

NYT Personals

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Figure 1: Aaron Swartz used a free trial of the government's Pacer system to download 19,856,160 pages of documents in a campaign to place the information free online.

Michael Francis McElroy for The New York Times

Attention attractive people: Are you looking for someone respectable enough that they've been *personally vetted* by the *New York Times*, but has enough of a *bad-boy streak* that the vetting was because they 'liberated' *millions of dollars* of government documents? If so, look no further than page A14 of today's *New York Times*:

Aaron Swartz, a 22-year-old Stanford dropout and entrepreneur who read Mr. Malamud's appeal, managed to download an estimated 20 percent of the entire database: 19,856,160 pages of text.

Then on Sept. 29, all of the free servers stopped serving. The government, it turns out, was not pleased.

A notice went out from the Government Printing Office that the free Pacer pilot program was suspended, pending an evaluation. A couple of weeks later, a Government Printing Office official, Richard G. Davis, told librarians that the security of the Pacer service was compromised. The F.B.I. is conducting an investigation.

[Continuing on the blog:](#)

In the technology world, Mr. Swartz is kind of a big deal, as the saying goes. At the age of 14, he had a hand in writing RSS, the now-ubiquitous software used to syndicate everything from blog posts to news headlines directly to subscribers.

[O]ver the course of six weeks, Mr. Swartz was able to download 780 gigabytes of data — 19,856,160 pages of text — from Pacer. The caper grabbed an estimated 20 percent of the entire PACER network, with a focus on the most recent cases from almost every circuit.

When the government abruptly shut down the free public program, Mr. Malamud saw it as a sign of possible trouble ahead. “Who shuts down a 17-site national program with no notice whatsoever?” he recalled thinking. “I immediately saw the potential for overreaction by the courts.”

Mr. Malamud told Mr. Swartz: “You need to talk to a lawyer. I need to talk to a lawyer.” Mr. Swartz recalled, “I had this vision of the Feds crashing down the door, taking everything away.”

He said he locked the deadbolt on his door, lay down on the bed for a while, and then called [to warn] his mother.

But when lawyers told Mr. Malamud and Mr. Swartz that they appeared to have broken no laws, Mr. Malamud sent Mr. Swartz a message saying, “You should just lay low for a while.”

Mr. Swartz said that he waited for a couple of months, but “nobody came knocking on my door. I started breathing a little more easily.”

Want to meet the man behind the headlines? Want to have the F.B.I. open up a file on you as well? Interested in some kind of bizarre celebrity product endorsement? I’m available in Boston and New York all this month — contact me by [email](#), [Facebook](#), and [web form](#).

More:

- John Schwartz, “[An Effort to Upgrade a Court Archive System to Free and Easy](#),” *New York Times*, February 12, 2009
- public.resource.org, “[A Cleaner PACER](#)” (“32 districts, 735.9 GBytes, 19,856,160 pages”)

UPDATE: Schwartz expands on his story in [Steal These Federal Records—Okay, Not Literally](#).