

## ***Unplugged - Voices:*** **The Internet's Own Boy:** **The Story of Aaron Swartz (2014)**

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Research in management and organization may only gain by being inspired from arts, culture and humanities in order to rethink practices but also to nourish its own perspectives. Life in organizations is artificially separate from ordinary life: all of mundane objects are thus conducive to astonishment, inspiration, and even problematization. The unplugged subsection “voices” gives the opportunity to academics and non-academics to deliver an interpretation about an object from the cultural or artistic world. Interpreted objects are or not directly related to organizational life, resonate or not with the moment, but share some intriguing features. These interpretations suggest a patchwork of variations on the same object.

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Directed by Brian  
Knappenberger  
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## Aaron Swartz: management or life

"There is one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living, is to answer the fundamental question of philosophy" (my translation). Those words from Albert Camus's 1942 *The Myth of Sisyphus* may resonate with the dramatic story of Aaron Swartz. Academics in management studies may be inclined to relate it to some organizational concerns but suicide necessarily goes beyond and remains a painful question mark. Also because management is just or mostly a matter of life. Some rare people are not able to come in the Truman Show. Their extreme lucidity prevents them from accepting the inescapable dose of lying that makes possible the organizational play. Common decency, in Orwell's vocabulary, accompanies them in everyday practice but makes life unbearable as social interactions become hopeless. Loneliness of enterprising the self is exhausting. Aaron Swartz was one of those.

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## **E viral Essay - Entrepreneurship goes viral: The invention of deviant enterprising selves**

Unjust laws exist;  
shall we be content to obey them,  
or shall we endeavor to amend them,  
and obey them until we have succeeded,  
or shall we transgress them at once?

Henry David Thoreau

With these opening words, the fascinating story of Aaron Swartz unravels on the screen. Swartz is described in the 2014 biographical documentary *The Internet's Own Boy: The Story of Aaron Swartz* not only as a child prodigy who was already reading by the age of three, but also as someone who became fascinated with the potential of the World Wide Web and its associated technology to change the world into something better. He took an active role in writing the RSS web feed format when he was 14, was involved in the development of the web.py website framework, and became a partner of the social news site Reddit after it merged with his own company, Infogami. Swartz also helped to develop the non-profit organization Creative Commons, and founded Demand Progress, an online political advocacy group with the aim of defending civil liberties. He is described on Wikipedia as 'an American computer programmer, entrepreneur, writer, political organizer, and Internet hacktivist.'

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It is certainly a captivating life that is depicted in the biopic, but one that sadly ended all too early. On 11 January 2013, at the age of 26, Aaron Swartz committed suicide in his apartment in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, New York. He left behind not only the legacy of his accomplishments and transgressions, but also an Internet community mourning the visionary who, according to his girlfriend, brought hope to all 'members of the future.' Swartz's own role model, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, creator of the World Wide Web, posted the following tweet about the loss of Aaron:

Aaron dead.  
World wanderers, we have lost a wise elder.  
Hackers for right, we are one down.  
Parents all, we have lost a child. Let us weep.

In the documentary *The Internet's Own Boy*, Swartz is referred to as a revolutionary. The piece tells the story of his initiative to download millions of documents from the academic archive JSTOR, which ultimately led to his death. Swartz was charged with computer and wire fraud—but what, in fact, were his intentions? In the film, one of his friends says, 'He was not a thief, he was trying to make a point,' just trying to 'fix the world.' Did he wish to use the information to make personal profit, or to make it accessible to the public for free? The prosecution process against Swartz is depicted in the film as a witch hunt by a US government buoyed by the fact that the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) remained 'neutral.' The film includes accusations that the US government was trying to make an example of Swartz, and claims that 'he was killed by the government' and that 'MIT betrayed its most basic principles.'

The Aaron Swartz documentary is worth watching for anyone interested in justice, and particularly in understanding today's opportunities for creating and organizing innovative online social and civil rights movements. But also, for anyone with a background in entrepreneurship studies, and with a particular interest in how entrepreneurship has become the linchpin of almost all activity, everywhere, for everyone, the documentary invites reflection on the explosion of new kinds of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship that have emerged in recent times.

