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The Uber Files Reveal The Risk of Private Interests Controlling Our Data

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The Guardian reported last month that Uber executives sought to manipulate academic research to support their lobbying efforts and appeal to regulators. While the charges that a well-known economist accepted €100,000 to produce a report “actionable for direct PR to prove Uber’s positive economic role” are especially egregious, the reporting highlights a subtler, but more widespread problem. If we let special interests dictate the research that gets done, we won’t have the information we need to make decisions in the best interest of the public.

As an academic who has studied the effect of ride-hailing on the transportation system, I understand this firsthand. In 2017, I visited Uber Headquarters to ask for data. I requested the origins and destinations of trips, aggregated to Census tracts, and averaged to weekday conditions to protect privacy. Uber staff said they could not share those data but asked if I knew that Uber supports public transit and offered instead to provide detailed individual trip data for all the Uber trips to and from rail stations in the Bay Area. With the data filtered in that way, it was clear that I would only be able to reach one conclusion. I declined.