

## Google's University? An Exploration of Academic Influence on the Tech Giant's Propaganda

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### Abstract

This article sheds light on the symbiotic relationship between academics and Google's propagandistic endeavors to normalize the unilateral exploitation of user data. While technology enthusiasts often praise Google's innovations, little attention is given to the company's trajectory from a small start-up to a global behemoth. The authors argue that academia plays a significant role in fostering a sense of gratitude among users for Google's services, despite relinquishing their rights and privacies. Google's substantial financial support for academic conferences and grants to researchers fuels the narrative that its data usage is both legitimate and altruistic. However, this paper reveals instances where Google has exerted pressure on academics to produce favorable articles and penalized those who refused to comply, effectively influencing academic discourse to bolster its image as a benevolent corporation.

**Keywords:** academic influence, Google, regulation, surveillance capitalism.

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## Introduction

Google, renowned for its myriad of free and user-friendly services, has undoubtedly become an integral part of our daily digital lives. The expansive portfolio of Google services spans various facets of our digital existence, significantly augmenting our efficiency. Google's flagship offering, Google Search, has revolutionized the online browsing experience by furnishing users with swift and pertinent search results. Meanwhile, Gmail, the ubiquitous email service, delivers generous storage capacities and seamless compatibility with an array of other Google services. Google Drive affords users the capability to store and collaboratively share files in the cloud, complemented by the comprehensive suite of online office productivity tools comprising Google Docs, Sheets, and Slides. Further enriching our digital lives, Google Maps offers intricate navigation capabilities, satellite imagery, and local business data. The acquisition of YouTube in 2006 (Snickars & Vonderau, 2009) has positioned Google as the steward of the world's preeminent video-sharing platform, which daily entertains and educates millions of users (Shahghasemi, 2021). Google Photos conveniently serves as a repository for organizing, storing, and distributing images and videos. Additionally, Google augments productivity, communication, and access to information through ancillary services such as Google Calendar, Google Translate, Google News, and Google Meet. As technology's inexorable advance continues, Google remains at the forefront, ceaselessly innovating and expanding its service offerings to cater to the diverse and global needs of its user base.

Google's official webpage features an "About" section in which the company expresses its dedication to enhancing the well-being of a substantial portion of the population. Furthermore, Google outlines various other "Commitments", which might raise questions about whether this webpage represents a philanthropic institution. Yet, what frequently escapes scrutiny, particularly among lay users, is the extraordinary evolution of a fledgling startup initiated by a cadre of motivated university students. This transformation has culminated in the emergence of a mammoth corporation boasting a market capitalization of several hundred billion dollars in under three decades.

Google has traversed a path marked by remarkable economic expansion, cementing its status as one of the world's most valuable and influential corporations. The company's exponential revenue growth finds its roots in its dominant foothold within the digital advertising domain. By the year 2020, Google's parent entity, Alphabet Inc., had disclosed a staggering revenue figure of \$181.7 billion, with advertising

revenue serving as the primary contributor to this substantial income (Statista, 2021). Google's array of advertising platforms, encompassing Google Ads and YouTube Ads, has played an indispensable role in capturing a substantial portion of the global digital advertising expenditure. This strategic positioning has allowed Google to reap the rewards of the ongoing digitalization of both business operations and consumer activities.

Google's economic ascent has not solely hinged on its advertising supremacy; it has also been underpinned by a strategic diversification into various technology-related ventures. The company's strategic investments in realms such as cloud computing services, hardware offerings like Pixel smartphones and Nest smart home devices, and its foray into artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies have all exerted a considerable influence on its revenue expansion.

Furthermore, Google's judicious acquisitions of firms like YouTube, Android Inc., and Nest Labs have further solidified its market presence and bolstered its economic growth trajectory (Glowik, 2017). With its unceasing commitment to innovation and its commanding position across multiple sectors, Google's economic expansion appears poised to persist well into the future, fundamentally reshaping industries and exerting a profound impact on the global digital landscape (Investopedia, 2021).

The apparent paradox of high-tech corporations like Google achieving enormous profitability while projecting an image of self-sacrifice indeed warrants critical examination. Within academic circles, this paradox is rarely scrutinized, raising questions about when and how such ostensibly altruistic endeavors became immensely lucrative. This forms the foundation of our argument. We contend that Google has effectively crafted a deceptive yet widely accepted public image, and we posit that part of this phenomenon is attributable to Google's subtle and successful manipulation of academic discourse.

Our argument is substantiated by evidence demonstrating how Google has forged a symbiotic relationship with academia, both as a social institution and through a Faustian pact. This alliance has resulted in what we describe as the emergence of a "Google University" on a global scale. To delve deeper into this matter, it is essential to first understand how societal perceptions take shape and the pivotal role played by university discourses in shaping these perceptions.

