

Open access activist dead at 26

Family charges US with role in Aaron Swartz suicide

Kevin Reed
15 January 2013

Aaron Swartz, the Internet pioneer, open access crusader and social justice activist, was found dead on Friday, January 11 in Brooklyn, New York from an apparent suicide. Although precise details of his death at age 26 are still emerging, it is clear that Swartz was the victim of a malicious and vindictive prosecution by federal authorities.

In July 2011, Swartz was indicted on federal charges of gaining illegal access in 2010 to the paid subscription service JSTOR over the network of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). The authorities said he illegally downloaded 4.8 million scholarly scientific and literary articles and was planning to distribute the copyrighted content for free on file-sharing web sites.

Swartz was facing federal wire and computer fraud charges that carried potential penalties of up to 35 years in prison and \$1 million in fines. He was also charged by the District of Middlesex for breaking and entering for illegally going into an MIT utility closet.

Swartz and his defense counsel maintained a steadfast position of not guilty throughout the last two years, with the legal battle unfolding right up to the last day of his life. According to his lead defense attorney, Elliot Peters, Swartz had recently rejected a plea deal from the office of US Attorney Carmen Ortiz that would have avoided a trial but put him behind bars for six months in exchange for a guilty plea on 13 federal crimes.

According to a statement by the New York Medical Examiner's office, Swartz hanged himself on Friday evening in his Crown Heights, Brooklyn apartment. The *New York Times* reported that an uncle, Michael Wolf, confirmed that Swartz died of an apparent suicide and that a friend had discovered his body.

Mr. Wolf said his nephew, who had battled

depression and suicidal thoughts in the past and even written of it, "looked at the world and had a certain logic in his brain, and the world didn't necessarily fit in with that logic, and that was sometimes difficult."

In a public statement the Swartz family said, "Aaron's death is not simply a personal tragedy. It is the product of a criminal justice system rife with intimidation and prosecutorial overreach." They added that, while JSTOR had declined to press charges against Aaron, "Decisions made by officials in the Massachusetts US attorney's office and at MIT contributed to his death."

Swartz was 14 years old when he co-authored RSS (Really Simple Syndication) that allows readers to subscribe to online news and information sources. He was also founder of Infogami, which was merged into the popular social news site Reddit, which ranks member-posted items based on reader recommendations.

Aaron left Reddit in 2006, after publisher Condé Nast acquired it, and dedicated himself to free access to online information and opposition to Internet censorship. Soon afterward, he co-founded Demand Progress, a group that promotes online campaigns against social injustice.

In 2008, he published "The Guerilla Open Access Manifesto," which opposed private ownership of information and advocated the free sharing of scientific journals. Swartz's manifesto declared, "There is no justice in following unjust laws. It's time to come into the light and, in the grand tradition of civil disobedience, declare our opposition to this private theft of public culture."

As part of this campaign, Swartz wrote a program for downloading the content of a database of federal judicial documents called PACER, nearly 20 million

pages at a time, for free. The government shut down the free program and investigated, but did not prosecute. Authorities, however, reacted much differently in 2011 after the JSTOR downloads at MIT.

While Aaron Swartz's emotional condition may have played a role in his suicide, his tragic death is the direct product of the repressive actions of the US Justice Department.

Over the course of the past year, it became apparent that the US Attorney was hell-bent on making an example of Swartz. He was being aggressively prosecuted out of all proportion to the alleged crime and its impact.

While not a single government official or top financial executive has been charged, much less prosecuted, for high crimes associated with the illegal wars of the past decade and the financial crash of 2008, the Obama administration's Justice Department was determined to punish an individual for attempting to make information accessible to the general public and ended up hounding him to his death.

Along with his activities in the information access world, Swartz represents the growing layers of society that are disgusted by the corruption, lying and theft of ruling circles in the US and around the world.

Last year, he criticized the Obama administration's assassination program, writing:

"Every week or so, more than 100 members of the US national security team gather via secure video teleconference run by the Pentagon and go over the biographies of suspects in Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan, and 'nominate' those who should be targeted in the attacks."

Like Julian Assange and PFC Bradley Manning, Aaron Swartz's campaign for free access to information and, above all, his willingness to stand up to intimidation, were seen as intolerable by the state.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact