

### (In)effectiveness of Donating Money to MIT

As I come near the end of my time as an undergraduate at MIT, I've started to receive emails from the 'MIT Alumni Association.' Past the greetings of 'congratulations' and the 'fun' events I can participate in as an alumna, the true reason for the email appears. A recent one that was sent on the last day of classes said that MIT was so close to reaching its goal of getting \$1,000 students to donate so some other alumna will donate more money. Every time I see one of these emails, especially since I still have not officially graduated from MIT, I wonder what exactly is MIT doing with the donated money and its 16.4 billion dollars of endowment. At [giving.mit.edu](http://giving.mit.edu), MIT lists numerous ways donated money not only helps MIT students but the world at large. In particular (quite ironically), MIT has a campaign titled 'MIT Campaign for a Better World' that has a lofty fundraising goal of 6 billion dollars. However, one does not have to look far past the 'inspirational' video and superfluous statements on the website to see that MIT's Better World Campaign and overall culture of its student body to see how much (or little) MIT is impacting. Using comparisons with Winner's 'Do Artifacts Have Politics', Stierl's 'Fleet of Mediterranean Border Humanitarians,' and Kockleman's 'the Chicken and the Quetzal', I will argue that if one really wants a 'better world,' MIT is not the place to donate money because its solutions ignore the political atmosphere in which they take place. In this paper, I will discuss the political aspects of MIT and the lack of response to such politics.

In his article, 'Do Artifacts Have Politics,' Winner makes the argument that many examples of modern (at the time) technology were deeply interwoven in politics. He identifies two ways technology can become political: the piece of technology helps a certain community or the piece of technology itself is inherently political. As an institute of technology, technology certainly plays a major role in the lives of both MIT students and staff. Like the examples in Winner's article, some of the technology that was invented by alumni of MIT, were or are being made with politics in mind and while others are inherently political.<sup>1</sup> For example, consider inventions like the world wide web and email, both of which were invented by which was invented by MIT alum Ray Tomlinson. On the surface, most people would not consider these inventions to necessarily be political. Winner would classify email as an '...arrangement of a specific technical device or system that becomes a way of settling an issue in a particular community.' The internet and email certainly had many positive effects on the world but they also increased existing inequalities similar to the effects of the tomato harvester that Winner discusses. With the rise of email, 'snail mail' become less frequent and ultimately led to the loss of thousands of jobs in the early 2000s<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps what is even more troubling was that more and more activities such as education required people to have internet access, yet, even today racial minorities are less likely to have a (non-smartphone) home internet connection.<sup>3</sup> While few people would argue that email and the internet should not have been invented, they have political aspects.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://mitadmissions.org/blogs/entry/50\\_things\\_that\\_mit\\_made/](https://mitadmissions.org/blogs/entry/50_things_that_mit_made/)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.postal-reporter.com/blog/usps-workforce-at-lowest-level-in-nearly-50-years-over-258000-less-employees-in-7-years/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/>

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In the second part of Winner's article, he discusses technology that is inherently political. He says that advocates of solar power claim that it is much better for democracy because of the decentralized nature and that it would allow people to have more control of their electricity and be happier about it. Arguments like these are used to claim other technology are bad but Winner says all arguments of the type 'how many jobs will be created, how many pollutants will be added, etc' are not the concern. He says that the questions surrounding the 'consequences for the form and quality of human associations' should be discussed. Many of the technological advancements coming from large technology, like Facebook and Google, should certainly be scrutinized for their political implications. For example, Facebook, has vastly transformed how humans associate with each other. While there are positive aspects, the negative ones have vast political consequences as seen in the 2016 election and might be seen in the 2020 election. However, when Facebook came out and started growing larger, no one was having the discussion of how to address the political consequences of Facebook. It was not until Facebook was caught with the Cambridge Analytica disaster and an unpopular candidate became president that people started paying attention to the vast social consequences of technology. Governments, like the EU have started to take a stance against companies like Google amidst privacy concerns.<sup>4</sup> Yet, amongst all of the controversy, there is one place that is welcoming technology companies with open arms: MIT.