During the past few decades, entrepreneurship has 'gone viral,' spreading to the most unlikely contexts. It has transcended its boundaries as a stand-alone concept to combine well with numerous prefixes such as social, environmental, community, regional, ethnic, women's, and so on. In this vein, it has been subject to the most unexpected adaptation. To give just a few examples, entrepreneurship provides opportunities for ex-criminals to exploit their creativity and for women from ethnic minorities to gain a sense of community and create working lives for themselves, and a path for girls in upper secondary school to free themselves from old teaching dogma (Berglund and Skoglund, 2015).

Entrepreneurship is thus no longer associated only with its ability to bring about economic change, and has become a mechanism for solving all kinds of problems. Swartz's story exemplifies this new, extended function. While he can be described as a typical, conventional entrepreneur in his role as a technology inventor starting up exciting, 'hot' new businesses, he can also be viewed as a 'non-entrepreneur,' 'totally unexcited about starting businesses and making money' as is emphasised in the film. At the end of the documentary, Swartz's father reflects on the difference between his son and other famous tech entrepreneurs who have come to change everyday life in contemporary Western society:

If you look at Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak they started by selling a blue box which was a thing designed to fraud the phone companies. If you look at Bill Gates and Paul Hallon they initially started the business by using computers that were at Harvard, which was pretty clearly against the rules. The difference between Aaron and the people I just mentioned is that Aaron wanted to make the world a better place, he just didn't want to make money.

Aaron Swartz can therefore be distinguished from contemporary, conventional entrepreneurs, because, according to his father, he is not as interested in making personal profit as in making the world a better place. Because Swartz's activities aim to protect civil society through questioning systemic errors, trying to re-establish boundaries between the private and the public sector, and paving the way for social change, he could be described as a 'social' or 'societal' entrepreneur (cf. Hjorth and Steyaert, 2008; Berglund, Johannisson and Schwartz, 2012). Social entrepreneurs are being identified as a unique new breed, marking a sharp contrast to the traditional model of profit-orientated entrepreneurs. Of interest here is how the new- and the old-style entrepreneur can be seen to coexist, in the documentary about Aaron Swartz,. This, given the similarities as well as the differences between the old- and the new-style entrepreneur, prompts reflection on how this new phenomenon has expanded entrepreneurship discourse.

Beginning with the Swartz story, it can be concluded that the positions of the old versus the new entrepreneur are not mutually exclusive, but are, in fact, quite compatible. Understanding entrepreneurial identities as being underpinned by an 'enterprising self' makes this comprehensible. The enterprising self gives rise to various entrepreneurial identities as it urges us to adapt to survive, take

initiative, learn and move on from experienced difficulties, and change life direction when necessary. Hence, the enterprising self is made up of the fundamental characteristics humans need in order to become autonomous, self-regulating, and responsible individuals. The way in which the new, socially-concerned entrepreneurs take responsibility, not only for themselves, their employees, stakeholders and customers, but also in terms of their engagement with civil society and their wish to alleviate social injustice, suggests that they represent a morally advanced version of the entrepreneur.

Through their endeavors to make the world a better place, social entrepreneurs involve themselves in matters that traditionally fall under the remit of political systems and national government. Their involvement in such matters blurs boundaries and creates a new private/public borderland. Their role as transgressors in this respect may, however, place them under pressure. It has also been found that their strong commitment to what they believe to be meaningful work comes at a cost of personal self-sacrifice, for instance, in terms of family, friends, and close relationships (see, for example, Dempsey and Sanders, 2010).

