

1,000 attend New York memorial for Aaron Swartz

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A memorial service for the open-access Internet activist Aaron Swartz held this past Saturday afternoon filled the Great Hall at Cooper Union in New York City with as many as a thousand of his friends, family, colleagues, members of activist groups who knew him, as well as many others who did not, but were outraged by the circumstances of his suicide a week and a half ago.

The 26-year old Swartz was facing ongoing prosecution by the US Attorney's office in Massachusetts led by Obama appointee Carmen Ortiz, for allegedly downloading millions of articles from the academic paid-access journal JSTOR at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 2010, with the intent of making them freely available on the Internet.

At the time of his death, the federal prosecutor had increased the number of felony charges against him to 13, threatening him with fines of up to a million dollars, and a maximum sentence that had been raised from 35 to 50 years in prison. These draconian threats were intended to bully him into accepting a plea bargain for crimes he denied ever committing.

Despite her subsequent attempts to deflect criticism over Swartz's death, Ortiz and the Massachusetts US Attorney's office have continued to defend their vendetta against Swartz as legal and justified. (See "US attorney downplays vendetta against Internet pioneer Aaron Swartz")

At the memorial, many friends and colleagues spoke of Swartz's unique, inspiring presence in their lives, and were clearly shaken by his sudden death. By all accounts Swartz was not only a prodigy and an unusually gifted programmer of Internet infrastructure—having contributed to the creation of the aggregators RSS and Reddit that have since become

key components of sharing information on the Internet—he was fundamentally motivated by the democratic principle that the resources of academic knowledge and technological innovation were a product of society which should be freely available to all of its members. To that end, he also founded Demand Progress, a group that promotes Internet freedom.

Active in many organizations that seek to use Internet technology for social justice—from the charitable group GiveWell, to the global IT consultant firm Thoughtworks and Freedom to Connect, which also advocates for open source infrastructure—Swartz hoped that his political goals could be achieved through campaigns to pressure the Obama administration to the left. However, his prodigious technological abilities lent his political activities far more serious implications in the eyes of the government.

Many of Swartz's colleagues were clearly still in shock that his activities were considered a significant enough threat to bring the full weight of the US government down on him ostensibly just for planning to make a few million academic papers available online for free. As Edward Tufte, a prominent scholar and expert in the visual presentation of information, commented wryly, "Why isn't MIT celebrating? Only a couple thousand of those papers were worth reading anyway."

However, the underlying economic value of information, whether it be seemingly arcane academic papers, or more importantly the technology and software coding that controls the Internet traffic upon which the functioning of the global economy depends—and for-profit companies are ruthlessly determined to control—are of central importance to the case against Swartz. In that sense, US attorney Ortiz's statement that "stealing is stealing whether you use a

computer command or a crowbar, and whether you take documents, data, or dollars” bears more than a grain of truth from the perspective of capitalism and the ruling elite, which demand that everything, including knowledge, be subordinated to private property and profit.

Another speaker at the memorial, Roy Singham, founder of the advocacy group Thoughtworks, cited the eulogy by Aaron’s father, Bob Swartz in which he spoke out against social inequality and “the duplicity of a society that protects those that accumulate wealth, but treats those like Aaron in a completely different fashion.”

Singham went on to hold the US government and legal system complicit in Swartz’s death. “Let’s not pretend that this was not a political issue. [Aaron’s death] was not suicide, but murder by intimidation, bullying and torment.”

In this context, the control of information plays an ever more critical role in the government’s ability to repress social opposition, and the introduction of measures to maintain this control—far from succumbing to pressure from Internet activists—will only intensify.

A year ago, Swartz had played a prominent role in the Internet strike by Reddit, Wikipedia, and Google against SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act), a bill that would have drastically curtailed Internet freedom under the pretense of stopping online piracy. Dropped last January, in part due to President Obama’s finally opposing it, the bill will very likely be reintroduced in a slightly different form.

Of greater potential concern to the US government and the Obama administration was Swartz’s ability to hack into and publicize sensitive government information. In 2008, he was targeted for investigation by the FBI for downloading and then releasing 20 percent of the Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) database of United States federal court on the grounds that these documents should be available for free, rather than subject to a \$0.10 per page fee. No charges were filed, but Swartz was subject to several intimidating visits by the FBI.

In her remarks, Swartz’s partner Taren Stinebrickner-Kauffman movingly conveyed the magnitude of the loss that Swartz’s death represents, not just on a personal level but to the advancement of human knowledge.

She indicted the US government for driving him to take his own life. “He faced a deeply dysfunctional criminal justice system,” she said, “He was so scared, so desperate and so tormented, and more than anything else just so weary, he could not take it another day.” she said.

Vowing that the US Attorney’s office in Massachusetts must be held accountable, she and others will advocate for the passage of “Aaron’s Law” to enact “fundamental reforms of the criminal justice system.”

However, the legal persecution of Swartz has made clear that the demands for fundamental human rights—not just of freedom of information but for political and economic equality—will be met not with reforms but by relentless intimidation.

As in the ongoing case against Wikileaks, its founder Julian Assange and whistleblower Pvt. Bradley Manning, the exposure of the behind-the-scenes crimes of the United States and other nations will not be tolerated by the Obama administration. In that sense, the vendetta against Swartz assumed a certain preemptive character.



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