

# HOW GOOGLE MANIPULATES YOUR GOVERNMENT, YOUR MEDIA AND YOUR SOCIETY

## The Hidden Life of Google's Secret Weapon

Story by Brody Mullins

Joshua Wright, the tech industry's indispensable fixer, was summoned to his boss's office in late 2019 and asked a question that set the course for his fall.

Was he having an affair with a young associate?

The answer had consequences for more than just Wright. The law firm of Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, based in Silicon Valley, had long defended Google, Qualcomm and other corporate giants from unwanted regulation. Wright was the firm's secret weapon.

He was a law professor who became one of the most influential yet little-known figures of the tech era, leveraging positions in academia and government to shield deep-pocket clients. For more than a decade, Wright kept antitrust regulators at bay while America's top technology companies amassed economic power not seen since Standard Oil, AT&T and other behemoths dominated their industries in the 20th century.

Along the way, Wright spent two years as a regulator himself, serving on the Federal Trade Commission. Google, Facebook and Qualcomm benefited from his work at the FTC and through his consulting firm. The companies made hefty donations to fund his academic perch at George Mason University, money that kept flowing while he was in and out of government.

The question about Wright's office romance put it all in jeopardy.

Wright denied the affair. An investigator for the law firm questioned the Wilson Sonsini associate, Lindsey Edwards, who acknowledged a yearslong sexual relationship with Wright. It began when Edwards was a 24-year-old student at George Mason University's law school, and Wright was a law professor there.

The lie began to crack open the hidden life of a prolific philanderer and exposed how Wright skirted conflict-of-interest standards to serve his amorous and financial pursuits, The Wall Street Journal found.

While Wright served on the FTC from 2013 to 2015, he won limits on a potentially powerful antitrust tool, benefiting corporations that paid millions to him or the university in the years before, during and after he was on the commission, the Journal found. He used ties with executives, government officials and the Trump administration to place romantic partners at the FTC, Justice Department and law firms without disclosing the relationships.

Wright's denial of the affair cost him a seat at Wilson Sonsini, but the damage to his career took three more years to unfold. Allegations about his sexual relationships with students at the law school cost

him his marriage and his university job. The tech companies that fostered his lucrative career were the last to abandon him and only after the allegations became public.

“You would have to be willfully ignorant or blind to not know that something was happening,” said Brandy Wagstaff, a Justice Department lawyer. Wright, one of her first-year professors, initiated a sexual relationship with her when she was a law student in 2006, Wagstaff said.

Wright, who has denied any wrongdoing, declined to comment for this article. His lawyer said there were inaccuracies but declined to say what they were. A spokeswoman for Binnall Law Group, which is representing Wright, said, “We remain confident that the truth will prevail, leading to Mr. Wright’s complete vindication in court.”

This account is based on interviews with dozens of Wright’s former law-school students, lawyers and people who know him, as well as court filings, divorce records, emails obtained from the FTC and George Mason University through public-records requests, documents submitted by Wright for his Senate confirmation hearing, lobbying-disclosure reports and other public records.

Wright, 47 years old, grew up the youngest child in a middle-class home in San Diego. He was a high-school basketball star who took a golden path through UCLA, George Mason University and the FTC. He built a sterling reputation among conservative lawmakers and academics for his analytically rigorous, hands-off interpretation of antitrust laws.

“He had it all,” said William Kovacic, who served on the FTC from 2006 to 2011. “He was bilingual in law and economics, he was a gifted writer and speaker and had a great capacity to distill complex concepts into easily accessible ideas.”

Wright’s skills earned him more than \$2 million a year from Google, Facebook, Walmart and others. Amazon paid Wright \$600,000 a year, more than any of its lobbyists. His university pay topped \$440,000 a year.

For years, his business-friendly antitrust view carried weight among Washington officials. Yet he often didn’t reveal funding from Google, Amazon, Qualcomm and other clients in academic papers, blogs, open letters or congressional testimony favorable to the companies, the Journal found, disclosures that might have raised doubts about the objectivity of his research and opinions.

Last summer, several of Wright’s former law students alleged he used his position as a professor, and later as a boss, to pressure them for sex, according to court documents. Wright pursued them during or after they were in his contracts class, they said. The course is required of first-year students at George Mason University’s Antonin Scalia Law School, a public institution in Arlington, Va.

The school hired a law firm to investigate sexual misconduct claims after one of Wright’s former students filed a Title IX sexual-harassment complaint in December 2021. The investigator told senior antitrust lawyers at Google and Facebook about the complaint in June 2022. Wright was still consulting for the companies when he resigned from the university in July 2023.

