

“The Internet’s Own Boy”: Documentary about “Hacktivist” Aaron Swartz

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The Internet’s Own Boy (2014, Filmbuff/Participant Media), directed and produced by Brian Knappenberger, is a documentary film about Aaron Swartz (1986-2013), the open Internet activist and web technology prodigy who took his own life after being hounded by a vindictive criminal lawsuit orchestrated by the US federal government.

The film was recently presented at the American Film Institute’s AFI Docs film festival in the Washington, DC suburb of Silver Spring, Maryland. The film was released nationwide June 27.



The Internet’s Own Boy

In 2010, security cameras at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) caught Swartz using a laptop to download thousands of scholarly papers from the Internet subscription site JSTOR by hacking into the building’s computer system. Swartz was intending to make the documents free to all for downloading. This initiated a federal witch-hunt against Swartz, which threatened to send him to prison for nearly 50 years as well as force him to pay fines of up to \$1 million for charges of wire fraud, computer fraud, unlawfully obtaining information from a protected computer, and recklessly damaging a protected computer.

This vindictive attack on Swartz, for the crime of wishing to make information widely available through the Internet, was most famously captured in a statement by US Attorney Carmen Ortiz, who said that “stealing is stealing whether you use a computer command or a crowbar, and whether you take documents, data, or dollars.”

In the film, one gets a sense of both how truly young Swartz was when he died, as well as how much he could have contributed to the world under different circumstances. Interspersed with footage of Swartz throughout his younger years are interviews with friends, associates and family, portraying the various aspects of his life and personality. Swartz's ideals were informed by his genuine enthusiasm and preoccupation with the world around him.

At one point a clip is played of Aaron saying, "I think you should always be questioning, I take this very scientific attitude in which everything you've learned is just provisional, that it's always open to recantation, refutation... I think the same thing applies to society." (The film includes a clip relaying that a potential cure for pancreatic cancer had come about due to JSTOR documents Swartz had downloaded.)

Likewise, some of his personal achievements include co-founding the RSS web feed protocol at age 13, the creation of software company Infogami (which later merged with the link aggregator web site Reddit) before age 20, as well as his work for Condé Nast Publications, the owner of *Wired* magazine. Swartz would later turn his back on his career in Silicon Valley to pursue ideals closer to his heart. Swartz's attitude toward corporate America is memorably captured by the commentary of an associate, who suggests that the young man had "climbed a mountain of shit" in order to "pluck a single rose, only to find that he had lost his sense of smell."

The film turns toward Swartz's involvement with activism and other social issues. This culminates in his role in organizing the protests against the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Protect IP Act (PIPA) bills in 2012. These bills, which sought to implement a framework of legal censorship, were eventually abandoned after numerous companies came out against them on the grounds that they would impose undue financial burdens upon them. This episode is handled somewhat uncritically, portraying this essentially pro-corporate decision as a "victory" for grassroots activism.



Aaron Swartz

The section of the film dealing with the US government's repression of Swartz is the film's strongest, as various people recount the brutal persecution meted out by Assistant US Attorney Stephen Heymann, acting on behalf of the Obama administration. After initially being caught at MIT, Swartz and his family were placed under FBI surveillance. At one point, the surveillance became so intrusive that Aaron refused to leave his house. Upon being detained, Swartz was assaulted by police officers, as well as later being strip-searched and having his belt and shoelaces taken from him.

Swartz was initially charged with five felonies and offered a plea bargain, which would have placed him under house arrest and barred him from Internet usage if he admitted criminal guilt. After refusing this deal, eight more dubious felony counts were added to Swartz's charges under the draconian 1986 Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA). Meanwhile, the film notes, JSTOR—the corporation that Swartz had allegedly stolen from—had sought to drop the lawsuit.

Robert Swartz, Aaron's father, tells interviewers that Heymann sought to make a "case of deterrence" out of his son's case. The elder Swartz contrasts this aggressive behavior to the kid gloves treatment the banks received from federal officials after the 2008 economic meltdown. Swartz's father goes on to note that famous technology billionaires such as Steve Jobs and Bill Gates achieved initial successes by creating devices that had undermined the profitability of communications companies in the US. "The only difference with Aaron," his father states, was "he wanted to make the world a better place, not just make money."

In another scene, Quinn Norton, Swartz's former girlfriend, breaks down in tears as she details the US attorney's attempts to make her inform on Aaron. When she pleaded with US federal prosecutors that they were "on the wrong side of history," she says that the officials simply "looked bored" with her. Something of the shortsightedness and philistinism of the ruling class is captured in these scenes.

Eventually, the constant harassment and struggle to obtain funds for his defense overcame the young activist, who numerous friends and associates stated was tired of feeling like "a burden on those around him." Swartz was found dead in his Brooklyn apartment from suicide on January 11, 2013. He was 26 years old.

To demonstrate the political nature of the persecution of Aaron Swartz, the film makes note of the historical setting of the prosecution. The film contains clips of both the Egyptian Revolution, which forced a US-backed dictator from office, as well as the Occupy Wall Street protests that swept the globe in that period. The film notes that both these phenomena relied heavily on the networking power of the Internet, of which Swartz was a known expert.

In various aspects of his story, Swartz bears similarity to former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, who gave up a highly lucrative career with the spy agency in order to reveal details of government surveillance programs carried out against and behind the backs of the world's population. To his credit, the film features Swartz speaking out against the unchecked power of the federal government to spy, noting that it is primarily directed at the population itself.

The filmmakers make much of the CFAA, highlighting efforts to have the law repealed, as well as at one point inviting commentary from Democratic politicians—Senator Ronald Wyden of Oregon and Representative Zoe Lofgren of California—to denounce the bill. This narrow focus on the CFAA fails to note the deeply anti-democratic character of the US state

itself. This is captured by one commentator who, in describing the SOPA and PIPA bills, correctly calls all legislative matches “just fights between different corporate interests.”

Still, this fairly predictable limitation does not fundamentally undermine the strength of the film, which serves to unmask the hypocrisy of the US federal government, whose functionaries view all creative and egalitarian impulses from the population with distrust and hostility, and are willing to go to criminal lengths to suppress it. For that reason alone, the film deserves a wide viewing.

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