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## Jeffrey Epstein's Intellectual Enabler

How did Epstein meet so many luminaries in the worlds of science and technology? It all might trace back to literary agent John Brockman.

By **EVGENY MOROZOV**

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If you are an accomplished science or technology writer, your books are probably handled by the most powerful literary agency in the field: the famous Brockman Inc., started by John Brockman and now run by Max Brockman, his son. As it happens, Max is also my agent—and has been since my first book was sold in 2009. As agencies go, I only have positive things to report: The Brockmans fight for their authors and get us very handsome advances. That's what agents are for.

But that's not the whole story. John is also the president, founder, and chief impresario of the Edge Foundation, which has earned a stellar reputation as an eclectic platform for conversations that involve scientists, artists, and technologists. There is more than one Edge Foundation, though: There is the one meant for public consumption, with its "annual question"—e.g. "What are you optimistic about?"—answered by famous intellectuals and thinkers; and one meant for private consumption by members of Brockman's elite network. The former exists primarily online. The latter has a vibrant real-life component, with sumptuous dinners, exclusive conferences, and quite a bit of travel on private jets—it functions as an elaborate massage of the ego (and, apparently, much else) for the rich, the smart, and the powerful.

Over the course of my research into the history of digital culture, I've got to know quite a lot about

John's role in shaping the digital—and especially the intellectual—world that we live in. I've examined and scanned many of his letters in the archives of famous men (and they are mostly men), such as Marshall McLuhan, Stewart Brand, and Gregory Bateson. He is no mere literary agent; he is a true “organic intellectual” of the digital revolution, shaping trends rather than responding to them. Would the MIT Media Lab, TED Conferences, and *Wired* have the clout and the intellectual orientation that they have now without the extensive network cultivated by Brockman over decades? I, for one, very much doubt it.

Lately, John has been in the news for other reasons, namely because of his troubling connections to Jeffrey Epstein, the so-called financier who reportedly hanged himself earlier this month while facing federal charges of sex-trafficking. Epstein participated in the Edge Foundation's annual questions, and attended its “billionaires' dinners.” Brockman may also be the reason why so many prominent academics—from Steven Pinker to Daniel Dennett—have found themselves answering awkward questions about their associations with Epstein; they are clients of Brockman's. Marvin Minsky, the prominent MIT scientist who surfaced as one of Epstein's island buddies? A client of Brockman's. Joi Ito, the director of the elite research facility MIT Media Lab, who has recently acknowledged extensive ties to Epstein? Also, a client of Brockman's.

Should we just write it off as natural collateral damage for someone with a network as extensive as Brockman's? He is, after all, a networker's networker. Based on my observations over the last decade, his whole operation runs on two simple but powerful principles. First, the total value of the network (and thus his own value) goes up if the nodes start connecting to each other independently of him. Second, the more diverse the network, the more attractive it is to newcomers as well as to all the existing members. Billionaires are rich, but they might harbor an insecurity complex related to not being very well-read (looking at you, Bill Gates!). Scientists, in contrast, are usually well-read but might aspire to fancier cars and luxuries and funding for their pet projects. And so on: There's something for everyone—and, in the case of Epstein, someone seems to have done the matchmaking.

In Brockman's world, billionaires, scientists, artists, novelists, journalists, and musicians all blend together to produce enormous value—for each other and, of course, for Brockman. This mingling of clients doesn't happen in other literary agencies, at least not to this extent. Nor does this happen at Brockman Inc., as all such interactions that we know of took place under the umbrella of the Edge Foundation, a sibling organization, with Brockman as its president. Would Brockman Inc. exist without the Edge Foundation? Possibly—and it did, at the outset. Would it be as powerful, trading on Brockman's ability to rub shoulders with academics and billionaires alike? Probably not. Still, I can attest that Brockman's authors face no pressure to get involved with Edge: I, for example, diligently responded to their annual questions between 2010 and 2013—and then stopped, as I was put off by Brockman's insistence that people responding to the annual question should keep away from politics.

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When the Epstein-Brockman connection first surfaced in the news, I wanted to give Brockman the benefit of the doubt. It's possible, I thought, that Epstein was just one of the many rich people in Brockman's orbit. Or maybe the two had been close only before Epstein's first criminal case in the mid-2000s. Or maybe Brockman was in the dark about Epstein's tendencies and they only talked about quantum physics and artificial intelligence.

In the last few weeks, such a charitable interpretation has become very hard to sustain, especially as other details—implicating Marvin Minsky and Joi Ito, who has apologized for taking money from Epstein—became public. John Brockman has not said a word publicly about his connection to Epstein since the latest scandal broke, preferring to maintain silence on the matter. That I have found quite infuriating.

### **Knowing that Brockman likes to brag about all the famous people he has met**

and befriended—you can easily count the seconds until he name-checks “Marshall” (McLuhan) or “Andy” (Warhol) or “Gregory” (Bateson) in a casual conversation—I decided to look over our correspondence over the past decade and see if he might have name-dropped Epstein somewhere. And, of course, he did. Browsing through our email correspondence, I stumbled upon a most peculiar email from September 12, 2013.

