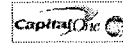


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Anonymous hacks MIT sites to post Aaron Swartz tribute, call to arms

By Hayley Tsukayama, January 14, 2013



Aaron Swartz poses in a Borderland Books in San Francisco on February 4.... (NOAH BERGER/REUTERS)

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Hackers from Anonymous on Sunday claimed credit for posting messages to Massachusetts Institute of Technology Web sites commemorating the life of RSS co-founder Aaron Swartz and calling for an overhaul of computer crime laws.

Swartz, 26, was an outspoken advocate of open information and had been embroiled in a legal battle over digital copyright for scraping articles off of the JSTOR academic article database. He hanged himself Friday at his apartment in Brooklyn.

In addition to co-authoring the technology behind RSS, which alerts users to real-time updates on Web sites, Swartz also played an early role at Reddit, and founded the advocacy group Demand Progress. He believed that the articles on JSTOR should be more widely available, particularly as many were funded by public money. He hacked into the database's systems and downloaded articles using a computer concealed in an MIT closet.

Once found, Swartz was charged with felony hacking charges, which could have carried a decades-long sentence. His trial was set to start this spring and his attempts to reach a plea-bargain with the government, the *Wall Street Journal* reported, had recently fallen apart.

In the messages Sunday, the group called for an overhaul of intellectual property and computer crime laws. The group also said Swartz's death should be a rallying point for Internet freedom advocates. "We call for this tragedy to be a basis for a renewed and unwavering commitment to a free and unfettered Internet, spared from censorship with equality of access and franchise for all," the group said.

In an update to the messages, which have since been taken down, the group said it does not blame MIT for Swartz's death and apologized for using its sites as a stage for its messages.

The messages were posted shortly after MIT President Rafael Reif wrote a letter to students, alumni and other members of the school's community to say that it would look into the role MIT played in Swartz's case.

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"I want to express very clearly that I and all of us at MIT are extremely saddened by the death of this promising young man who touched the lives of so many," Reif wrote. "It pains me to think that MIT played any role in a series of events that have ended in tragedy."

A statement issued by Swartz's family specifically blamed MIT for the prolonged legal battle, and said the school "refused to stand up for Aaron and its own community's most cherished principles."

"Aaron's death is not simply a personal tragedy," the statement said. "It is the product of a criminal justice system rife with intimidation and prosecutorial overreach. Decisions made by officials in the Massachusetts U.S. Attorney's office and at MIT contributed to his death."

JSTOR — which settled a civil case with Swartz in 2011 after he returned the files he downloaded — also released a statement over the weekend, saying that the company was "deeply saddened" to hear about Swartz's death.

Across the Web, Internet community leaders and others published tributes of their own to Swartz. Sir Tim Berners-Lee, credited as one of the original architects of the Internet, sent out a poetic tribute to Swartz, calling him a "mentor, a wise elder" and saying, "we have lost a child."

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Meanwhile, others have started a White House petition to remove U.S. Attorney Carmen Ortiz, who supervised the prosecution of in Swartz's case, for "overreach."

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