The Grey Hoodie Project: Big Tobacco, Big Tech, and the threat on academic integrity

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Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control

*In setting and implementing their public health policies with respect to tobacco control, Parties shall **act to protect these policies from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry** in accordance with national law.*

1. Motivation

Governmental bodies are relying on academics' expert advice to shape policy regarding Artificial Intelligence.

With other fields of study, industrial funding is seen as a conflict of interest that may cloud or bias judgement.

By comparing the well-studied actions of another industry, that of Big Tobacco, to the current actions of Big Tech we see similar strategies employed by both industries to sway and influence academic and public discourse.

2. Learning from History

We observe four main goals driving investment into academia by embattled industries (i.e., Big Tobacco and Big Tech). For these industries, funding research in the academy serves to:

1. Reinvent itself in the public image as socially responsible;
2. Influence the events and decisions made by funded universities;
3. Influence the research questions and plans of individual scientists;
4. Discover receptive academics who can be leveraged.

3. Goal 1: Reinvent itself in the public image as socially responsible

The "Partnership on AI to Benefit People and Society" was "established to study and formulate best practices on AI technologies, [… and study] AI and its influences on people and society"

Unfortunately, non-Big Tech members of this partner-ship realized that neither "ACLU nor MIT nor any other non-profit has any power in this partnership", leading members to conclude "PAI's association with ACLU, MIT and other academic/non-profit institutions practically ends up serving a legitimating function"

4. Goal 2: Influence the events and decisions made by funded universities

The top machine learning conference NeurIPS has had at least two Big Tech sponsors at the highest tier of funding since 2015. In recent years, the number of Big Tech companies at the highest tier of funding has exceeded five.

When considering workshops relating to ethics or fairness, all but one have at least one organizer who is affiliated or was recently affiliated with Big Tech. For example, there was a workshop about "Responsible and Reproducible AI" sponsored solely by Facebook.

Such a conflict of interest persists even when considering conferences dedicated to examining the societal effects of technology. For example, FAccT (previously known as FAT*) has never had a year without Big Tech funding: Google (3/3 years), Microsoft (2/3 years), Facebook (2/3 years)

From public health policy:

> "rather than disclosure and management, the ethically paramount intervention targeted against behavior of partiality flowing from [conflict of interests] is the idea of sequestration. Sequestration refers to the idea of eliminating or at least severely curtailing relationships between commercial industries and [...] professionals".

5. Goal 3: Influence the research questions of individual scientists

A large portion of the way Big Tech gains influence over AI ethicists, is by **acting as a pseudo-granting body**.

By providing a large amount of money to researchers, Big Tech can decide what will and won't be researched. We show that a majority (58%) of AI ethics faculty view are looking to Big Tech for money. An even larger percentage (97%) have been exposed to the logics of Big Tech through some past financial relationship.

This influence **can occur even without an explicit intention of manipulation** if those applying for awards and those deciding who deserves funding don't share the same underlying views of what ethics is or how it "should be solved".
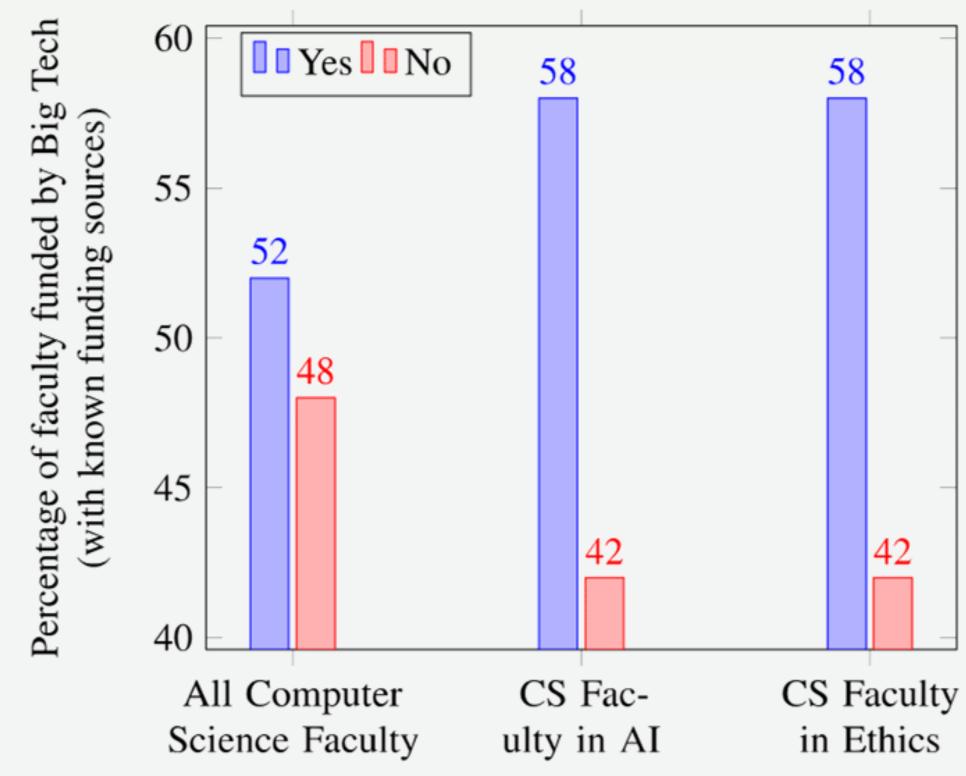

