

# Google Funds Academic Scholars - So A Competitor Funds Campaign for Accountability To Criticize Them



By *Chuck Dinerstein* — July 14, 2017



Courtesy of Shutterstock [1]

Given the title of the article and the topic, I am going to make a Conflict of Interest disclosure - my son works for Google and I remain immensely proud of him even if someone claims Google controlled the tone of my article due to that.(1)

Now that we got that out of the way let us consider concern about academic conflicts of interest. An advocacy group, the Campaign for Accountability (CfA), which is funded by a competitor of Google, [published a report on how Google pays academics to research topics](#) [2] and complains that a disclosure of Google's funding was in some cases absent.

Some of the people included in this report [rightly object on grounds their inclusion is bizarre](#) [3]. If eight years ago you received \$7,000 as a "Fellow" to cover expenses during a 10-week gig at the American Library Association in Washington, D.C., must you disclose that forever? Even in a paper half a decade later, where you are the fourth author?

Another academic said she merely [worked for an organization that received money from Google](#) [4].

How far are we going to let this go? Yesterday the *New York Times* carried a 12-page(!) advertising campaign for Turkey, paid for by the Turkish tourism industry. (2) Are *New York Times* reporters now disclosing in their articles that they are on the payroll of the country of Turkey because their employer got money? Will people linking to New York Times articles have to qualify that the company "is at least partially funded by the country of Turkey"? I am told that almost 40 years ago Hiram Walker & Sons gave the American Council on Science and Health a donation

after we punctured the belief that every disease and death should be linked to alcohol. (3) Do I have to suggest I could be considered on the take from Big Canadian Whiskey because of an unrestricted grant from 1985?

As a physician, my alleged ties to Big Pharma and Big Device are published annually by the federal government and then ProPublica pays journalists their \$150-200,000 (along with giving them researchers) a year to repackage those into an interactive form. Forget how much ProPublica is only paying people who match the beliefs of their donors, are there lessons the CfA and the federal government could learn from what, to any rational person, is an abuse of disclosure requirements?

First, and this is most egregious, the CfA did not ask the professors to verify the findings. [Like shoddy Bloomberg journalists who let environmental litigators invent conspiracy theories](#) [5] about pro-science groups and publish them with no fact-checking, this is an ethical no-no. The government gives physicians a chance to view data before it is released and we can submit additional statements or indicate errors. By just releasing reports like this and pretending to be whistleblowers, without prominently disclosing they are funded by a competitor of Google, they are basically just impugning a lot of people who have done nothing wrong.

### **CfA is being disingenuous in two more ways**

Despite their claims about how widespread Google funding is, when you look at their interactive chart you find CfA do not disclose that of the 1,112 papers they "reviewed" only 329 were even remotely "Google sponsored" (29.5%). Of those 329, only 179 were actual grants to academics, the other 150 were simply grants to organizations - you know, like Hiram Walker giving us a grant over 30 years ago, which will cause Sourcewatch to declare I personally must be on the take from Big Whiskey today.

Even though they were really trying, CfA only has about 16 percent of their hand-picked papers to discuss - a very small set - and imply a widespread ethical failure. Yet they do suggest this is a chronic problem. You need more proof than an acknowledgment of payment to claim that a paper was *biased by its funding* but they do it anyway.

In Note 1 below, I discuss \$187 in paid lunches (I'm in my 60s, so that's a small fraction of the lunches I've had). As a vascular surgeon, working in a catheterization laboratory, cardiologists were instead the dominant players. Drug companies know we are all busy, the only time physicians have to listen to information on new developments or drugs is on breaks or at night, so occasionally a company brought in lunch for the staff, to gain access. For those lunches I disclosed a company was promoting a medication indicated for atrial fibrillation, a disease I do not treat and a prescription I never have written. I was not the target market but I confess I did eat the free lunch, which was duly reported to the feds. Should I disclose this fact to my patients? Did the free lunch influence my behavior?