### **The social construction of knowledge**

Human beings are inherently social creatures, and a substantial portion of our experiential reality is forged within the context of our collective

interactions. While we must refrain from asserting the ubiquity of social influence over all aspects of life, it is prudent to acknowledge the pivotal role that social knowledge plays in shaping our cognitive processes and behaviors. The concept of social construction of knowledge is fundamental in understanding how public perceptions and beliefs are influenced by those in positions of power. Scholars have extensively studied this phenomenon, and figures like Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser have made significant contributions to our understanding of ideological control and the role of social institutions in shaping public consciousness.

Antonio Gramsci, a prominent Italian Marxist philosopher and statesman, has left a profound imprint on our comprehension of public knowledge and its societal implications. Born in 1891, Gramsci emerged as a seminal figure in the realm of early 20th-century political philosophy and was a pivotal founding member of the Italian Communist Party. His most enduring legacy is his formulation of the theory of cultural hegemony, which underscores the critical role of intellectual and cultural leadership in the exertion of power.

Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony is predicated upon the idea that the ruling class maintains its grip on society by promulgating its ideology as the prevailing and pervasive worldview, thereby shaping the beliefs and values held by the broader populace. This dominion is not solely achieved through coercive means; rather, it is secured through the meticulous control and dissemination of public knowledge and information. In the case of Google's propaganda, we see a parallel where the company strategically disseminates information that reinforces its image as a benevolent corporation working for the common good. By supporting academic conferences and funding favorable articles, Google influences public knowledge about its data practices, portraying them as natural and beneficial. In his seminal work, the "Prison Notebooks," authored during his incarceration under the oppressive fascist regime in Italy, Gramsci delved deeply into the mechanics of how the ruling class strategically employs educational institutions, media outlets, and various cultural institutions to mold public consciousness and perpetuate their dominion (Gramsci, 1971).

As per Gramsci's perspective, public knowledge does not exist as a passive mirror reflecting objective reality; rather, it is actively molded by individuals occupying positions of authority and influence. The ruling class, in particular, employs a calculated approach in shaping information and constructing narratives that align with their vested interests. Simultaneously, alternative viewpoints that may contest

the prevailing order are marginalized or stifled. This intricate process serves to manufacture a deceptive sense of unanimity and legitimize the existing societal structure, rendering it as both natural and inescapable.

Gramsci's insights also resonate with the contemporary challenges posed by digital technologies and social media. The ease of information dissemination has amplified the manipulation of public knowledge, leading to the formation of echo chambers and filter bubbles that further reinforce dominant narratives. Such manipulation can be done much easier in societies where critical thinking is weak, and research provides evidence that this is indeed the situation. Sabbar and his colleagues found evidence that people, even educated ones, lack high levels of critical thinking and they easily believe messages they receive on social media (Sabbar et al., 2021).

In light of Gramsci's theories, scholars and activists have underscored the imperative for fostering critical media literacy and advocating for the democratization of knowledge production. Promoting a mindset characterized by skepticism and discernment when engaging with information empowers individuals to question dominant narratives and actively participate in informed public discourse (Couldry & Curran, 2017). Antonio Gramsci's theories concerning cultural hegemony and the manipulation of public knowledge continue to retain profound relevance in contemporary society. These theories offer crucial insights into the mechanisms by which power is sustained through information control and highlight the critical significance of fostering media literacy and ensuring access to a plurality of information sources. Such endeavors are fundamental in the pursuit of a more informed and democratic society.

Louis Althusser, a renowned French Marxist philosopher born in 1918, made significant contributions to the evolution of Marxist theory in the 20th century. Central to his work is the concept of interpellation, which he introduced as a pivotal element within the framework of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). Althusser's exploration of interpellation offers valuable insights into the mechanisms through which individuals become subjects to ideological influence and identification within the context of capitalist societies. Althusser's concept of interpellation, as elucidated in his work (Althusser, 1971), pertains to the intricate process by which individuals are summoned or addressed by various ideological apparatuses. These apparatuses encompass a spectrum of societal institutions, including but not limited to the family, educational systems, religious institutions, and media. Their collective function is to perpetuate and fortify the prevailing ideology, thereby sustaining the

established social hierarchy. Through the mechanism of interpellation, individuals are hailed and effectively recognized as subjects, leading to the internalization of the values, norms, and beliefs endorsed by the dominant ruling class.