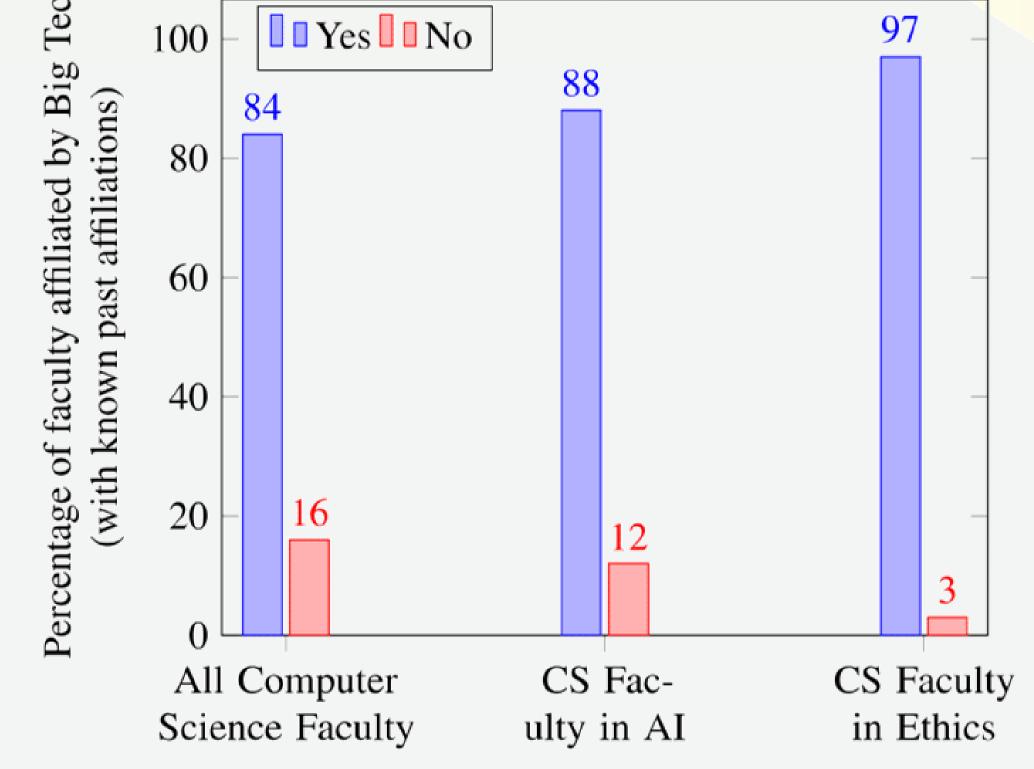**Figure 1.** Percentage of CS Faculty who have received direct funding from Big Tech.

Figure 2. Percentage of CS Faculty who have/had any financial relationship with Big Tech.

6. Goal 4: Discover receptive academics who can be leveraged.

To "leverage" an academic is to use them to push goals in a legislation/litigation setting.

Eric Schmidt, previously of Google, was advised on which "academic AI ethicists Schmidt's private foundation should fund". This is not a onetime occurrence either. Schmidt also inquired to Joichi Ito (formerly of MIT's Media Lab) if he "should fund a certain professor who, like Ito, later served as an "expert consultant" to the Pentagon's innovation board".

7. Next Steps

The conflict of interest in academia caused by external private funding is a systemic issue which exists at the societal level, and therefore we think that effective solutions will have to come from policy (either governmental or institutional).

However, there are some clear next steps:

- Every researcher should be required to post their complete funding information online.
- Should Big Tech be able to directly fund a researcher's work?
- What are some possible alternatives?
- Is it ethical to seek external funding sources given the historical effects such funding has had on critical work?

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