After Wright announced his departure in a tweet, several of his former students shared their stories. His clients, including Google and Facebook, scattered. “Upon learning the details of the allegations, we immediately cut ties,” a Google spokesperson said.

Wright filed a defamation lawsuit against two of the women in August, seeking \$108 million in damages for wrecking his reputation and consulting business. Wright cast his accusers as jilted lovers, acknowledging the affairs but denying any wrongdoing.

“This is about a love-triangle,” his lawsuit said. “Defendants both pursued Mr. Wright at various times over the last decade, they had consensual, adult relationships with him, and when those relationships ended, both were heartbroken because they had strong feelings for him.”

Some of Wright’s former students said they stayed in relationships with him for years, benefiting from his professional and political connections, yet feeling trapped by fears he might sabotage their careers if they didn’t submit to his sexual demands, according to court papers.

Angela Landry, a lawyer and one of the women Wright has sued, called him “the Harvey Weinstein of the antitrust bar,” an allegation he included in his defamation suit.

A George Mason University spokeswoman declined to comment because of continuing litigation. Wright filed a federal discrimination lawsuit last year against the school.

## **Numbers man**

After President Obama took office in 2009, FTC officials signaled interest in bringing antitrust cases against companies using an untested authority in the Federal Trade Commission Act of 1914. The law opened the door for antitrust regulators at the FTC and Justice Department to investigate companies suspected of engaging in unfair or deceptive business practices.

Wright made his mark in one of the government’s first cases.

The FTC launched an investigation of consumer-product company Church & Dwight in June 2009. The government accused the company of leveraging the popularity of its products, including Arm & Hammer detergent, to get prime shelf space at retailer stores for its Trojan-brand condoms. The practice hurt consumers and rivals, the FTC said.

Wright, working for a Boston-based consulting firm, produced economic reports and statistics-based studies. His research armed lawyers for Church & Dwight with evidence that the company’s actions didn’t harm consumers, either by increasing prices or limiting choice.

The FTC lost in court, and Wright found his silver bullet: the claim of irrefutable data and analysis. Few judges or officials had the wherewithal or inclination to try to debunk his work. Antitrust consulting occupied a specialized niche at the intersection of law and commerce, and Wright established himself as a leading expert.

A Google executive in Washington emailed him in May 2009 for help. The FTC had set out to determine whether the company had violated antitrust law in its search and advertising businesses.

“I’ve heard your name lots recently, and thought it would be good to reach out,” said Adam Kovacevich, senior manager of issues and policy communications at the time. “We’ve also been trying to do a better job of talking w/ people about Google’s approach to competition, and we’d love to chat with you.”

Wright suggested Google sponsor his research in antitrust policies. Making a financial contribution would be in Google's interests, he told Kovacevich, "given the otherwise unfriendly antitrust environment that is emerging." The company agreed.

In March 2010, Wright and a co-author published a paper in the Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy titled "Google and the Limits of Antitrust: The Case Against the Antitrust Case Against Google." It concluded there was no evidence Google violated the law. Bringing a case against the company would "chill the innovation and competition currently providing immense benefits to consumers," said the paper, which cited Google's financial support.

Wright shared a subsequent paper with Google and asked for any suggestions before publication. "I love this paper, you really nail some excellent points," a Google lawyer responded in March 2011. "I think I exclaimed out-loud 'yes!' several times while reading it."

For roughly two years, as the FTC pursued its investigation of Google, Wright published four research papers and a stream of blogs and tweets. They had a common theme: The FTC's argument was wrongheaded and stood no chance of prevailing in court. In some instances, Wright disclosed Google funding, in others, he didn't.

FTC officials were among those who followed Wright's blogs and research papers. Close readers at the agency included lawyers who would help decide whether to pursue an antitrust lawsuit against Google. What they read in some blogs came straight from the company, according to emails between Wright and the company.

After Wright rebutted a Google critic in one of his posts, Kovacevich emailed him. "Thanks for your time spent fighting the good fight this week," he told Wright.

A few days later, on Oct. 11, 2011, an official from the FTC Bureau of Economics emailed Wright to praise his takedown of the critic: "Very nice work. Man, that guy is an idiot."

Wright forwarded the email to Kovacevich at Google.

"Also encouraging that they're actually paying attention to the outside debate," Kovacevich wrote to Wright the next day.

"Yes," Wright said. "They are definitely paying attention."