Social entrepreneurs are, almost without exception, described as 'morally superior' individuals. Such a morally driven person may often tend to suppress her or his own vulnerability, self-doubt, and insecurities when striving to achieve social justice and change. Scharff (2015) shows how this aspect of the enterprising self, which she attributes to living in a liberal society where many individuals continually strive towards self-improvement, can turn people against themselves through self-competition and self-critique. The ability of enterprising selves to be autonomous, repress their vulnerabilities, take responsibility, and be concerned about social change may create a division between them and 'others' who can be blamed for not living up to this standard (Scharff, 2015; see also the pressure placed on social enterprise employees to work harder for less or no money in Dempsey and Sanders, 2010). This may have the ironic, and perhaps counterproductive, consequence of inverting their moral hegemony if they then become uncompromising and judgmental of others' deviance from the principles that underpin their aims.

The point I would like to make here is that even if it is possible to claim that Swartz is both an 'old' and a 'new' entrepreneur – entrepreneurial identities that differ at one level but that are both underpinned by the enterprising self – it shows how easily this interpretation can be applied, and how easy it is to leave out other aspects that may not fit at all within the analysis of an enterprising self. In Swartz' story there is definitely a disturbing noise that intensified the more I thought about whether it is appropriate to analyze Swartz' ambitions to make the world a better place as this advanced enterprising self with a well-developed sense of responsibility. This question kept returning to me, asking for another analytical turn.

Swartz does not appear to be interested in describing himself in one particular way, which is common among entrepreneurs of all kinds. His interests lie in explaining in detail what it is he is doing and how it relates to the potential for correcting systemic errors and effecting social change. He emphasizes how uncomfortable he felt in the business world, where he found himself trapped and locked in (for instance during the time when he moved his company to the San Francisco office). While he does not seem to place a high value on wealth, profit or economic success, neither does he reject them in order to establish his stance as a social entrepreneur. Instead, he focuses on how issues of public interest can be reformed through Internet technology. Moreover, Swartz appears to show little interest in using business as a means for slow, gradual change. He instead makes radical statements through different actions that reveal the possibilities of the Internet. Some of these actions were executed in the shadows and interpreted as being illegal. Ironically, Swartz was charged with the intention to

use the information he 'stole' for self-gain. He was thus effectively charged with theft, which would seem to class him as an entrepreneur with a personal profit incentive. However, he does not defend himself from that position, and instead speaks out about what he perceives to be the injustice that publically supported research and the knowledge it generates are effectively paid for twice, and are not made freely accessible to all global citizens. He appears to hold on to a hope that justice will be done once the facts of this are made clear.

Thus, Swartz deviates from the generally accepted idea of the enterprising self in several ways. For instance, he does not take the initiative to survive by resisting the accusations or attempting to escape the situation. While this deviates from the norm, it does not represent the passive and indolent antithesis of the active enterprising self,. While Swartz's response may appear to be atypically inert, his steadfastness enables him to hold on to the general principles of justice and civil rights.

Whether this new, alternative kind of entrepreneur is an outlier or a natural progression of the species needs further attention and study. There is a certain research tradition, with a tendency to heroize, that pays attention to the idea of the autonomous entrepreneur, and another that tries to develop an understanding of how unchained, liberal enterprising selves, while seeking to fulfill their potential, ironically shackle themselves up in a web of responsibility and vulnerability. Whilst the former is typically narrated in management and business literature as the free individual (who conquers the market), the other has a tendency to be narrated in political science and critical culture literature as the governed individual (who has to survive at the market). However, with the raise of the new social entrepreneurs the boundaries are blurred, which also blurs the distinction between conquering/surviving. The case of Aaron Swartz, well demonstrates that there is a deeper complexity to such individuals, which may present a challenge to such clear-cut accepted notions that may be reinforced in both management and business research and in political science and critical culture research.

When one of Aaron's two brothers reflects upon his desire to change the world and correct injustices 'just by explaining the world very clearly to people,' a researcher may fully relate to this position and hope that more nuanced and thoughtful stories of others like him, who also seek to change the world, may emerge to help us understand the challenges we face in the 21st century. Although Aaron Swartz died tragically, it must be remembered that a community continues to exist which is working together to protect civil liberties and pass on his legacy.