In the context of education, Althusser's theory of interpellation is particularly evident, as schools assume a pivotal role in summoning individuals to conform to societal norms and expectations. The educational system serves as a conduit for the transmission of dominant ideologies, wielding the power to mold the identities of students and groom them for distinct social roles. Through the inculcation of attributes such as discipline, obedience, and conformity, schools actively contribute to the perpetuation and replication of the capitalist system. In the context of Google's propaganda, the company's collaborations with academia can be seen as a form of interpellation, where favorable narratives about Google's data practices are internalized and reproduced.

The interplay between the social construction of knowledge and Google's propaganda is intricate and influential. By understanding the underlying mechanisms at play, we can more effectively address the ethical implications of the relationship between technology giants and academia. Promoting critical media literacy, encouraging diverse sources of information, and challenging dominant narratives are essential steps toward a more transparent and balanced discourse surrounding data privacy and corporate practices.

Althusser's theory of interpellation extends its purview to encompass the formation of individual subjectivity, elucidating the profound role played by ideology in this intricate process. Through interpellation, individuals come to acknowledge themselves as subjects possessing distinct social identities, aligning themselves with the dominant societal norms and values. This transformative journey unfolds via the conduit of ideological messages that permeate cultural practices, rituals, and discourses, effectively shaping individuals' self-perception and engendering a sense of belonging within the broader socio-cultural context.

Critics have contended that Althusser's theory of interpellation tends to disregard the concept of agency and adopts a somewhat deterministic stance regarding ideology (Callinicos, 1976). Nevertheless, Althusser's insights remain relevant as they underscore how dominant ideologies perpetuate social inequalities within capitalist societies.

In the context of modern discussions, Althusser's interpellation theory finds resonance in debates concerning media, advertising, and consumer culture. The media, particularly through advertisements

and popular culture, plays a pivotal role in interpellating individuals as consumers. By creating desires and promoting certain lifestyles, the media aligns with capitalist interests and reinforces the existing power structures (Hall, 1982). By examining this process of interpellation, individuals can gain awareness of how dominant ideologies shape their identities and exercise their agency in challenging oppressive structures.

Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation offers valuable insights into how individuals are hailed and subjected to ideological control within capitalist societies. The various ideological state apparatuses, including media, work to internalize dominant ideologies, shaping individuals' subjectivities and perpetuating established power dynamics. By critically engaging with interpellation, individuals can adopt a more conscious and transformative approach to effecting social change. Althusser's observations on the role of media in subtly coercing public thought would likely have extended to the internet's popularization, had he lived to see it.

One of the paramount concerns in contemporary political discourse pertains to the proliferation of post-truth narratives and the utilization of 'alternative facts' within the context of democratic governance (d'Ancona, 2017). Although misinformation and deceptive practices in politics have historical precedents, the issue has assumed newfound significance, particularly in the aftermath of pivotal events such as the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the Brexit referendum in the UK. The post-truth phenomenon has now become a pressing and cross-cutting concern in numerous countries, spanning regions such as Brazil, Hungary, the Philippines, Italy, Australia, Poland, Thailand, and India (Fischer, 2019).

An in-depth analysis of the post-truth phenomenon necessitates a thorough examination of its interconnectedness with the surge of populism and concurrent political developments, both within the United States and on a global scale. This multifaceted exploration encompasses a range of factors, including the erosion of 'post-democratic' values, the adoption of right-wing strategies aimed at fracturing the political culture for their own gains, the consequent emergence of 'tribal politics,' the profound influence of social media, and the widespread dissemination of disinformation (Sabzali et al., 2022). These cumulative developments have contributed to the proliferation of high levels of public distrust, thereby establishing the foundational social conditions that foster the prevalence of post-truth narratives (Kahan, 2013).

In shaping public discourse and influencing society, universities play a crucial role. As centers of knowledge, research, and critical

thinking, they possess the potential to contribute to the advancement of ideas, social progress, and the development of informed citizens. Universities influence public discourse through academic research, public engagement, teaching, and creating environments that encourage diversity of thought and freedom of expression.

Academic research conducted by universities has a significant impact on public discourse. Professors and researchers explore various topics, generating new knowledge and insights that enhance our understanding of complex societal issues. By disseminating their findings through peer-reviewed publications, conferences, and other academic platforms, universities contribute to informing public policy, challenging established assumptions, and shaping public opinion. Emphasizing evidence-based approaches, universities foster rational and informed debates in the public sphere (Mullins, 2018).

