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UCL, Google DeepMind & Complicity in Israeli Apartheid, Occupation & Genocide

UCL enjoys a "long-standing" and comprehensive relationship with DeepMind, an AI company that since 2014 has been a subsidiary of first Google, and then Google's parent company Alphabet.[1] DeepMind funds Master's and PhD scholarships in Neuroscience, Computer Science, and Science, Technology and Society, as well as a DeepMind Chair in Artificial Intelligence at the UCL Centre for Artificial Intelligence.[2] DeepMind staff directly run a course and lecture series in the UCL Department of Computer Science, and have collaborated on joint research with UCL staff.[3] DeepMind is part of UCL's Circle of Benefactors, a small group of elite donors who have given £1million or more to the university, and is publicly honoured on UCL's Donor Wall in Wilkins Terrace.[4] Beyond this close relationship with DeepMind itself, UCL also holds extensive investments in Google DeepMind's parent company, Alphabet, that were valued at £4,861,127 in 2023.[5]

UCL's close partnership with Google DeepMind risks making the university complicit in Israeli apartheid, occupation, war crimes and genocide. In 2021, Google (and Amazon) launched Project Nimbus, a $1.2 billion cloud computing infrastructure and artificial intelligence contract with the Israeli government and military.[6] Project Nimbus provides Israel with enhanced "capabilities for facial detection, automated image categorization, object tracking, and even sentiment analysis that claims to assess the emotional content of pictures, speech, and writing."[7] Project Nimbus is used directly by the Israel Ministry of Defense and Israel Defense Forces; and it may be used directly by Israeli arms companies, including Rafael and Israel Aerospace Industries.[8]

In October 2021, a group of 90 Google employees issued a statement condemning their employer for selling "dangerous technology to the Israeli military and government," and warning this technology "will make the systematic discrimination and displacement carried out by the Israeli military and government even crueler and deadlier for Palestinians," as it "allows for further surveillance of and unlawful data collection on

[1] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2019/nov/deepmind-renews-its-commitment-ucl#:~:text=Global%20leading%20artificial%20intelligence%20company,relationship%20between%20the%20two%20organisations.
[2] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2018/sep/new-deepmind-professorship-ucl-push-frontiers-ai; https://deepmind.google/about/education/; https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ai-centre/people
[3] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/giving/case-studies/2021/jul/deepmind-unlocking-future.
[4] https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/vice-provost-views/tag/campaign/.
[5] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/finance/home/annual-report-financial-statements-and-investment-portfolios
[6] https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/23/what-is-project-nimbus-and-why-are-google-workers-protesting-israel-deal.
[7] https://theintercept.com/2022/07/24/google-israel-artificial-intelligence-project-nimbus/.
[8] https://theintercept.com/2024/05/01/google-amazon-nimbus-israel-weapons-arms-gaza/.

Palestinians, and facilitates expansion of Israel's illegal settlements on Palestinian land."[9] Since then, hundreds of Google workers have engaged in public protests against the use of their employer's technology to directly support "the ongoing ethnic cleansing of Gaza and … genocidal bombing of Gaza."[10] Google's response so far has been to fire more than fifty of its employees for participating in these protests.[11]

These concerns affect Google DeepMind directly. When Google acquired DeepMind in 2014, the "acquisition agreement between the two companies said DeepMind technology would never be used for military or surveillance purposes."[12] But "a series of governance changes ended with DeepMind being bound by the same AI principles that apply to Google at large," which involve "signing lucrative contracts with the Pentagon and Israel."[13] DeepMind workers have joined other Google workers in protesting their employer's military contracts, and warn of the dangers of unregulated AI technology.[14]

All of these concerns are being raised in the context of revelations that Israel is relying on artificial intelligence technology to run its war on Gaza. AI software used by Israel "analyzes information collected on most of the 2.3 million residents of the Gaza Strip through a system of mass surveillance, then assesses and ranks the likelihood that each particular person is active in the military wing of Hamas," and "gives almost every single person in Gaza a rating from 1 to 100, expressing how likely it is that they are a militant." This information is used to generate "kill lists," even though the system is known to make errors "in approximately 10 percent of cases."[15] Artificial intelligence is also being used by the IDF to identify buildings and structures in Gaza for bombing, and "can 'generate' targets almost automatically at a rate that far exceeds what was previously possible," and "essentially facilitates a 'mass assassination factory.'"[16]

In January 2024, the Palestinian led BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) Movement called for a global campaign against Google.[17] Given that Google's own employees have also been raising the alarm about the company's complicity with Israeli apartheid, occupation, ethnic cleaning, war crimes and genocide for years now, why isn't UCL embracing the precautionary principle of suspending its close ties with Alphabet and Google DeepMind?

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[9] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/oct/12/google-amazon-workers-condemn-project-nimbus-israeli-military-contract.

[10] https://notechforapartheid.com.

[11] https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/apr/27/google-project-nimbus-israel.

[12] https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/30/technology/google-project-maven-pentagon.html.

[13] https://time.com/6964364/exclusive-no-tech-for-apartheid-google-workers-protest-project-nimbus-1-2-billion-contract-with-israel/.

[14] https://time.com/6964364/exclusive-no-tech-for-apartheid-google-workers-protest-project-nimbus-1-2-billion-contract-with-israel/; https://www.theguardian.com/technology/article/2024/jun/04/openai-google-ai-risks-letter.

[15] https://www.972mag.com/lavender-ai-israeli-army-gaza/.

[16] https://www.972mag.com/mass-assassination-factory-israel-calculated-bombing-gaza/.

[17] https://bdsmovement.net/Act-Now-Against-These-Companies-Profiting-From-Genocide.