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Portfolio 1: Aaron Swartz and the history of Academic Journals

*“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.”* (Karmanov)

- Aaron Swartz

At only 26 years of age, Aaron Swartz had a resume that many people would envy. His long list of accomplishments include playing a major role in the creation of RSS, the online tools that millions of people use today to subscribe to news feeds, and being the co-founder of Reddit.com, an exorbitantly popular news-sharing website. (Schwartz) While many would agree that Swartz was living life to the fullest, it is arguable that his heavy involvements with the internet also lead to his untimely death. Over the years, he had built up the reputation of being an advocate for greater freedom in information sharing. In the past, he was heavily involved with several events regarding this issue, such as the campaign against the SOPA legislation. One day however, his devotion led him into opposition with the law. In 2011, after gaining unauthorized access to the computer network at M.I.T., he downloaded around 4.8 million articles from JSTOR, a database for academic journal articles that requires colleges and other institutions to pay thousands of dollars to have access too. It was Swartz’s intention to freely distribute these articles in an attempt to provide more open access to the material. He was ultimately discovered, and the government decided to press heavy charges. Facing up to 35 years in jail and a $1 million fine, Swartz hanged himself in his apartment on January 11, 2013. (Schwartz)

It comes as no surprise that many people have been saddened by Swartz’s demise. However, an interesting movement has arisen as a result of his death, with the goal being to finish the work he started. Several groups have formed to try and put an end to the system of fees and restrictions currently associated with academic journal databases. It is this system that arguably destroyed one of the internet’s hero’s, causing one to wonder how things could have been different. What would the world be like if the culture surrounding sharing academic information had developed differently?

Historically, it appears as if academic journals originally were more in line with Swartz’s vision of information sharing. As it turns out, journals, “were originally published by learned societies. . . . authors contributed their works for publication in order to disseminate their ideas, and the scholarly societies compiled journals for distribution to scholars who then responded with contributions of their own.” (Keefer) These “learned societies”, most of which are colleges and universities, published the vast majority of these journals throughout most of history. It was only after the second World War that private for-profit companies took over much of these duties, as higher learning institutions were unable to keep up with the demand for information that came with the post-war scientific and industrial booms. (Keefer)

A major complaint about private companies taking over the primary responsibilities of the distribution of academic material is that the process as a whole has become over-commercialized. Unlike universities, which are primarily focused on advancing research, publishing companies primarily want to maximize profits. This fact is clearly reflected in the dramatic changes in pricing seen in academic journal databases in recent history. “Costs for academic journals, or “serials” have persistently escalated over the past 20 years.  From 1986-2005, serial expenditures for the member libraries of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) have increased 302% while the number of serial items purchased has increased only 1.9% on average per year.” (McGuigan) The rise in digital technology has largely influenced this evolution, for as Nicole Howard states, “The dense science and humanities texts students have traditionally purchased can hardly be seen as efficient . . . the highly competitive textbook market has led publishers to put textbooks in an accessible, user friendly digital format.” (Howard, 152) Further adding to the complaints associated with these developments is the fact that the authors of such articles will not receive any profits associated with the distribution of their work. In fact, sometimes the authors must even pay fees to the companies to have their writings included in the journal! (Keefer) All of this, coupled with the fact that the colleges of the world are estimated to collectively spend more than $20 billion a year on academic journal database subscriptions (Manjoo), gives evidence to many that current information sharing is corrupted.

It is clear that the major obstacle to Swartz’s vision is the existence of the private institutions described above. These bodies have over time shifted the focus of academic journal articles away from sharing information and towards creating a business. Removing them entirely from the picture, and having universities instead freely distribute material composed by their, scholars, would allow for a wider audience to be exposed to such knowledge. However, a negative outcome of this would be a society significantly less technologically advanced than what we have today. This goes back to the issue of the post-war boom. With universities unable to meet this new demand for information distribution, scientific research would have been severely handicapped. As such, some of the luxuries we now take for granted very well wouldn’t have existed yet.

It would seem that privately run databases were a necessary evil needed for society’s development, thus making Swartz’s vision one that would not fit with the world as we know it. However, this is still hope that his dream can be realized. The rise of the internet has made article distribution much easier, meaning that academic institutions don’t have to be as reliant on the private market. This “Open Access” Movement has been gaining steam in light of Swartz’s death, with several free non-profit databases emerging. (Karmanov) Ultimately, Swartz’s death was a needless tragedy, but society can take some solace in the fact that his efforts may one day lead to truly free information.

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