Furthermore, it is imperative for academic institutions to undertake proactive public engagement endeavors as a means to facilitate the convergence of academia and society. Through the orchestration of public lectures, seminars, and workshops, universities can effectively disseminate their reservoir of expertise to a wider spectrum of stakeholders, thus fostering a milieu of discourse and knowledge transference. Moreover, active engagement with the public sphere offers an invaluable avenue for researchers and scholars to glean insights from a multifarious array of perspectives, thereby enhancing their comprehension of prevailing societal challenges and concerns. Additionally, academic institutions are well-positioned to forge collaborative partnerships with community-based organizations, governmental entities, and corporate enterprises, thus collectively addressing and ameliorating real-world issues.

The pedagogical facet of academia assumes a pivotal role in shaping and steering public discourse. Academic institutions serve as crucibles for imparting critical thinking competencies to students, instilling within them the ability to methodically scrutinize information, discern latent biases, and engage in scrupulous analysis. Graduates who possess these honed skills are better poised to evolve into active, astute contributors to public deliberations, thereby catalyzing a more erudite and deliberative public discourse. Furthermore, by inculcating a profound sense of civic duty and ethical principles in their student body, universities cultivate the next generation of leaders who are adept at influencing public discourse in a constructive and ethically grounded manner.

It is incumbent upon universities to cultivate an ecosystem that not only upholds the principles of unfettered expression but actively nurtures



a rich tapestry of divergent thought. Academic institutions must assume the mantle of being fortresses of open discourse, wherein a multiplicity of ideas and viewpoints can be examined with the utmost freedom and civility. By nurturing a milieu that prizes intellectual inquisitiveness and welcomes dissenting perspectives, universities contribute significantly to the enhancement of public discourse. This inclusive environment provides a vital platform for robust deliberations and constructive disputation. Moreover, it serves as a crucible for the interrogation of established beliefs and biases, thus propelling the frontiers of knowledge and augmenting societal comprehension. Furthermore, it is imperative that universities actively confront issues of accessibility and inclusivity, thereby guaranteeing equitable representation and the amplification of diverse voices both within their academic enclaves and the wider public discourse (Koivunen et al., 2020).

It is essential to acknowledge that certain universities, rather than directing their resources towards fostering a more democratic and enlightened public discourse that grapples with the intricacies of our increasingly interconnected world, may occasionally employ the tenets of academic freedom, open dialogues, and evidence-based reasoning in service to their own interests or those of their clients. Recent studies have shed light on how corporate funding can impact the direction of academic research and influence policies. For instance, A study conducted by Data for Progress brought to light a disconcerting revelation: six major fossil fuel corporations channeled an astounding sum of over \$700 million into the research coffers of 27 United States universities during the period spanning 2010 to 2020. According to the report's findings, this substantial funding bestowed upon universities engaged in climate research not only possesses the capacity to influence the trajectory of research endeavors but can also exert considerable sway over the formulation of policies that align with the preferred climate solutions of the industry. Of notable significance are the top five institutions on the list, which include renowned centers for climate research such as the University of California at Berkeley, receiving \$154 million, Stanford University with \$56.6 million, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology securing \$40.5 million in funding. Additionally, there are universities with historical affiliations to the fossil fuel sector, exemplified by George Mason University, which received \$64 million and has emerged as the predominant beneficiary of funding from the Koch Foundation.

The infusion of financial resources from industry sources raises pertinent questions concerning its potential to influence the focus

and trajectory of climate research and the ensuing policy formulation processes. These revelations beckon inquiries into possible conflicts of interest and the discernible impact of corporate interests on the integrity and autonomy of academic institutions.

*The Washington Post* has characterized Google as a highly influential entity in Washington, adeptly steering its own narrative. The company's exercise of influence is notable for its subtlety and sophistication, with particular attention paid to the active involvement of Eric Schmidt in these efforts. Furthermore, Schmidt's engagement extended to the New America Foundation, a prominent public-policy think tank that played a pivotal role in shaping the economic policies embraced by the Obama administration. Assuming the chairmanship of the foundation in 2013, Schmidt notably made a personal contribution of \$1 million, a substantial portion of the foundation's annual budget, which stood at \$12.9 million that year. Throughout Schmidt's tenure on the board from 1999 to 2016, the foundation received a substantial sum of \$21 million in funding, emanating from a combination of contributions from Google, Schmidt himself, and Schmidt's family foundation (Zuboff, 2019). These actions have raised concerns about Google's capacity to subtly manipulate the dissemination of knowledge, often operating beyond the awareness of the general public.

## Methodology

To examine how Google could potentially utilize academics and universities to shape public opinion in favor of its data capture and rendering practices, our research encompassed two distinct phases. In the first phase, we conducted in-depth interviews with 14 tech analysts. These individuals were selected based on their expertise in the field, surpassing the common utopian admiration of technological innovation. The selection process involved scrutinizing their previous analyses, and upon invitation, 14 of these experts willingly participated in our interviews.

