# The Lessons of Aaron Swartz

## With technology comes power. Shouldn't MIT teach students how to use it responsibly?

On the day after Aaron Swartz's death in January, President Reif and I spoke about how MIT might respond to the news of his suicide. A well-known Internet activist and advocate for democratic principles and open access, Swartz, 26, had made important technical contributions to the Web's architecture at age 14. For his last two years, he had been the subject of a vigorous federal prosecution by the Boston U.S. attorney on charges of using a laptop connected to the MIT network to download millions of research journal articles from JSTOR, a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary sources. The president wanted MIT to publish a full report about our involvement in Swartz's arrest and prosecution. Others urged against that: there was already tremendous anxiety among MIT employees who had been involved, and an investigation could make matters worse. Even on that first day, criticism of MIT was already surfacing on the Internet: an investigation and report could bring increased exposure and risk to the Institute and its people. Wouldn't it be more prudent to remain silent and let the storm blow over?

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The arguments for openness prevailed, and the next day the president asked me to take on the task of creating a report. The charge was to produce an objective public record that people both inside and outside MIT could use in drawing their own conclusions about MIT's actions.

Creating that record took six months, and I had the great luck to work on it with Institute Professor emeritus Peter Diamond, assistant provost Doug Pfeiffer, and attorney Andy Grosso, an expert in computer law. We interviewed 50 people, reviewed 10,000 pages of documents, and in July published a 180-page report that answers the question of "what happened" (swartzreport.mit.edu/docs/report-to-the-president.pdf).

Determining what happened is only part of MIT's response. In my first talk with President Reif, we agreed that the key purpose of producing a report was to help MIT to learn from the tragedy. For the president, this was to be a two-part process. Publishing the report was part one.

MIT is now at the second part of the process. What will our community make of what happened, and what will we do as a result? While many people have told me they appreciate the report's clarity and detail, others have expressed skepticism that MIT will really address the eight key questions it raised. We'll see over the coming months what lessons the MIT community takes to heart.

Some lessons are straightforward. The report identifies gaps in our policies for handling digital information, and confusion about procedures. Beyond that, we need to review our practices for inviting outside law enforcement to campus—particularly for technology-related crimes, where calling the local police can be tantamount to bringing in federal agents, as happened with Aaron Swartz.

Other questions address our values. In reviewing the record for the report, I was struck by how little attention the MIT community paid to the Swartz case, at least before the suicide. The *Tech* carried regular news items on the arrest and the court proceedings. Yet in the two years of the prosecution, there was not one opinion piece, and not one letter to the editor. The Aaron Swartz case offers a textbook example of the issues of openness and intellectual property on the Internet—the kinds of issues for which people traditionally look to MIT for intellectual leadership. But when those issues erupted in our midst, we didn't recognize them, and we were not intellectually engaged. Why not?

For me, the most vital questions that arise from the report have to do with our responsibility as educators in an age of technology. Though Aaron Swartz was not an MIT student, he was like many of our students: brilliant, passionate, technically empowered. Yet he was also dangerously naïve about the reality of exercising that power, to the extent that he destroyed himself. We might well ask whether the people who mentored Swartz and helped him achieve such brilliance and power had a responsibility to cultivate not only his technical excellence and his passion as an advocate but also, as my grandmother would have called it, *seykhel*—a wonderful Yiddish word that means a combination of intelligence and common sense.

We can ask the same thing about ourselves. The young people we work with are so extraordinary, and are so empowered by their time here; do we at MIT have a responsibility to help them grapple with the reality of that power? And in a world where technology brings power as never before, can we remain leaders in education if we don't meet that responsibility?

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COURTESY OF HAL ABELSON