Two days later, Google donated \$180,000 to the Law and Economics Center at George Mason University, which published Wright's research.

As the FTC investigation gathered steam, Google recruited Wright to help lead a team of former FTC officials, antitrust experts and legal scholars. They published academic papers and opinion articles and spoke with reporters. Their goal was to persuade officials that the government didn't have a case. The team was paid directly by the company or in contributions to their employers. Yet Wright and others didn't disclose they were working on behalf of Google.

At Google, the campaign had a code name: Project Eagle.

Days before the FTC's antitrust investigation was announced in June 2011, Google officials called Wright. He agreed to write two blog posts and an article for a Silicon Valley media outlet that sought to poke holes in the agency's legal theories.

In January 2012, Kovacevich emailed Project Eagle members for a response to a blog post from a Google critic. "Would you guys be able to post something on this?" he said. "If so, shorter and faster," he added. "So it gets into news cycles right away."

Wright wrote a rebuttal within hours.

That same week, Wright got an email from CNNMoney reporter David Goldman asking for his opinion of the FTC investigation. "I suspect any antitrust enforcer would have a very difficult time proving that case," Wright told Goldman.

"I encouraged him to get in touch," Kovacevich later said to Wright.

Wright brandished his connections to Sen. Mike Lee of Utah, a top Republican on the Senate antitrust committee. "Good news is almost nearly everyone on his staff for that committee is a former or current student of mine," Wright emailed Kovacevich in February 2012.

In late 2012, FTC Chair Jon Leibowitz decided to settle the Google investigation. He couldn't muster a majority on the FTC to pursue a lawsuit against the company.

## **Hands off**

Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the top-ranking Republican senator, wanted a capable conservative on the FTC, and his office passed Wright's name to the Obama administration. In September 2012, the president nominated Wright.

Wright could trace his experience at the FTC to his undergraduate years at the University of California, San Diego. In 1997, he was a 20-year-old summer intern at the agency's limestone-and-granite building in Washington. The entrance is marked by two statues of muscled figures struggling to restrain a horse. The New Deal-era artwork, titled "Man Controlling Trade," is said to symbolize the federal government's mission to protect Americans from unchecked corporate power.

At the time of the internship, Wright's uncle, George Cary, was deputy director of the FTC Bureau of Competition, which reviews proposed mergers in light of antitrust laws.

Wright later told girlfriends that his uncle's career was a blueprint. Cary left the FTC and worked as a successful lawyer, helping secure government approval for landmark corporate mergers.

After graduation, Wright enrolled at UCLA, where his uncle got a law degree. Wright went a step further, earning both a law degree and a Ph.D. in economics. In 2004, he began work as a professor at the George Mason University law school, which promoted free markets and opposed government interference. In 2007, Wright became the FTC's first scholar-in-residence.

The president's nomination put Wright at the center of the nation's antitrust work. He spent the fall of 2012 preparing for his Senate confirmation hearing. During that time, Google made three donations to the university's Law and Economics Center, school records show, totaling \$207,000.

At the Senate hearing, Wright disclosed he had done antitrust and economic consulting work for more than a dozen trade associations, economic-consulting firms and companies, including Google, Microsoft, Express Scripts and AT&T. Under questioning from Democratic Sen. Maria Cantwell of Washington state, Wright pledged he wouldn't participate in FTC matters involving Google for two years.

Wright was confirmed by the Senate on New Year's Day 2013. Days before he was sworn in, the FTC announced a settlement with Google in the antitrust case.

He hired several George Mason University students to work for him at the agency. One was Landry, whose affair with Wright began when she was his law student in 2010. He also got internships for students, including Edwards, who later became another romantic partner.

Wright brought a skeptical view of government intervention and routinely opposed FTC antitrust actions. The agency suspected Qualcomm used its dominance in the mobile-phone chip industry to leverage Apple and other phone makers to pay inflated rates to access its 5G patents. Wright voted against pursuing the case, but the investigation went forward.

Several companies Wright defended with his vote while on the FTC, including Google and Qualcomm, donated to the Law and Economics Center at George Mason University. There are no rules prohibiting the contributions, and Wright wasn't required to report them. The center discloses the names of corporate donors but not the amount of the contributions. University records obtained by the Journal show Google gave \$200,000 to the center during Wright's first year on the FTC.

In November 2014, Wright co-wrote a paper favoring the drugmaker later renamed Allergan, which had been the target of a 2009 FTC lawsuit. The agency had alleged the company used anticompetitive tactics to keep a rival testosterone drug off the market. In 2015, Allergan's foundation made a donation to the university's Law and Economics Center.

