

Free knowledge for free people

By Alana Do Nascimento, LAPAS intern

Why should we pay to access the public knowledge? This is one of the questions Aaron Swartz, a computer programmer, activist and entrepreneur was obsessed with. They say he was one of the most brilliant minds of our century. His many accomplishment and his imperative sense of justice are the legacy he has left us. Here's the story of a guy who tried to change the world for the better. The story of the internet's own boy.

The genius, the hacktivist, the man



The internet's own boy: the story of Aaron Swartz (2014) by Iturn coffee

Aaron Swartz was a guy of many talents, he was a computer programmer, an [hacktivist](#), a writer and an entrepreneur. As Snowden he wanted to give people what belonged to them, the public knowledge. But who was Aaron Swartz?

The Genius

From an early age Aaron showed an incredible voracious mind. He loved programming and soon the internet's world became his own world. He strongly believed that programming was doing magic. He participated in the development of many internet's projects, here are some of his most remarkable successes.

At the age of 14 he participated on the creation of [RSS](#) a [web feed format](#) which allows users to access updates to online content from many different websites in a single news aggregator.

He helped to launch [Creative Commons](#), an American NGO, which expands the number of creative works available for others. Creative Commons helps people legally share their kno-

wledge, providing easy-to-use copyright licenses.

At the age of 19 he co-programmed [Reddit](#), a social news aggregation site, and in 2010, he became a researcher for Harvard's University's Safra Research Lab on Institutional Corruption.

The Hacktivist



Aaron Swartz by Communist parti of gray Britain

Aaron wasn't an idealist he knew what was wrong in the society and tried to do his best to "fix it". We could say that he was moved by a strong **moral imperative**. He applied a scientific method to his campaigns and fights: he never stopped questioning to identify the problems and to implement better solutions.

He was particularly focused on promoting the idea of **free access to knowledge** and empower citizens to participate in civil society.

Empowerment battles

In 2010 he co-founded [Demand Progress](#), a political advocacy group that organize people online and "take action by contacting Congress and other leaders, funding pressure tactics, and spreading the word about civil liberties, government reform, and other issues."

He helped to launch the [Progressive Change Campaign Committee](#) focused on building progressive power through advocacy campaigns.

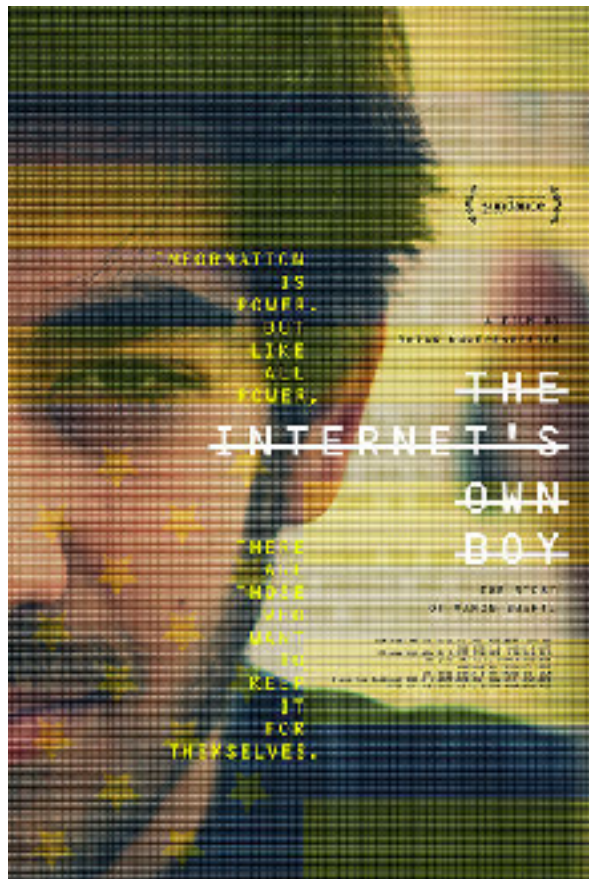
While at Harvard's University he founded the online group [Demand Progress](#), better known for it's campaign against SOPA (Stop Online Privacy Act), an USA bill which expanded the ability of US law to fight online copyright infringement and also made it easier for the Government to shut down web sites accused of violating copyright.

