invest in tech startups outside of MIT.

Media Lab receives about \$75 million in annual funding provided by a long list of corporate "members" including Hyundai, Samsung, Comcast, Google, Nike, Twitter and more.

Ito vowed to raise an amount equivalent to the donations that the Media Lab received from Epstein and to direct the funds to nonprofits that focus on supporting survivors of trafficking. He did not respond to an emailed request for comment.

Asked if MIT was discussing Ito's possible departure, Steve Bradt did not respond, saying via email that Ito's public apology letter "offers the extent of comment and information."

Ito has been director of the Media Lab since 2011 and sits on the board of directors of The New York Times and the MacArthur Foundation. He is on the board of trustees of the Knight Foundation.

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