It was very laconic: “JE, FYI, JB”—followed by my short bio and some media clippings. (You can check the entire PDF of the correspondence [here](#).) Strangely, it was sent to me and had no other contacts in cc. Perhaps he wanted to send it to “JE” but put my email there by mistake. When I commented on the meaning of this cryptic message, he responded with the following message, reproduced here in full:

*I missed that one.*

*Jeffrey Epstein, the billionaire science philanthropist showed up at this weekend's event by helicopter (with his beautiful young assistant from Belarus). He'll be in Cambridge in a couple of weeks asked me who he should meet. You are one of the people I suggested and I told him I would send some links.*

*He's the guy who gave Harvard \$30m to set up Martin Nowak. He's been extremely generous in funding projects of many of our friends and clients. He also got into trouble and spent a year in jail in Florida.*

*If he contacts you it's probably worth your time to meet him as he's extremely bright and interesting.*

*Last time I visited his house (the largest private residence in NYC), I walked in to find him in a sweatsuit and a British guy in a suit with suspenders, getting foot massages from two young well-dressed Russian women. After grilling me for a while about cyber-security, the Brit, named Andy, was commenting on the Swedish authorities and the charges against Julian Assange.*

*“We think they're liberal in Sweden, but its more like Northern England as opposed to Southern Europe,” he said. “In Monaco, Albert works 12 hours a day but at 9pm, when he goes out, he does whatever he wants, and nobody cares. But, if I do it, I'm in big trouble.” At that point I realized that the recipient of Irina's foot massage was his Royal Highness, Prince Andrew, the Duke of York.*

*Indeed, a week later, on a slow news day, the cover of the NYpost had a full-page photo of Jeffrey and Andrew walking in Central Park under the headline: "The Prince and the Perv." (That was the end of Andrew's role at the UK trade ambassador.)*

To which I responded:

*thanks for clarifying this. I'm sure he's an all-around sweet guy but I'll have to think about it. It could be that I spent far too much time in the Soros bubble but I have zero interest in meeting billionaires - if I did, I'd be going to Davos every year. but I appreciate you taking the time.*

Here is Brockman again:

*A billionaire who owns Victoria's Secret plus a modelling agency is a different kind of animal. But I hear you and basically agree. Gregory Bateson once advised me that 'Of all our human inventions, economic man is by far the dullest.'*

*JB*

And here is my final answer:

*"A billionaire who owns Victoria's Secret plus a modelling agency" --> one more reason to stay away actually.*

I didn't know who Epstein was at the time. Since I've never been very keen to hang out with billionaires, mine was a natural response (I similarly declined Brockman's invitations to hang out on his farm or attend his famous billionaire dinners). So I didn't think much of that invitation and eventually forgot about it. Needless to say, I never heard from Epstein—or from Brockman about Epstein.

In that old email, it seems clear that Brockman was acting as Epstein's PR man—his liaison with the world of scientists and intellectuals that Brockman had cultivated. That Brockman has said nothing over this affair is rather bewildering. (He did not return requests for comment left on his email and voicemail.)

I do know that John Brockman has been in poor health over the last few years. So I have cut him some slack. But, patient as I am, the time has run out. It's not as if the Epstein story broke yesterday. It's been more than a month since Epstein was arrested on the latest charges. Still, no word on the issue. And, now that I've found that old email he sent me, I cannot believe that he knew absolutely nothing of Epstein's wild sexual escapades—in fact, his email suggests he was trying to *capitalize* on them to recruit yet another useful idiot into Epstein's network.

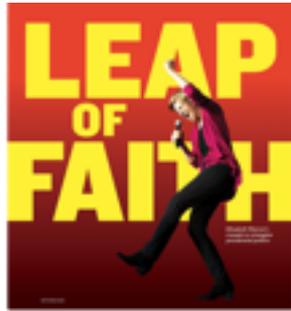
There's more: A close analysis of Edge Foundation's (publicly available) financial statements suggests that, between 2001 and 2015, it has received \$638,000 from Epstein's various foundations. In many of those years, Epstein was Edge's sole donor. Yet, how many of Edge's contributors—let alone readers—knew Epstein played so large a role in the organization?

**I'm just one of the many authors in Brockman's agency; my departure wouldn't**

affect anything. I am also the last one to complain: His agency sold two of my books, and I have two more underway, also sold by them.

Yet, I am ready to pull the plug on my association with Brockman's agency—and would encourage other authors to consider doing the same—until and unless he clarifies the relationship between him, the Edge Foundation, and Epstein. If such an explanation is not forthcoming, many of us will have to decide whether we would like to be part of this odd intellectual club located on the dubious continuum between the seminar room and a sex-trafficking ring.

Excessive networking, it appears, devours its own. Brockman is already many months too late to what he should have done much earlier: close down the Edge Foundation, publicly repent, retire, and turn Brockman Inc. into yet another banal literary agency. The kind where authors do not have to mingle with billionaires at fancy dinners or worry about walking in on Prince Andrew getting his foot massage. The un-network.



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