

## Ethics Notes



I may be perpetually naïve, but I am still surprised when I hear of leadership misconduct and the leader's attempt at a cover-up. I am not surprised by the bad behavior, but I am always surprised by the fact that the wrongdoer is risking his or her future by relying on other individuals to cooperate in the cover-up.

So it was the case when I recently read about the misconduct of a leader at the most prestigious technology school in the country, Joi Ito of MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology). Until a week ago, Mr. Ito was the Director of the Media Lab at MIT where over 200 graduate engineering students create the technology that the rest of us could never imagine until we see it before our eyes. **60 Minutes** did an episode on the Image Lab and I was perplexed by a computer that could translate someone's thoughts into action – the inventor ordered a pepperoni pizza without uttering a word.

But MIT, like all educational and creative institutions, needs money and lots of it. Mr. Ito's job as Director was, in part, to ensure the dollars kept coming. He developed a relationship with Jeffrey Epstein, a financier whose predilection for underage girls and his guilty plea for soliciting prostitution from children were well known. The New Yorker magazine reported last weekend that Mr. Epstein donated \$800,000 of his own funds to the MIT Lab and helped arrange over \$7.5 million in donations from other billionaires such as Bill Gates. This was done despite the fact that Mr. Epstein was listed as disqualified under the MIT donor database.

So how were these donations accomplished. According to the New Yorker, the officials at the Media Lab underplayed the Lab's relationship with Mr. Epstein. Going so far as to conceal meetings with Mr. Epstein and reporting his donations as being received from an anonymous donor – a donor that the Director's staff referred to as "Voldemort" or "he who must not be named."

And how did the New Yorker uncover this information? A former Media Lab development officer, Signe Swenson, came forward with the information about the relationship. Ms. Swenson had left the Media Lab in 2016, partly under protest for having to work with Mr. Epstein whom she knew to be a convicted pedophile. Another MIT faculty member, Ethan Zuckerman, left the Media Lab in protest over its relationship with Epstein. In a post announcing his departure Zuckerman stated, "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. 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."

I am struck by Zuckerman's simple statement; in the quest to accomplish something good, we may become blind to the appropriate means of getting there. In other words we justify the means to reach our end goal. Here, however, the means led to Mr. Ito's resignation as well as great humiliation for an esteemed institution.

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