

# Professors rally behind MIT Media Lab director after Epstein funding scandal

*'The conversation has veered into increasingly pessimistic territory,' a new petition says*

By [Mary Beth Griggs](#) | Aug 27, 2019, 6:03pm EDT



A group of prominent academics have signed a letter in support of MIT Media Lab director Joi Ito, as MIT reckons with the revelation that it accepted [around \\$800,000 in funds](#) from convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. The letter seeks to gather support for Ito, who has apologized for accepting funds from [the now-deceased financier](#).

Epstein had a reputation for [cultivating relationships with scientists](#), and funded many scientific projects, including some at MIT. He was also linked to deceased MIT professor and AI pioneer Marvin Minsky, who was [recently accused of having sex](#) with one of Epstein's underage victims. Epstein also gave money to the [Media Lab](#), among other institutions.



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In the wake of the new charges, Epstein's support has become a source of public shame for the Media Lab. Ito [published a public apology](#) on August 15 acknowledging that the MIT Media Lab received money from Epstein's foundations. "I knew about these gifts and these funds were received with my permission" Ito wrote, adding, "I also allowed him to invest in several of my funds which invest in tech startup companies outside of MIT."

In the apology he vowed to "raise an amount equivalent to the donations the Media Lab received from Epstein" and send that to non-profits focused on supporting survivors of trafficking. He also promised to return the money that Epstein had invested in his funds.

But the revelation had already created significant discord within the Media Lab. On August 10th, Ethan Zuckerman, the director of the Center for Civic Media at the Media Lab [resigned](#). In a [Medium post](#) published later, Zuckerman cited Ito's acceptance of funds from Epstein as the reason he was resigning.

"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.” Zuckerman wrote.

But as pressure on Ito builds, some members of the MIT community have begun to voice public support for him. [A new site](#) registered [on Monday](#) has posted a public message of support for Ito, signed by more than 100 people so far. The letter reads in part:

Now is a time to revisit how the principles of an organization are expressed through its funding process—and to explore how we can, together, build mechanisms to ensure our fundraising efforts reflect our core values.

However, the conversation has veered into increasingly pessimistic territory, and the media has focused their attention largely on this negativity. As such, it is our responsibility as members of the greater Media Lab community to add our voice to the conversation. We have experienced first-hand Joi’s integrity, and stand in testament to his overwhelmingly positive influence on our lives—and sincerely hope he remains our visionary director for many years to come.

A number of prominent professors and thinkers involved with MIT and Harvard are listed as signers, including Harvard Law professor and Creative Commons founder Lawrence Lessig, Whole Earth Catalog founder Stewart Brand, Media Lab co-founder Nicholas Negroponte, Harvard law professor and EFF board member Jonathan Zittrain, and synthetic biology pioneer George Church (who also [had ties to Epstein](#)). You can read the entire letter, and [see the list of signatories here](#).

Prosecutors are still investigating claims against Epstein’s potential co-conspirators, though they are no longer pursuing charges against Epstein himself, who died in jail on August 10. Sixteen of Epstein’s victims testified in a hearing this week.

“The reckoning must not end, it must continue,” Virginia Roberts Giuffre, one of Epstein’s accusers said, [according to the Washington Post](#). “He did not act alone. We the victims know that.”