The campaign against SOPA didn't have many chance to win at the beginning but, as it be-

came a real national movement, everything changed. One of the campaign highlights was the completely inexperienced lawyers — which at the time wrote the law — on internet issues.

When SOPA was defeated Aaron realized that he wanted to spend all his life fighting unfair laws and inequalities and with his technical skills and strong motivation SOPA would have been the first of many others success.

Battles for free information



The internet's own boy by Andrea Quarleri

In 2008 Aaron download 2.7 million federal court documents strode in PACER (Public Access to Court Electronic Records) a database that charges 8 cents per pages for information that would be free as federal documents are not covered to copyright. The access of legal documents is a business of **10 billion dollars per year**. Students, lawyers, journalists, researchers, everybody has to pay to access public documents, which is a paradox. Without means you are simply cut out from information. According to Carl Malamud, the founder of publi-cresources.org this is “a pro-capite tax on the justice access”.

Aaron participated to the realization of projects about free information such as [Open Library](http://OpenLibrary.org), an online project intended to create "one web page for every book ever published".

He was also a strong supporter of the **open access movement** - which promotes free and easy access to the world knowledge online. In 2008 he wrote the [Guerilla Open Access Manifesto](#) where he detailed his perspective on the restriction information and creative commons. Here are some passages of the **Manifesto**:

“Information is power. But like all power, there are those who want to keep it for themselves.

The world's entire scientific and cultural heritage, published over centuries in books and journals, is increasingly being digitized and locked up by a handful of private corporations. Want to read the papers featuring the most famous results of the sciences? You'll need to send enormous amounts to publishers like Reed Elsevier. [...]"

*[...] "I agree," many say, "but what can we do? The companies hold the copyrights, they make enormous amounts of money by charging for access, and it's perfectly legal — there's nothing we can do to stop them." But there is something we can, something that's already being done: **we can fight back.***

*Those with access to these resources — students, librarians, scientists — you have been given a privilege. You get to feed at this banquet of knowledge while the rest of the world is locked out. But you need not — indeed, morally, you cannot — keep this privilege for yourselves. **You have a duty to share** it with the world.[...]*

***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.*

The man

Aaron is usually mentioned for his incredible successes and skills. People forget he was a young man with passions and hobbies. He was a voracious reader and on his blog [Raw Thought](#) said to have read one hundred of books per year for a couple of years. He was also a creative and flourishing essays writer. Thanks to his technical knowledge on the Internet and of intellectual property law he wrote interesting works about the architecture of the Internet the intellectual property and copyright but also on other topics as politics, ethics, hacking and pop culture.

The trial



Bail Bond in Liberty TX by michaelmiller1

While working as a research fellow at Harvard's University in 2010, Aaron downloaded millions of academic journal articles from [JSTOR](#) of which he had an account, by using MIT's computer network.

On January 2011, he was arrested by MIT police and then charged on four felony counts: wire fraud, computer fraud unlawfully obtaining information from a protected computer and recklessly damaging a protected computer.

After paying a caution of thousands of dollars Aaron was then released.

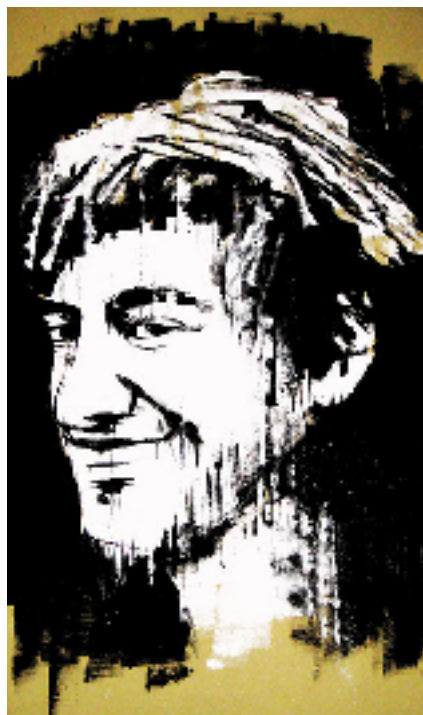
The case didn't stop and arrived to the federal court where it was brought under the [Computer Fraud and Abuse Act](#) an amendment written to limiting federal jurisdiction to cases "with a compelling federal interest-i.e., where computers of the federal government or certain financial institutions are involved or where the crime itself is interstate in nature."