Of course not, but groups like CfA or ProPublica will claim I received a gift, and like with all gifts, there will be an element of reciprocity. They believe I feel more favorable towards the company that paid for my lunch. Will ProPublica journalists or executives squash investigative reports if somewhere in that chain of money a donor might be involved? They seem to think so, at least about

everyone else.

Another flaw in the CfA finding is that the report stresses words, when they should back their claims up with numbers. For example,

*“Some studies were authored by serious academics and appeared to employ reasonable methodologies, but many others lacked basic standards of academic rigor. Many of the Google-funded policy research papers examined were not published in peer-reviewed journals. Some were self-published on the Social Science Research Network, and many more appeared in publications that lack peer-review requirements.”*

How many is "some" or "many more"? Some imply few, but how few? Many more implies a lot, why not simply include the numbers? The reason is likely because there is no story if they do. Again, we are talking about a really small number of papers when you sort through their work.

### **CfA - funded by a competitor to Google**

Here at the American Council on Science and Health, we often joke that Organic Consumers Association insists all agricultural scientists and farmers are being manipulated by "agri-chemical" companies, when our total corporate donations are 1 percent of OCA's. Their head, Ronnie Cummins, [works 20 hours a week and pays himself \\$112,000 a year to take industry money from companies and redistribute it](#) [6] to groups they created to promote fear about America's food, which allows those environmental groups to pretend they don't take corporate funding.

OCA and CfA forgot the old Biblical adage, "let he who is without sin, cast the first stone." For an organization determined to foster transparency, CfA comes up short in that department. Oracle, a Google competitor, [provides funding to CfA for their Google Transparency project](#) [7]. And when asked about any other contributors, the deputy director of the CfA, Daniel Stevens, refused to disclose them, or to even explain why they refuse to disclose their funders, given their veneer of wholesome accountability.

### **Disclosure is only for academics, not CfA.**

Their report perhaps foreshadows the financial bias of their donors against Google, and therefore their own, in the opening paragraphs:

*“Google has been inextricably associated with academia since its inception. The parents of both founders were academics and the company itself was conceived and born at Stanford University. ... The company has cultivated a college-like atmosphere, offering yellow bicycles for employees to ride around its sprawling campus. “*

Yellow bicycles? Oh, the conflict! Google spends money on research they happen to like, they

spend money to influence regulatory decisions that impact them. That is just like every company, just like Natural Resources Defense Council, just like every company that gives money to Organic Consumers Association to give to activists so they can claim they don't take corporate funding. None of that is a surprise to anyone.

Where is the real smoking gun CfA suggests exists? Did Google tell academic researchers not to disclose their funding? Did Google tell academics not to publish things they did not like? Did Google insist on a positive deliverable?

CfA provides no evidence for any of that. It is just conspiracy theory, with a Google competitor behind the scenes.

NOTE:

(1) Because I am clearing the air, I also received \$187 in “free lunches” from pharmaceutical companies in 2015. I also had dinner with an Endologix representative. He sold aortic stent grafts, a product I used along with their competitor Medtronic. If the American Council on Science and Health ever takes a stand on Endologix aortic stent grafts, I will recuse myself.

(2)



(3) That was all the rage in the 1980s. Did you commit suicide and have any alcohol in your blood? The alcohol caused it.

**Source URL:** <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/07/14/google-funds-academic-scholars-so-competitor-funds-campaign-accountability-criticize-them-11558>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.shutterstock.com>

[2] <http://django.googletransparencyproject.org/table/>

[3] <http://www.chronicle.com/article/Scholars-Cry-Foul-at-Their/240635?source=acsh.org>

[4] <https://www.wsj.com/articles/paying-professors-inside-googles-academic-influence-campaign-1499785286>

[5] <http://www.acsh.org/news/2017/07/13/five-reasons-youre-right-not-trust-corporate-science-media-bloomberg-example-11551>

[6] <http://acsh.org/sites/default/files/Organic%20Consumers%20Association%202015%20Form%20990.pdf>

[7] <http://fortune.com/2016/08/19/google-transparency-project-2/>