



The Internet's Own Boy: The Story of Aaron Swartz Discussion Guide

Director: Brian Knappenberger

Year: 2014

Time: 105 min

You might know this director from:

Ice Warriors: USA Sled Hockey (2014)

We Are Legion: The Story of the Hacktivists (2012)

FILM SUMMARY

Aaron Swartz's brilliance was evident from an early age. *THE INTERNET'S OWN BOY* reveals a child who could read from the age of three, had an early interest in computers, an insatiable thirst for knowledge, and an endearing confidence. He seemed destined for greatness. Siblings, girlfriends, parents, friends, colleagues, lawyers: their stories create a complex portrait, and while the information conveyed can be overwhelming, it is the very notion of information itself – and who is worthy of it – that drove Swartz.

From Highland Park to Silicon Valley, Boston to Brooklyn, *THE INTERNET'S OWN BOY* follows a young Swartz armed with enormous technological knowledge and a politically active agenda. He helped develop the basic Internet protocol RSS and co-founded Reddit. Swartz's story is not just that of a programming genius, but also one of a social activist involved in political organizing with a strong stance on information accessibility.

In 2011, Swartz used an MIT computer system to download numerous academic articles from the online archive JSTOR, leading to an intense legal battle with the U.S. government, which many believe led directly to his death. Swartz's message of political transparency and anti-censorship resounded with individuals across the globe. When his life came to an abrupt end in 2013, the world lost someone who championed free, fair, and open access to information for all. However astonishing the heights he did reach, Swartz's sudden downfall at the age of 26 places a disheartening, hollow parenthesis at the end of a story that, at its heart, reflects on the dubious state of civil liberties in the digital world.

FILM THEMES

Swartz devoted himself to keeping the Internet a resource open to all. Rather than chasing financial gain, he used his brilliance as a tool for social change. His death leaves us questioning right versus wrong.

AN EXAMPLE TAKEN TOO FAR

The U.S. government's legal case with Aaron Swartz was not founded on a well-defined, undeniable crime having been committed. Although 13 counts were brought against him, the scope of law under which Swartz was prosecuted was tenuous, and rather than declining to prosecute him, the government used Swartz as an example to reveal the destiny awaiting all those who would liberate information considered private property. Targeted as an enemy of the state, Swartz was pressured into severe psychological and financial stress, leaving us to wonder if the government persecution was a contributing factor in his suicide.

PUBLIC ACCESS TO PUBLIC DOMAIN

Aaron Swartz believed that people had a right to free information, specifically to the law through PACER and to peer-reviewed scholarly articles via JSTOR. To Swartz, putting a price tag on information was levying a type of poll tax, and the wealthy were once again benefiting. Swartz would have none of that. Following his short stint in the corporate world, his political aspirations became clear. Seen by some as a Robin Hood of the digital age, Swartz strongly believed in the same principles put forth by Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address, that a "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Though the manifestation has changed, the core sentiment remains.

DEGREES OF STEALING

When a bank account is hacked, depleted of money, and its details are leaked online, the crime is obvious. But where was the inherent crime in making academic legacy - information that had been collected by volunteer researchers - accessible to the public? With no commercial interests, no financial gain, and no marketable end, Swartz was nevertheless treated as a threat and criminal based on a murky area of law. When the individual fighting to liberate public information is incriminated, the notion of stealing becomes a questionable entity.

EMBATTLED AND HOPEFUL

Friends and family describe Swartz as a believer, not one easily disheartened. Troubled by a society that valued riches over knowledge, he pursued his vision of making the world a better place. Yet in his optimism he was downcast; in his hope he felt despair. Swartz's story exposes the essence of human nature, where there is space for both the positive and negative, the energetic and the weary. Swartz believed there was little chance that SOPA could be stopped, but he soldiered on, proving the strength of his beliefs and his hope for positive change, despite the darkness taking him in the end.

“I want to make the world a better place.”

Aaron Swartz

“Aaron was trying to make the world work. He was trying to fix it.”

Tim Berners-Lee

“It's not enough to live in the world as it is... You should always be questioning. Everything you've learned is provisional.”

Aaron Swartz

FILM FACTS:

- In January 2012, the English Wikipedia blackout, a protest against the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and Preventing Real Online Threats to Economic Creativity and Theft of Intellectual Property Act (PIPA), lasted for 24 hours. Along with the articles for SOPA and PIPA, the website showed only the message “Imagine a world without free knowledge,” which an estimated 160 million people viewed.
- As of 2014, around 40% of the world has an Internet connection. Asia leads the world in Internet users, with 48% of its population online.
- On March 12, 1991, Tim Berners-Lee, an English computer scientist working at CERN at the time, put forward a proposal for the concept that became the World Wide Web as we know it today. In 1993, World Wide Web technology was made available on a royalty-free basis, effectively enabling the Internet to grow. Yahoo!, one of the first Internet search engines, was launched in 1994, with Google following in 1998. Wikipedia was created in 2001, as was the first social network Friendster, followed by Facebook in 2004, which became an open system in 2006, the same year Twitter was created.
- As of 2011, there were more than 400 million Creative Commons licensed works on the Web.
- In August 2013, Aaron Swartz was posthumously inducted into the Internet Hall of Fame, launched in 2012 by the Internet Society.
- Aaron Swartz suffered from ulcerative colitis, a type of inflammatory bowel disease that affects the colon and rectum, which he was diagnosed with at the age of 12. In 2007, he posted a blog entry entitled Very Sick, stating, “Huge pains grind through my stomach, like it’s trying to leap out of my body. Food is always followed by pain, followed by running to the bathroom. I’m afraid to go out because I wouldn’t want to get too far from a toilet. I’m always thirsty and the dehydration makes me angry and confused. At times the pain is excruciating and even after it goes I spend some time just reeling from it.”
- 30,000 web sites are hacked each day.
- Robert Swartz, Aaron’s father, founded The Mark Williams Company in 1980, a small software company that produced Coherent, a clone of Unix. Before software, the company produced a lemon-lime soft drink called Dr. Enuf.
- THE INTERNET’S OWN BOY was released under a Creative Commons License.
- The copyright debate was first raised in 17th-century Britain, following the invention of the printing press, which led to higher rates of literacy. The Copyright Clause of the United States Constitution was passed in 1787, when the copyright length for an individual piece of work was 14 years. The current length of a copyright clause in most of the world is the life of the author plus 50 or 70 years.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Consider getting involved with Demand Progress, which “mobilizes the public to challenge entrenched power and promote freedom.” The organization also supports Aaron’s Law.
2. Find out more about The Electronic Frontier Foundation, which defends civil liberties in the digital world.
3. Protect digital access to your work by applying for a Creative Commons License.
4. Help bring clarity to the confusing landscape of the digital world by supporting New Media Rights, which provides legal services, education, and public policy advocacy for Internet users and creators.

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