

Father of Aaron Swartz indicts US government for son's suicide

Our reporters
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A funeral for Aaron Swartz was held Tuesday at the Central Avenue Synagogue in Highland Park, Illinois. The event overflowed with friends, family, collaborators and those who came to pay tribute to the 26-year-old open Internet activist who took his own life late last week.

In remarks delivered at the funeral, Robert Swartz, Aaron's father, issued a stinging rebuke of the US government. "Aaron did not commit suicide," he said. "The government killed him. Someone who made the world a better place was pushed to his death by the government."

At the time of his death, Swartz faced federal felony charges for allegedly downloading millions of academic journal articles from subscription service JSTOR through the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, with the aim of making these articles freely available. Federal prosecutors were demanding prison time, and Swartz faced the prospect of 35 years in prison if convicted in trial. (See, "Open access activist dead at 26")

Robert Swartz spoke passionately of his son, who he said grew up as a "beacon of light in a world of darkness." He contrasted Aaron's principled actions in service of open information access with the criminality of the financial system that crashed the global economy.

Swartz noted that Aaron did nothing legally wrong and yet was persecuted and bullied by the US government. He contrasted the actions of his son with those who did "sketchy or illegal" things in order to make vast fortunes, mentioning Mark Zuckerberg, Steve Jobs, and Bill Gates.

From a very early age, Swartz played a major role in developing important internet infrastructure, including RSS feeds. A company he founded, Infogami, merged

with Reddit, which has since become one of the most popular link aggregating sites on the Internet. Swartz also founded Demand Progress, a group that promotes Internet freedom.

In a document describing his views, written in 2008, Swartz argued that "the world's scientific and cultural heritage, published over centuries in books and journals, is increasingly being digitized and locked up by a handful of private corporations." He added that large corporations are opposed to any attempt to make information broadly available, "and the politicians they have bought off back them."

Friends and family at the funeral spoke of Aaron's intellectual curiosity, selflessness, emotional sensitivity and deep concern for improving the world. Various speakers spoke of a "light" within Aaron that drew people to him as he sought to hold the world to a higher standard. They spoke of his ability to challenge others and inspire them to solve complex problems, whether technological or social.

Aaron's partner, Taren Stinebrickner-Kauffman, recalled a kind, sensitive and creative person. "Aaron wanted so badly to change the world. He wanted it more than money and more than fame," she said. "Aaron wanted us to see the world as it is," she said, "even if it was very painful to do so."

In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Stinebrickner-Kauffman said that she "was never as worried about [Swartz] as the last few days of his life, and there's no doubt in my mind that this wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for the overreaching prosecution." She said that Swartz was particularly distraught by the need to make continual financial appeals from friends and supporters to fund his defense campaign. "He couldn't face another day of, 'Have you done this, have you asked people for money.' I

think he literally rather would have been dead.”

Other speakers and collaborators at the funeral spoke of the seriousness that Aaron gave to every subject he sought to understand. He was “wise beyond his years,” said his friend and collaborator Larry Lessig, a professor at Harvard Law School.

Aaron's defense lawyer, Elliot Peters, recollected a young man who looked vulnerable and needed protection, but always became animated and alive when conversations turned to complex subjects. He was pained that Aaron took his life, as he felt that his case could have been won. Peters spoke out against US Attorney Carmen Ortiz's statement that “stealing is stealing, whether you use a computer command or a crowbar, and whether you take documents, data or dollars.”

Ortiz, the US attorney for the district of Massachusetts and an Obama appointee, along with assistant attorney Stephen Heymann, pushed to get felony convictions against Swartz. In this they were operating at the behest of the Obama administration, which has aggressively pursued opponents of corporate and government control of the Internet.

Even after JSTOR indicated that it had no desire to pursue a case against Swartz, the federal government, with the support of MIT, brought the full weight of the law against him. The excessive charges were accompanied by a refusal to reach any settlement that did not include prison time and a guilty plea on 13 felony counts.

“I said, how about a misdemeanor and probation, and they said it will never happen,” Peters said on Monday. Swartz was adamant about not accepting a felony plea, Peters said, but this meant facing a trial that require enormous financial resources and could ruin his life.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to some of those in attendance at the funeral. Kathleen Geier, a writer for *Washington Monthly*, said, “Aaron was a representative of the best that is in America. He read more than anyone I knew and studied so many different subjects. He was a representative light to us all.”

Peter Eckersley, Technology Projects Director at Electronic Frontier Foundation, and a friend and collaborator of Swartz, said, “It was a terrible loss. We both worked together fighting SOPA and PIPA,” referring to proposed legislation to increase government

control over the Internet.

With tears in his eyes, Eckersley said, “A big problem in the US is the out-of-control criminal justice system. I'm from Australia and I find it unbelievable here. You have a system that takes people that do not hurt anyone and puts them in prison.”



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