In the second phase, we undertook an exhaustive search to identify relevant investigations specifically focusing on Google's meticulous efforts to influence academic discourse. Our search strategy was tailored to locate and evaluate studies that shed light on this particular aspect of Google's practices. However, it is noteworthy that the number of studies dedicated to this subject was limited, as we shall discuss in the following section. Nonetheless, the combination of interviews with tech analysts and the available literature allowed us to gain valuable insights into the potential methods employed by Google in its pursuit of influencing public sentiment through academic channels.

## Findings

Google currently does not have a university under its direct ownership or operation. While it remains a possibility that the leaders within Alphabet, Google's parent company, may contemplate the establishment of such an institution in the future, they have, for the time being, chosen a prudent approach of exerting influence indirectly through intermediaries. Interestingly, in 2007, Tara Brabazon authored a book titled *The University of Google: Education in the (Post) Information Age*. Despite its suggestive title, this work provides limited insights into Google's specific endeavors within the academic sphere, offering instead abstract and somewhat restrained observations:

“Google is the metaphor, metonymy and the archetypal example of the need for higher levels of interpretation, comprehension and literacy in education. Because Google ranks its site returns on the basis of popularity, it is reasonably easy to influence the algorithms that display and rank results. Called Search Engine Optimization (SEO), all users must monitor not only the content of the sites returned, but their (lack of) diversity and the rationale for their ranking. Stephen Abram and Judy Luther discovered a clear example to demonstrate why we need to use Google to think with, not think through Google” (Brabazon, 2007: 140).

On February 28, 2022 Leslie Yeh, Director of University Relations at Google posted on the department's official blog about the reasons Google support universities:

“Sharing knowledge is essential to Google's research philosophy — it accelerates technological progress and expands capabilities community-wide. Solving complex problems requires bringing together diverse minds and resources collaboratively. This can be accomplished through building local and global connections with multidisciplinary experts and impacted communities. In partnership with these stakeholders, we bring our technical leadership, product footprint, and resources to make progress against some of society's greatest opportunities and challenges. We at Google see it as our responsibility to disseminate our work as contributing members of the

scientific community and to help train the next generation of researchers. To do this well, collaborating with experts and researchers outside of Google is essential. In fact, just over half of our scientific publications highlight work done jointly with authors outside of Google. We are grateful to work collaboratively across the globe and have only increased our efforts with the broader research community over the past year. In this post, we will talk about some of the opportunities afforded by such partnerships ..." (Yeh, 2022).

Similar to previous pronouncements made by Google, this comprehensive public statement notably omits any explicit mention of the reciprocal nature of the relationships Google forges within the academic sphere. Notably, Google's executives, including Leslie Yeh, seldom divulge the benefits accruing to the corporation from its benevolent contributions to academia. Google actively cultivates financial affiliations with scholars hailing from prestigious institutions like Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley. Over the past decade, Google has provided substantial funding for research endeavors primarily geared toward bolstering its market preeminence in the face of regulatory challenges. Investigations into these arrangements have unveiled a wide spectrum of payments, spanning from \$5,000 to \$400,000, allocated for such research efforts. Additionally, some researchers opt to share their papers with Google before their official publication, thereby affording the company an opportunity to offer feedback and suggestions.

Journalists, in pursuit of transparency and accountability, have obtained an extensive cache of emails through public-records requests involving over a dozen university professors. Intriguingly, despite the financial backing provided by Google, not all professors disclose the extent of the company's involvement in their research endeavors. Furthermore, only a limited subset of these academics subsequently reveal the financial ties in subsequent publications relating to topics intertwined with Google's market position and regulatory concerns (Mullins & Nicas, 2017). This practice raises profound concerns regarding the transparency of these relationships and the potential ramifications it might exert on the academic discourse surrounding Google's market dominance and regulatory entanglements. Moreover, there exists a palpable need for the public to be apprised of the inception and duration of this covert *modus operandi*.

The academic involvement of Google dates back to at least 2010, as evidenced by the establishment of the Google Focused Research Awards. With a total grant value of \$5.7 million, these awards were specifically targeted at college professors engaged in research projects beneficial to both Google and broader research efforts. The areas of interest included machine learning, leveraging mobile phones for health and environmental data collection, energy-efficient computing, and privacy. Recognizing the importance of advancements in these fields, Google supported 12 projects led by 31 professors from 10 different universities. The grants extended over two to three years, with recipients gaining access to critical Google tools and technical expertise to facilitate their research endeavors (Whitney, 2010).

