

Neglecting to confront conflicts of interest in industry-sponsored research unfairly burdens early career researchers

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7/24/2014

As public funding shrinks, industry-sponsored research may be a remedy. But [Rebecca Cassidy](#) reports back from a workshop on how the pressure caused by scarcity of funding and conflicts of interest in certain fields falls disproportionately on early career researchers, the most vulnerable members of the higher education precariat. Those who have yet to build up the social capital which comes from publication and funding records may be faced with the choice between either accepting industry funding or leaving the field entirely.



All researchers are striving to find ways to survive in the increasingly market driven world of research and higher education. In particular, we are encouraged to partner with industry, both for [financial support and also to generate evidence of 'impact'](#). How does this affect work in areas of dangerous consumption including alcohol, gambling and tobacco?

The only funding stream devoted to gambling research in the UK is the [Responsible Gambling Trust](#), which both collects voluntary contributions from the industry and commissions research. The RGT is chaired by a veteran member of the gambling industry, Neil Goulden. A similar situation holds in the United States. The [National Centre for Responsible Gambling](#) was founded in 1996, supported by contributions from the casino industry and is 'the only national organization exclusively devoted to funding research that helps increase understanding of pathological and youth gambling'. Chairman Alan Feldman is Executive Vice President of Global Government and Industry Affairs for MGM Resorts International.



Image credit: [The Bosses of the Senate by Joseph Keppler](#) (Wikimedia, Public Domain)

As public funding shrinks, pressure on researchers to take industry funding increases. In alcohol and tobacco these

kinds of arrangements have been subject to intense scrutiny, not least because industry funded research has been [found to produce systematically flawed results](#). In gambling these discussions are in their infancy.

At a workshop at Goldsmiths last Friday we discussed how the pressure caused by scarcity of funding and conflicts of interest in these fields falls disproportionately on early career researchers, the most vulnerable members of the higher education precariat. The lack of options for early career researchers in gambling is striking. Those who have yet to build up the social capital which comes from publication and funding records may be faced with the choice between either accepting industry funding or leaving the field entirely. Colleagues in tobacco and alcohol appeared to have relatively better options. Their research projects were undoubtedly shaped by external funding priorities, but these lay within a broader public health arena.

Early career gambling researchers also face distinctive problems in relation to publishing. How much labour should be invested in peer reviewed articles and books? Who will review their work in a field strongly influenced by industry supported actors, including at the level of journal editor? The peer review process is a poor guarantor of quality in a small field like gambling studies where the pool of editors and reviewers is small and partisan. In many cases, early career scholars can predict who will be chosen to review their work, and anticipate their critiques in order to stand any chance of being published. In this case, peer review rewards conformity and blunts creativity. How can the field improve under these conditions?

The peer review process also creates a vacuum to be exploited by responsive and timely industry sponsored research which is not subject to scholarly conventions of citation or acknowledgement. There is no tradition of declaring interests in the field of gambling studies. In 2014 Babor and Miller [conducted a survey of 30 randomly selected papers](#) from the NCRG library. Only one declared the NCRG in its conflict of interest statement. Fewer than half (48%) referred to funding from the NCRG in the Acknowledgements section or a footnote ([2014: 341](#)). Many scholars simply do not recognise funding from the RGT, the NCRG or similar charities as a potential conflict of interest.

Peer reviewed publications in specialized gambling journals appear to offer little to early career researchers. They are time hungry, conservative, and impact light. What about blog entries and social media? Web resources can often have more impact, and can challenge rapidly produced industry research. However, who will defend early career researchers when industry backed scholars are paid to criticise their work? In terms of career progression, will web publications be valued equally in job interviews or funding applications? Sections of the scholarly community strongly [endorse activity on social media](#), but others continue to treat blog entries and other interventions as second class work.

The discomforts of working in areas of dangerous consumption mean that we continue to lose talent to areas where funding is more easily available and potential adversaries are not so powerful. As we found in our recent report [Fair Game](#) promising scholars desert gambling, unwilling or unable to produce good work under these conditions. Those who remain are able to consolidate their positions. To begin to break this cycle we need urgently to reform the structure of funding gambling research and to establish a culture of recognising and acknowledging conflicts of interest. We cannot begin to educate policy makers about how to read evidence until we clean up our act.

Visit the [Gambling Across Borders](#) blog for more on the workshop and the [Gambling in Europe](#) research project.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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