Years passed and the trial was getting worse putting Aaron under an incredible pressure. In 2013 he was charged with two counts of wire fraud and 11 violations of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, charges carrying a cumulative maximum penalty of \$1 million in fines plus 35 years in prison, asset forfeiture, restitution and supervised release. Two days after refusing to make a deal for this extreme sentence and facing the possibility of imprisonment, Aaron committed suicide.

According to Aaron's father his son was **killed by the law**: "They were vindictive, cruel and they destroyed Aaron" he said during an interview. Many thought and are still thinking that the Government wanted to use Aaron's "punishment" as a reminder for others. Those were the years of Wikileaks and Anonymous and the Government was completely unprepared to face them. However even if is still unknown what Aaron wanted to do with these documents he didn't publish them nor acted as others hackers.

In the end the old world and a bunch of bureaucrats destroyed the internet's boy.

After Aaron's death



RIP Aaron Swartz by BAMN

Aaron's death was a shock to many around the globe. His funeral took place on January, 15, 2013 in Highland Park, Illinois. Memorials around the USA didn't late to follow.

"Aaron was part of an army of citizens that believes democracy only works when the citizenry are informed, when we know about our rights and our obligations. An army that believes we must make justice and knowledge available to all not just the well born or those that have grabbed the reigns of power—so that we may govern ourselves more wisely."

by Carl Malamud's speech at Aaron's memorial at the Internet Archive, on January 24.

After Aaron's death Anonymous hacked two websites of MIT replacing their domain with tributes to Aaron.

In 2013 it was introduced an amendment to the Computer Fraud Act, it's called [Aaron's Law](#).

There's something wrong

When asking for free information and knowledge it's seen as a threat, *there's something wrong*.

We are facing a weakening of social justice and democracy while inequalities are increasing more than ever. *There's something wrong*.

When somebody tries to tell you that the problem of our society are the poorest they are probably trying to distract you from the real problems. *There's something wrong*.

We are living in a world where the strongest injustices are not persecuted. Those which caused the 2008 crisis are lunching with presidents. Again, *there's something wrong*.

You may think you are powerless or you don't have the technical capabilities of Edward Snowden or Aaron Swartz to do something. But you are powerful. We all are. Aaron and Edward made their point, they wanted to increase people awareness, but were people that created the movements and step up for their rights.

I'd like to conclude with Aaron's words:

"What is the best thing you should do to change things today? And if you're not working on it, why aren't you?"

If you want to know more about Aaron's life here's some tips:

Watch the documentary The internet's own boy: the story of Aaron Swartz: a biographical documentary about Aaron Swartz.

Film trailer: [The internet's own boy](#)

Watch the movie Killswitch: a documentary about the battle for control over the Internet.

Film trailer: [Killswitch: The Battle for a Free and Open Internet](#)

Read the book The Boy Who Could Change the World: The Writings of Aaron Swartz. For the first time in print the life's work of one of the most brilliant mind of our time.

Read Aaron's Blog: [Raw Thought](#)

References:

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- Wikipedia, Aaron Swartz: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aaron_Swartz#Open_Access
- Aaron Swartz, weblog: <http://www.aaronsw.com/>
- Memorial for Aaron Swartz at the Internet Archive January 24, 2013, Aaron's Army by Carl Malamud: <https://public.resource.org/aaron/army/>