MIT as an institution and MIT students have a vast and deep connection with technology companies. Several months after the Cambridge Analytica story broke, Facebook's COO addressed MIT's Class of 2018 as the invited commencement speaker. The year before the speaker was Apple CEO Tim Cook. On the surface, these relationships might seem logical and apolitical. A school that has a focus on technology would partner with companies with a similar focus. Yet, MIT's 'partnership' with these companies is much more than that. In a way that is similar to the flow of corporate America influencing the government which then gives tax breaks for people using the said technology, MIT has essentially created a pipeline of students to these companies. Every year in the end of September, MIT holds its Fall Career Fair. Hundreds of companies come and the overwhelming majority of them are technology companies. Companies can also pay money to have more of a presence at the career fair as well and the large technology and defense companies that have questionable political status have the largest presence. These companies usually higher many MIT students and pay them well, which ends up looking good for MIT when it reports the success of its alumni. The connection even runs to professors as well. There are several professors in the Computer Science department who also work at Google. The influence of corporate technology can be seen just by walking around campus where many students (myself included) are walking advertisements with t-shirts, backpacks and other free 'swag' from companies.

Not only does MIT have vast corporate connections, it also accepts money from questionable political figures. In the day in age where art museums and charities are rejecting money because of figures with bad history<sup>5</sup>, MIT proudly accepts money from people like Stephen Schwartzman and the Koch Brothers. Accepting money from a buddy of Trump brings

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-google-margrethe-vestager-adsense-antitrust-competition-fine/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/15/arts/design/met-museum-sackler-opioids.html>

into question what type of research will really be funded at the new ‘college of computing’ that is supposed to have a part for ethical AI<sup>6</sup>.

The fundamental issue of MIT’s political aspects is that as an institution, it fails to discuss these aspects and deal with their consequences. It is not uncommon for universities to have corporate relations or even for institutions to accept money from questionable characters. It is the fact that MIT does not admit to doing so and that the line between MIT’s interests and others is unclear. In the second half of this paper, I will discuss how MIT plays a similar role to the one of the NGOs discussed in Stirl’s article and that is why donating money to MIT for a ‘better world’ is ultimately ineffective.

In ‘A Fleet of Mediterranean Border Humanitarians,’ Stirl describes the frightening situation regarding migrants in the Mediterranean. In particular, she describes how three NGOs which rescue people from the water have varying beliefs after their overall role. The Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), is an NGO that was started when the founder’s wife saw a lifejacket floating in the Mediterranean. Funded by a military contractor’s fortune, MOAS rescues thousands of migrants every day from the waters. Stirl’s criticism of the MOAS is not of their physical actions but of their belief in the role they play. The head of MOAS does not see his company’s role as political at all and his NGO does not participate in trying to pressure the EU to deal with the migrant crisis. He believes what he is doing is purely humanitarian. The issue is that this belief of non-political involvement leaves the situation in constant of being unresolved. For now, the NGOs might be able to fill the need of physically getting the migrants to land but it is unclear if this situation can be sustained without any real political change.

I believe that a parallel can be drawn between MOAS and MIT. Both believe that they are doing good and for the most part they are. MIT does produce ‘groundbreaking’ research and it does provide opportunities for thousands of students to succeed. But its political ties ultimately make the large changes that a ‘better world’ needs impossible.

One reason is that the corporate sponsorship of research, a core part of MIT’s strengths, makes it more difficult to pursue research questions that could harm current corporations. Earlier this semester, an interesting opinion piece was posted in the student newspaper. A Chemical Engineering graduate student discusses how his research topic is driven by funding and he has seen graduate students lie to corporate sponsors on how they are funding research that will help their company. <sup>7</sup>Unfortunately, situations like this are common when MIT relies on corporations to sponsor research. While this is one of the few publicly discussed instances of research motivation changing based on corporate sponsorship, corporate sponsorship of research by companies interested in profit like IBM and Shell Oil make it hard to really pursue the difficult questions.