While Google's financial contributions to academia have played a role in supporting research and technological development, concerns have been raised regarding the lack of explicit disclosure regarding these arrangements. Some professors involved in Google-funded research projects do not disclose the company's involvement, and only a few mentions the financial ties in subsequent articles on related subjects. The potential impact on the integrity and independence of academic research is a subject of debate, warranting further examination to ensure transparency and preserve the integrity of academic discourse. Understanding the extent of Google's influence on academic research and the mechanisms that govern these relationships will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between technology companies and academic institutions in shaping knowledge and innovation.

Google enlisted the expertise of Deven Desai, a researcher specializing in the intersection of law and technology at Princeton University at the time. His primary task was to identify and engage academics who possessed the capability to produce research papers that would prove advantageous to the company's interests. Over a span of two years, Mr. Desai reportedly managed a budget exceeding \$2 million of Google's resources, channeling these funds towards the organization of conferences and the commissioning of research papers. In return for their contributions, authors were remunerated with payments ranging from \$20,000 to \$150,000 (Mullins & Nicas, 2017).

Subsequently, The Washington Post published an exhaustive report that shed light on the meticulous efforts undertaken by Google in this domain. This was exemplified by the covert orchestration of a three-part series focused on internet search competition, hosted at the George Mason University's Law and Economics Center. This academic center,

characterized as “free-market-oriented,” had received substantial financial backing from Google. These events unfolded in May 2012, coinciding with the Federal Trade Commission’s inquiry into the Google antitrust case.

Investigative journalists uncovered evidence of close collaboration between Google’s personnel and the center’s staff, with Google actively influencing the selection of speakers and participants who were largely comprised of Google employees. Intriguingly, Google even furnished a detailed spreadsheet outlining the individuals occupying positions of influence, including members of Congress, FTC commissioners, and senior officials from the Justice Department and state attorney general’s offices, to the center’s staff. Remarkably, the panels convened during the conference prominently featured “leading technology and legal experts” who espoused strong opposition to government intervention against Google. Notably, they presented their arguments before regulators who held the responsibility of determining the corporation’s fate. It is worth highlighting that many participants remained unaware of Google’s behind-the-scenes role in orchestrating these meetings, as Google and center personnel had reached an agreement to keep the corporation’s involvement discreet (Zuboff, 2019).

The Federal Trade Commission’s antitrust investigation appeared to heighten Google’s apprehensions regarding potential regulatory threats to the concept of surveillance capitalism. In response to these concerns, Google adopted a more assertive approach in its grant-making endeavors targeted at civil society organizations.

As documented in the investigative research report authored by the Center for Media and Democracy, titled “The Googlization of the Far Right”, Google’s roster of grantees in 2012 underwent a notable transformation. This new list prominently featured a set of antigovernment organizations known for their staunch opposition to regulatory measures, taxation policies, and their active promotion of climate change denial. Prominent among these organizations were Americans for Tax Reform led by Grover Norquist, Heritage Action, funded by the Koch brothers, and other groups with an aversion to regulatory oversight, including the Federalist Society and the Cato Institute.

Moreover, Google discreetly acknowledged its affiliation with the corporate lobbying consortium known as ALEC, which is renowned for its advocacy against gun control, emissions restrictions, support for voter-suppression initiatives, tobacco industry tax concessions, and alignment with various far-right causes.

Concurrently, the composition of Google’s list of Google Policy Fellows for the year 2014 presented a seemingly paradoxical juxtaposition. It

included individuals representing nonprofit organizations that one would naturally expect to lead the charge against Google's consolidation of information and power. Among these notable organizations were the Center for Democracy and Technology, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the Future of Privacy Forum, the National Consumers League, the Citizen Lab, and the Asociación por los Derechos Civiles (Zuboff, 2019).

In specific instances, officials representing Google's Washington office took proactive steps to compile lists of academic papers they sought, complete with working titles, abstracts, and proposed budgets for each paper. This approach, as disclosed by a former employee and a former Google lobbyist, involved actively identifying and engaging willing authors to produce these papers. Notably, the objective of this concerted effort was to support Google's lobbying initiatives in the corridors of Washington, D.C. This initiative forms a discreet facet of a broader Silicon Valley strategy aimed at wielding influence over decision makers and policy dialogues.

Of significant interest is Google's financial backing of professors whose research papers posited that the exchange of consumer data represented a reasonable trade-off for access to the company's free services. Furthermore, these papers asserted that Google did not leverage its market dominance to unduly direct users toward its commercial offerings or advertisers, nor did it engage in unfair practices to stifle competition. Additionally, certain academic papers, funded by Google, advocated for Google's search engine to be permitted to link to books and other intellectual property without incurring costs to authors and publishers. Remarkably, since 2009, Google has provided funding for approximately 100 academic papers pertaining to matters of public policy. This information is based on an analysis of data compiled by the Campaign for Accountability, an advocacy group that opposes Google and receives financial support from Google's competitors, including Oracle Corp. It is worth noting that many of these academic papers openly acknowledged Google's financial support (Mullins & Nicas, 2017).