That same year, Wright achieved what he called one of "the most fulfilling experiences of my career."

He had long helped companies fight FTC allegations of unfair or deceptive business practices. Wright believed that authority gave the agency unbounded power because it didn't define what constituted unfair practice. The FTC, he said, should give companies "guidance about what conduct is lawful and what conduct is unlawful."

In August 2015, Wright persuaded the FTC's Democratic majority to join him in a 4-1 vote to clarify and limit the grounds for government lawsuits over unfair business practices, shrinking the agency's antitrust authority.

Four days later, Wright announced his resignation. He had served two years of a six-year term.

In early 2016, Wright took a \$1.5-million-a-year job with Wilson Sonsini. The law firm occupied offices in a glass-and-concrete building on K Street in the heart of Washington's lobbying district, about two blocks from the White House.

## **Just lunch**

After Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election, Wright's name surfaced as a candidate for chief of the antitrust division of the Justice Department. He didn't get the job, but he ran the transition team for the FTC, making recommendations to fill top antitrust posts.

Over the years, Wright had helped many former students get internships or jobs at the FTC, Justice Department and law firms. according to emails, legal filings and other documents. At least 50 law students from George Mason University worked as FTC interns from 2010 to 2020, according to an analysis by the nonprofit Tech Transparency Project. That was more than the number of students from Yale, Harvard or Stanford universities, the analysis found.

The acting FTC chair, appointed by Trump, picked Abbott "Tad" Lipsky and Alan Devlin—two men from Washington's small circle of antitrust lawyers—to serve as the director and deputy director of the FTC's Bureau of Competition.

The appointments gave Wright an opening for one of his Wilson Sonsini clients.

Three days before Obama left office, the FTC voted to sue Qualcomm for allegedly leveraging its dominance in the chip industry to obtain licensing agreements for Apple iPhones and other mobile devices. Wright had voted against pursuing the lawsuit while he was on the FTC and was prohibited from representing Qualcomm under a federal conflict-of-interest law.

Wright nonetheless emailed Lipsky at his personal email address and invited him to lunch. They met at BLT Steak in Washington on May 5, 2017. Wright told him he had been hired by Qualcomm, emails show. During the lunch and in a follow-up email, Wright pressed Lipsky and the FTC to drop its lawsuit against Qualcomm and seek a settlement.

The next week, Wright emailed Lipsky and Devlin, suggesting "we get together for a preliminary, relatively informal chat as a first step."

At an FTC meeting days later, there was a discussion about Wright's invitation. One official questioned whether Wright was allowed to represent Qualcomm in the case. Wright's involvement was reported to the FTC inspector general's office, which opened an investigation.

When the inspector general contacted Wright, he "initially denied participating" in discussions about a possible settlement, according to an agency report. "Maybe they are confused on that?" Wright told the FTC investigator. Wright later acknowledged his involvement.

The office concluded that Wright had violated a federal law dealing with conflict-of-interest restrictions and recommended prosecution. The Justice Department didn't pursue the case.

Lipsky and Devlin resigned from the FTC after a few months. Lipsky later took a job at George Mason University's Global Antitrust Institute, where Wright had become executive director.

Qualcomm needed Wright's help with another problem. On Nov. 6, 2017, Broadcom, at the time a Singapore-based semiconductor company, made an unsolicited—and unwanted—bid to buy Qualcomm for \$105 billion. The next day, Wright sent a letter to the company proposing that Qualcomm donate \$2.9 million to the institute. The company went along.

Qualcomm said last month that the donation was in the works before Broadcom announced the merger attempt.

In February 2018, Wright and other antitrust experts signed a letter warning that any tie-up between Broadcom and Qualcomm “faces significant antitrust risks.” President Trump announced his opposition the following month, citing national security concerns. Days later, the deal was dead.

Qualcomm also escaped the FTC’s antitrust investigation. After a court in Northern California sided with the FTC in 2019, Wright responded with an academic paper that criticized the decision. The research paper said Wright had advised Qualcomm but received no financial support from the company for writing the critique. A federal appeals court eventually reversed the decision, giving Qualcomm—and Wright—another victory.

In the summer of 2019, Wright’s wife, Anhvinh Wright, stumbled across a travel receipt with the name Lindsey Edwards.

She had suspected an affair but nothing close to the truth.

Wright also had little idea of what was coming.