Corporate sponsorship certainly makes pursuing solutions to difficult problems in the world more complicated but the fundamental flaw in MIT’s ‘Better World initiative’ is the lack of political discussion. In particular, when browsing the ‘Better World’ page for climate change, there are many promising stories of data being collected about cities and new energy units being built but only one story where the word policy is mentioned. While there is an obvious scientific side of climate change, for real progress to be made, solutions need more than a promising research paper in a journal. They need practical changes at the governmental level (and they need

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<sup>6</sup> <http://news.mit.edu/2018/faq-mit-stephen-schwarzman-college-of-computing-1015>

<sup>7</sup> <https://thetech.com/2019/05/01/research-funding-sources>

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to pass the government as well). By ignoring this aspect and focusing on ‘just the science,’ MIT is behaving in a way similar to MOAS. They can certainly come up with interesting solutions to help deal with the effects of climate change but it does not really address the root problem. This problem can be seen on many of the pages of the ‘Better World Campaign.’ For example, on the teaching page, there is an article about how MIT is supporting teachers teach STEM.<sup>8</sup> For the students and teachers in those particular classrooms, this is a wonderful opportunity. But how can a program that is supposed to help transform teaching for a ‘Better World’ not include research for educational policy reform or other political aspects about education like neighborhood location?

MIT’s approach to a ‘better world’ draws a parallel with the NGO featured in Kockelmans’, the Chicken and the Quatzel. One of the core failures of the NGO was that it completely ignored the historical and political history that led to the disappearing cloud forest in the first place. They thought that with their economic tourist model, they could have a non-political and practical economical solution. Of course, that assumption was extremely wrong and led to the failure of the NGO. A prime example is MIT’s interest in ‘innovation and entrepreneurship.’ Like some other universities, MIT can provide ‘seed’ money for startups if they look promising. MIT also holds competitions like the \$100 Pitch competition where groups are given money based on a presentation. These quick, fast-moving ideas that become companies are part of the reason why groups like the NGO end up in a failed position. Having a hasty competitive process encourages people to cut corners and not have the serious discussions that Winner encouraged.

Not only do MIT’s research initiatives lack political aspects, the undergraduate education does as well. When it comes to learning about new and exciting technology, I have not once heard or had a discussion with a professor about the implications of this technology. A prime example is the rise of Artificial Intelligence in mainstream companies. From both a technical and practical perspective, it is quite exciting, but it also comes with questionable ethical issues as well. For example, AI and machine learning programs are known to have racial bias in them.<sup>9</sup> However, the one class on ethical AI that does exist, is certainly not enough to discuss the possible political implications of the hundreds of students who are about to go work in the field of machine learning.

While Stirl’s article on NGOs in the Mediterranean lacks a concrete solution on how to remedy the difficult political situation, MIT, as a whole, does have the ability to at least address the political aspects of education and research. For example, having a required class where students have to learn to think of unintentional ways their software could be used for harm is a start. If MIT graduates who become Facebook employees were able to identify when their software might be manipulated, it’s possible that the severity of fake news could have decreased. MIT could have research initiatives that take technical research and make it have a more practical and long term effect. Creating a more distinct separation between research and funding and the actual research could allow professors and graduate students to feel more comfortable pursuing the research questions they desire.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://betterworld.mit.edu/teaching-children-integrated-approach-education/>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2018/12/17/why-your-ai-might-be-racist/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.73bb6ef96cf8](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2018/12/17/why-your-ai-might-be-racist/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.73bb6ef96cf8)

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Even though I believe the lack of political thinking at MIT is problematic, it is likely that many people who donate money, are not thinking that their donation is going to save the world. More likely than not, their donations make them feel like they are still connected to the time in their life when they were at MIT. In recent years, MIT has started throwing 'tent parties' to encourage alumni to come back and donate money. At the end of the day, MIT's goal is to raise money and it is quite likely that their Wolof style is much more effective at reaching that goal than analyzing the role of politics.

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