An additional set of approximately 100 research papers were found to have been authored by individuals who received funding from think tanks or university research centers that were financially supported by Google and other technology companies, based on available data. It is noteworthy that a majority of these papers did not disclose the financial backing received from these corporations, as reported by the Campaign for Accountability. Google, in certain instances, explicitly mentioned in its funding letters that it would appreciate receiving attribution

or acknowledgment of its financial support in relevant university publications. However, there are no established professional standards mandating such disclosures in research papers, particularly those published in law journals at various universities. This lack of consistent disclosure practices raises concerns about transparency and potential conflicts of interest in academic research on public-policy matters pertaining to technology companies like Google (Mullins & Nicas, 2017).

The investigation by *The Wall Street Journal* revealed that Google actively sought out and provided funding to university professors for research and policy papers that aligned with the company's positions on various subjects, including law, regulation, competition, and patents. This funding initiative began as early as 2009. In certain instances, Google exerted significant influence on the content of the papers before their publication, and some authors failed to disclose Google as a funding source. While Google publicly asserted that the funding came with no strings attached, a 2017 case contradicted this claim (Zuboff, 2019).

In 2022, Google awarded a substantial grant of \$4.8 million to The Computing Alliance of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (CAHSI), an initiative led by The University of Texas at El Paso. The primary objective of this grant is to bolster efforts aimed at increasing the representation of Hispanic students who enroll in and successfully complete graduate programs in the field of computing. Furthermore, the grant is earmarked to fortify research capabilities among both faculty and students at CAHSI-affiliated institutions, aligning with research areas of interest to Google.

Dr. Ann Gates, Director of CAHSI, Senior Vice Provost at The University of Texas at El Paso, and the principal investigator of this grant, expressed her appreciation for Google's generous contribution. She highlighted the importance of involving individuals with diverse perspectives, experiences, and interdisciplinary knowledge in addressing complex challenges, emphasizing that such diversity plays a pivotal role in driving innovation and enhancing the nation's competitive edge in the global economy. Dr. Gates regarded Google's grant as a testament to the effectiveness of CAHSI's ongoing endeavors in attracting, preparing, and supporting Hispanic students pursuing graduate degrees (University of Texas at El Paso, 2022).

This substantial grant from Google will facilitate collaboration between CAHSI and a consortium of partner colleges and universities, all of which share the distinction of being classified as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) by the U.S. Department of Education. Notably, ten of these institutions have also earned the esteemed designation of



R1, denoting “very high research activity” according to the Carnegie Classification. Together, they are committed to advancing diversity within the realms of computer science-related disciplines (Ibid).

Speaking about the collaboration, Dr. Sepi Hejazi Moghadam, from University Relations at Google, emphasized the significance of computer science research and its implications for billions of individuals worldwide. He expressed the belief that researchers engaged in this work should represent a diverse range of experiences, perspectives, and concerns. The Google grant aims to strengthen the existing collaboration by enhancing research capacity for faculty and Hispanic students and fostering research partnerships between CAHSI faculty and Google researchers (Ibid).

In June 2022, Google introduced the Google Cyber NYC Institutional Research Program, which allocates \$12 million to bolster the cybersecurity ecosystem in New York City and position the city as a global leader in the field. The funding will support cutting-edge research initiatives at four prominent higher education institutions in New York City. Moreover, the program aims to enhance educational opportunities for students pursuing advanced degrees in cybersecurity. The City University of New York, Columbia University, Cornell University (including Cornell Tech and the Cornell Ann S. Bowers College of Computing and Information Science), and New York University will each receive an annual funding of \$1 million under this initiative, continuing until 2025. Through this funding, around 90 collaborative research projects will be facilitated by 2025, focusing on areas that can foster the development of more secure digital ecosystems and drive innovation in cybersecurity. Additionally, the universities will utilize the funds to expand their cybersecurity degree programs, cultivate the future cybersecurity workforce, and promote the inclusion of underrepresented groups in the field.

The financial allocation dedicated to research by Google, despite being relatively minor within the vast budget of a search and advertising giant, has spurred concerns within academic circles. Some individuals within academia argue that professors may be paying a high price for corporate funding, as it could potentially give rise to the perception that academics are functioning more as lobbyists than impartial scholars. This viewpoint was articulated by Robin Feldman, a scholar affiliated with the University of California Hastings College of the Law. In a co-authored article published in a Harvard University law journal, Feldman and other critics of this funding practice expressed concerns that even the disclosure of financial support from companies that stand to benefit from the research could create an appearance of a conflict of interest,

which in turn could undermine the credibility of academic research. This issue underscores the paramount importance of maintaining transparency and independence in academic research while fostering awareness of potential conflicts arising from corporate funding within the academic sphere (Mullins & Nicas, 2017).

