

Aaron Swartz

Aaron Swartz, computer programmer and activist, committed suicide on January 11th, aged 26

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SMALL, dark, cluttered places were important in the life of Aaron Swartz. His days were spent hunched in his bedroom over his MacBook Pro, his short-sighted eyes nearly grazing the screen (why, he asked himself, weren't laptop screens at eye level?), in a litter of snaking cables and hard drives. In the heady days of 2005 when he was developing Reddit, now the web's most popular bulletin board, he and his three co-founders shared a house in Somerville, Massachusetts, where he slept in a cupboard. And it was in a cupboard—an unlocked wiring cupboard, where a homeless man kept stuff—that in November 2010 he surreptitiously placed a laptop, hidden under a box, and plugged it directly into the computer network at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

His aim was to download as many pages as possible from an archive of academic journals called JSTOR, which was available by paid subscription only to libraries and institutions. That was morally wrong, he thought; the knowledge contained in it (often obtained with public funding, after all) had to be made available, free, to everyone. And it was absurdly simple to do that. He already had access to the library network;

no need to hack into the system. He just ran a script, called `keepgrabbing.py`, which liberated 4.8m articles at almost dangerous speed. MIT tried to block him, but time after time he outwitted them; and then, as a last resort, he plugged in the laptop in the cupboard.

He had form on this; lots of form. In 2006 he got hold of the book cataloguing data kept by the Library of Congress, usually steeply charged for, and posted them free in the Open Library. In 2009 he wormed his way into a free-access trial of the PACER system, which contains all electronic federal court records, in certain public libraries; he downloaded 19.9m pages of it, then uploaded them to the cloud, before anyone could stop him. Again, it was easy: using a small, elegant language called perl, the documents fell into his hands.

He seemed to have been doing this for ever, writing programs to liberate information. At 12 or 13—a plump, bookish boy with a computer-company executive for a father and a very early Mac in the den—he set up `theinfo.org`, a sort of Wikipedia before the fact, which was going to contain all the world’s knowledge on one website. A mere year or so later he was working with Tim Berners-Lee, creator of the world wide web, to launch the Semantic Web to improve data-sharing, and developing RSS 1.0 to distribute videos and news stories. He helped set up Creative Commons, too, which made copyright licensing simpler (as, for example, to get this photo of him).

All this could have made him a fortune, but he had no interest in that. He wanted a world that was better, freer and more progressive. He dropped out of high school, then out of Stanford, educating himself instead by reading prodigious numbers of books, mostly philosophy. He made friends and fell loudly out with them because they couldn’t be as perfectionist as he was. At gatherings he would turn up messy-haired and half-shaven, the shy nerd’s look, but with the intense dark gaze and sudden, confident grin of a young man out to turn society on its head.

A lot of money came his way when Reddit was sold to Condé Nast in 2006, but relocation to an office made him miserable. Google offered him jobs, but he turned them down as unexciting. Political campaigning became his passion. He wanted to see everything available online, free, with nothing held back by elites or big money, and nothing censored. Information was power, as he proclaimed in his Guerrilla Open Access Manifesto of 2008, and war was needed “by stealth”, “in the dark”, “underground”, for the freedom to connect. In 2011 there was no fiercer voice against the Stop Online Piracy Act, and in 2012 no one prouder to proclaim it dead.

The JSTOR business, however, got him into deep trouble. When he went back to the cupboard for his laptop, police arrested him. He was charged on 13 counts, including wire fraud and theft of information, and was to go on trial in the spring, facing up to 35 years of jail. The charges, brought by a federal prosecutor, were hugely disproportionate to what he had done; MIT and JSTOR had both settled with him, and JSTOR, as if chastened by him, had even opened some of its public-domain archive. But theft was theft, said the prosecution.

Darkness to light

All this added to a weight that had oppressed him for many years. “Look up, not down,” he urged readers of his weblog; “Embrace your failings.” “Lean into the pain.” It was hard to take that advice himself. He kept getting ill, several illnesses at once. Migraines sliced into his scalp; his body burned. And he was sad most of the time, a sadness like streaks of pain running through him. Books, friends, philosophy, even blogs didn’t help. He just wanted to lie in bed and keep the lights off.

In 2002 he posted instructions for after his death (though *I’m not dead yet!* he added). To be in a grave would be all right, as long as he had access to oxygen and no dirt on top of him; and as long as all the contents of his hard drives were made publicly available, nothing deleted, nothing withheld, nothing secret, nothing charged for; all information out in the light of day, as everything should be.