



# THE INTERNET'S THE STORY OF AARON SWARTZ OWN BOY

An Introduction to the Documentary Film

The digital age has produced few heroes whose mastery of technology has made them champions of social change. Aaron Swartz seemed destined to become such a hero until the pressures of federal prosecution for an alleged computer crime caused him to commit suicide at age 26.

*The Internet's Own Boy* is a documentary film that traces the short life of Aaron Swartz, from his childhood as a programming prodigy, through his teenage years as an Internet innovator and online entrepreneur, to his final years as an activist in the digital rights movement. Written, directed, and produced by Brian Knappenberger, *The Internet's Own Boy* will premiere on Pivot TV, Thursday, November 6, 2014, at 7pm ET. (Find Pivot in your area at <http://find.pivot.tv>.) Visit <http://www.takepart.com/iob> to buy the film online.

## BACKGROUND

Aaron Swartz was born in 1986, and showed an early mastery of technology by building an ATM machine for a science fair in elementary school. At age 13, he won a national prize for creating a collaborative website. By age 14, he was helping to develop the Rich Site Summary (RSS) Standard, a format allowing website creators to share metadata for syndication and other purposes, and became a member of a metadata working group at the World Wide Web Consortium. Two years later, at age 16, he worked with Lawrence Lessig, founder of Creative Commons and noted expert in cyberlaw, on the design of certain Creative Commons licenses.

Swartz dropped out of Stanford after only one year and became increasingly involved in online innovation. He created an information-sharing website, infogami, which later merged with Reddit, and watchdog.net, a site designed to aggregate information on politicians and political contributions. He also built openlibrary.org for the Internet Archive, and Demand Progress, a grassroots social progress campaign site that was instrumental in the campaign against passage of the Stop Online Piracy Act in 2012.

Aaron Swartz devoted his life to enriching the Internet and pushing technological progress in ways the law could not anticipate. During his brief life, he came to stand for the many ways in which open and free access to the Internet can promote technological innovation and provide an area to reconceive laws, such as copyright, in ways that are more appropriate and adaptable in the digital era. Sometimes, Swartz's methods

involved writing scripts to access and aggregate public documents. When the Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) database made its contents accessible free-of-charge at designated library terminals, Swartz used a script to download over 2.7 million pages of public court records and make them freely available.



In late 2011, Swartz began using similar tactics to download millions of documents

from JSTOR, a database of academic journal articles available to subscribers. Swartz gained free access to the database through the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) network, but his massive downloading was detected and led to his eventual arrest. Swartz was ultimately charged with 13 felony counts, and the ensuing two-year federal prosecution ended when he committed suicide on January 11, 2013.

This last, tragic phase of Swartz's life raises challenging questions for law and law enforcement students, demonstrating the crucial importance of prosecutorial discretion to our criminal justice system. In this respect, the Swartz case may become a landmark for study of legal ethics and professional responsibility, as well as a milestone in the continuing effort to keep our laws up-to-date with our rapidly evolving technology.



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