

What Makes Aaron Swartz a Hero? Defying a Corporate System which Stifles the Free Flow of Information.

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The recent anti-NSA, anti-surveillance protests were the latest manifestation of a burgeoning movement for freedom from mass surveillance and the liberation of information.

It is this new resistance movement, comprised of myriad individuals and organizations, which is perhaps the greatest measure of the legacy of Aaron Swartz.

By the time of his death a little more than a year ago, Aaron Swartz had already achieved more in his 26 years than most activists achieve in a lifetime. He was a technological innovator, contributing his computer expertise to develop open platforms such as RSS, Creative Commons, and Reddit, while working to liberate information from closed databases like JSTOR (the online digital library of scholarly and scientific research).

However, he also took the fight into the public arena, articulating a language of freedom and social responsibility, tirelessly working to raise public consciousness of the all-encompassing, draconian system of control erected around us all.

A simple examination of Swartz's Guerilla Open Access Manifesto reveals many of his core beliefs. In it, Swartz wrote,

"Information is power. But like all power, there are those who want to keep it for themselves. The world's entire scientific and cultural heritage, published over centuries in books and journals, is increasingly being digitized and locked up by a handful of private corporations...We need to take information, wherever it is stored, make our copies and share them with the world...With enough of us, around the world, we'll not just send a strong message opposing the privatization of knowledge — we'll make it a thing of the past. Will you join us?"

Swartz was articulating the idea that remained at the core of his activism the rest of his life: that corporate monopoly and totalitarianism are not only to be feared, they are to be actively resisted using every possible means. And this point is what made him so dangerous to the political establishment in the United States. He offered not only grievances, but solutions which could fundamentally alter the balance of power in favor of the people.

One such solution which is still impacting the lives of millions was his development of the code that would evolve into the modern RSS (Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication), a vital web feed format that allows individuals and organizations to

disseminate, organize and share information instantly all over the world.

The truly revolutionary aspect of RSS was in its open source format, which prevented any single corporate interest from controlling its use. Unlike closed platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, RSS allowed individuals to connect and share information in a truly independent way, with no single entity controlling or restricting the free flow of knowledge.



Screenshot from thedaywefightback.org

In other words, RSS was Swartz's first attempt at, as he described, "*opposing the privatization of knowledge.*"

Swartz continued on this trajectory with his 'scraping' of the Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) system which restricted access to public court records behind a paywall. Using his computer prowess, Swartz helped design and modify the script that he then used to scrape the site and place at least 2.7 million court documents into the public sphere. He did not do this for profit, but rather in the belief that 'public records' should truly be public, that is, open and free to all.

Once again, Swartz put his rhetoric into action, defying a system that attempted to restrict and stifle the free flow of information.

Another vital contribution Swartz made was in his collaboration with a number of others in the creation and launch of Creative Commons, a project which allows individuals to share information and collaborate through free, easy-to-use copyright licenses. Where would independent media be today were it not for Creative Commons licensing?

This innovation brought the internet to the forefront of the true media revolution as it became something far more than a vehicle for corporate media to further capitalize and consolidate their control over information and public opinion.

Swartz was involved in many groundbreaking projects and initiatives intended to democratize the internet and information. However, the one that ultimately brought the wrath of the US government upon him was his attempt to liberate JSTOR. As he alluded to in

the Guerilla Open Access manifesto, JSTOR is a monopolistic attempt to restrict access to the shared scientific and cultural production of modern civilization accumulated over centuries.

Aaron Swartz remained true to his ideals of democratizing information by attempting to liberate this knowledge and put it into the public sphere. Ultimately, he faced multiple charges for this heroic and necessary act, charges which carried such a severe prison sentence that they may have ultimately led to him allegedly taking his own life.

Perhaps Swartz's most highly publicized actions were his tireless efforts leading the charge to stop the SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act) and PIPA (Protect IP Act), two Orwellian pieces of legislation that would have done irreparable damage to the open internet as we know it by allowing government and corporations unprecedented control over content, traffic, information and virtually every other aspect of online activity. Swartz was instrumental in leading the SOPA Strike, a movement consisting of activists, tech companies, NGOs and thousands of media and other organizations who came together to stop these dangerous bills from passing. Again, Swartz demonstrated his unwavering commitment to freedom and democratization of information.

Even after his death, Swartz's impact continues to be felt. He was a co-creator of DeadDrop, a secure document submission service designed to allow whistleblowers to anonymously leak and disseminate information for the public good. The system essentially decentralizes the function of an organization like WikiLeaks, preventing the authorities from stopping whistleblowers through persecution, as with Assange and WikiLeaks.

The Freedom of the Press Foundation has taken over the system and its management, renaming it SecureDrop, and helping to further cement Swartz's legacy as a crusader for truth and social justice.



AFP Photo / Allison Shelley

Making heroes into enemies

Aaron Swartz played a major role in transforming the way we disseminate, access, and share information online. For that, the US government and corporate establishment made him, and activists like him, into enemies. Even members of the political establishment have questioned the insidious way in which the Obama Administration has persecuted hackers and other activists.

Last month, Republican Senator John Cornyn marked the one year anniversary of Swartz's death by stating that,

“[Senator] Al Franken and I have asked the attorney general to look into the conduct of his prosecutors, and whether that might have to his decision to take his life...We asked him if there had been prosecutorial overreach and he claimed it was good use of prosecutorial discretion.”

To hear such statements from someone like Cornyn, himself boasting a very poor record on issues of constitutional rights and civil liberties, indicates the egregiousness of the behavior of the US government toward Swartz and others. More than a mere criminal, the government viewed Swartz as a threat.

This point is further illustrated by the voluminous surveillance records that the US Secret Service kept on Aaron and his activities. The 104 heavily-redacted pages, released through a FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) request, only scratch the surface of the surveillance carried out on Swartz (the full file contains more than 14,000 pages).

However, they demonstrate the degree to which Aaron was seen as a *'threat'* by the intelligence community whose responsibility it is to safeguard the infrastructure of power.

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