Daniel Crane, a law professor at the University of Michigan, acknowledged the allure of financial support provided by companies like Google, yet he cautioned that such support might interfere with the objective nature of academic research. He disclosed his own practice of declining Google's offers to fund research opposing antitrust regulation of internet search engines, citing his commitment to preserving academic independence and objectivity. Professor Crane further emphasized that when he encounters an academic paper that discloses an interest with a party having a stake in the research outcome, he approaches the research with skepticism and takes it "with a grain of salt." This sentiment underscores the potential influence of corporate funding on academic objectivity and underscores the necessity for transparency in disclosing financial interests to safeguard the credibility and integrity of academic research (Ibid).

In a striking case, Barry Lynn, a highly regarded scholar at the New America Foundation specializing in digital monopolies, publicly praised the European Union's decision to impose a \$2.7 billion fine on Google as a result of an extensive antitrust investigation. However, following pressure from Eric Schmidt, Google's then-Executive Chairman, the director of the New America Foundation dismissed Lynn and his entire Open Markets team, which comprised ten researchers. Lynn, speaking to the New York Times, criticized Google's assertive use of financial influence both in Washington and Brussels, suggesting that people were now apprehensive about the company's actions. This incident illuminated Google's "muscular and sophisticated" influence operation, surpassing the influence of any other U.S. company in the realm of public policy and regulatory affairs (Zuboff, 2019). It demonstrates that Google not only rewards academics it favors but also takes punitive measures against those it perceives as adversarial or critical.

## Conclusion

The infusion of financial resources into academic work introduces a dimension that can impact the sense of originality and authenticity traditionally associated with university-generated knowledge. Big-tech companies like Google are acutely aware of the political economy of knowledge production, recognizing that the dynamics within the world of academia can have far-reaching implications.

The political economy of universities exerts a significant influence on the creation and dissemination of knowledge, potentially introducing biases into the information generated. Various sources of funding, whether they originate from government allocations, corporate sponsorships, or private donations, wield substantial influence in shaping research priorities and framing the knowledge produced. Research suggests that funding from specific sources can indeed influence the objectivity of research outcomes, potentially tilting them toward perspectives that align with the interests of the funders.

Companies, particularly those engaged in the collection and utilization of personal data for predictive purposes, often employ these strategies to convince the public of their benevolent intentions. Corporate influence can extend into the development of academic curricula, especially within fields related to business, technology, and industry. Pressure from industry stakeholders may prompt universities to incorporate content that aligns with corporate interests, potentially overshadowing alternative viewpoints. Consequently, the dissemination of information may lack diverse perspectives, reinforcing certain biases within the realm of knowledge.

For those who delve into various fields within the humanities, the realization of the vastness of subjects studied becomes apparent. Even a few articles in a particular area of study can wield significant influence. Consequently, one can only imagine the immense impact of Google's numerous academic papers on the broader landscape of knowledge.

The covert influence on knowledge production can extend its reach to faculty hiring and tenure decisions within universities. Universities may face external pressures, often exerted by corporate entities, to appoint scholars whose views align with the interests of these external entities. Consequently, diverse perspectives may find themselves marginalized, leading to restrictions on academic freedom and the perpetuation of biases within the realm of knowledge. The case of Google's actions, as discussed in this article, illustrates the company's efforts to discourage dissenting voices among academics.

Effectively addressing bias in knowledge necessitates a critical examination and heightened awareness of the impact of the political economy on universities. Safeguarding academic freedom, promoting transparency in funding sources, encouraging interdisciplinary research, and actively fostering diversity among both faculty and students are integral steps in mitigating biases within the production of knowledge.

It is paramount to recognize that funders of universities wield a significant role in shaping the production and dissemination of knowledge. Understanding the influence of funding sources, corporate partnerships, faculty decisions, and concerns related to accessibility is crucial in identifying and remedying biases within academic knowledge. Establishing a more diverse and inclusive academic environment holds the key to generating knowledge that encompasses a broader spectrum of perspectives and is less susceptible to undue biases.

Initiating conversations and advocating for transparency regarding corporate influence, as well as raising awareness among the public about the origins and practices of companies like Google, can be instrumental in fostering a more balanced and objective academic landscape.

### **Ethical considerations**

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc.

### **Conflicts of interests**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

### **Data availability**

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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