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## Pursuing the legacy of Aaron Swartz, one tweet at a time. A screenshot-driven essay

Aaron Swartz not only believed in the idea that access to knowledge should be linked to fundamental principles of freedom and justice, but also in the enabling role of the Internet in this endeavor. Like other Internet activists such as Peter Sunde, the co-founder of the Pirate Bay<sup>1</sup>, Swartz defended the idea of a decentralized and open Internet through which every single user could become a disseminator of knowledge.

In the inspiring yet dramatic documentary *The Internet's Own Boy: The Story of Aaron Swartz*, we can see how Swartz used the Internet to free scientific knowledge that was locked up in protected databases. In his manifesto, he claimed that sharing copyrighted information, though illegal, is a moral imperative: "We need to take information, wherever it is stored, make our copies and share them with the world" (Swartz, 2008). Following actions that were aimed at realizing this goal, Swartz became a target of the authorities and was facing federal charges of up to 35 years in prison when he committed suicide in 2013 at the age of only 26.

As an academic, it is impossible to watch Swartz's tragic story without feeling involved. As we academics perform our day-to-day work, we are embroiled in a paradoxical situation that continues to feed the system Swartz was denouncing: we access paywalled journals for which our universities pay escalating costs<sup>2</sup> just to be able to read the work of our colleagues (who have handed over their copyrights to publishers); we instruct our students to do the same by making them mandatory reading on our courses; and we rely on publishing in those journals for career advancement, knowing that most of them cannot be accessed by the public, nor by a great number of scientists working for institutions that are unable to afford them.

The inevitable question raised by Swartz's biopic is whether we as academics can morally justify keeping the privilege of access to scientific knowledge for ourselves while a significant part of the world is left out. A growing number of academics are now answering this question by engaging in the battle surrounding open access. Whether modest or vigorous, their actions become visible through social networking sites such as Twitter. This microblogging platform is indeed increasingly being used by academics from all disciplines to engage in discussions about methods, literature, and ethics<sup>3</sup>. It is also becoming a space where their experience of work is expressed. Such informal uses of Twitter by academics to narrate their work to people inside and outside their universities do not correspond to any form of organizational requirement (Sergi & Bonneau, 2015). The questioning and thoughts shared by scholars these days are exposed on Twitter through their own initiative, in an open and communal fashion.

In this "screenshot-driven essay," I would like to examine, one tweet at a time, some traces left on Twitter by academics who still pursue the contemporary legacy of Aaron Swartz.

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1. In 2003, Peter Sunde, Fredrik Neij and Gottfrid Svartholm started The Pirate Bay, a file-sharing website. In 2009, they were convicted of "assisting [others] in copyright infringement." Sunde was incarcerated in 2014 and released a year later (Mollen, 2015).

2. Big players such as Elsevier, Springer, Taylor & Francis, Wiley-Blackwell, and Wolters Kluwer base their profitable business model on the "free labor" provided by scientists (Gershman, 2014) and "determine annually increasing subscription rates that make up a considerable amount of research spending, leaving academic libraries with no other choice but to cancel subscriptions" (Larivière, Haustein, & Mongeon, 2015, p.11).

3. Research has shown that Twitter is used by one in 40 scholars (Priem, 2011).

## TWITTER'S AFFORDANCE OF VISIBILITY

I have selected Twitter as the focal site of this brief guided tour because its functionalities afford visibility in very specific ways. Twitter has more than 302 million monthly active users (Twitter, 2015) and since its opening in 2006 it has offered a fast and lightweight means for individuals to publish information for personal and professional purposes. The limited length of tweets (140 characters) shapes how they are written and read, making it easy to publish and skim large amounts of content quickly. When created, new Twitter accounts are public by default, meaning that anyone can follow them without asking for permission. Unless users configure their account to make it private, their publications and conversations are visible, facilitating the discovery of users and messages through serendipity. In practice, this broadcasting capability creates high visibility and open communication with non-targeted users, as there is no need to indicate an intended addressee in a tweet. When messages are retweeted (i.e., shared by other users), they can reach a larger audience than the author's own list of followers.

The addition of the hashtag symbol (#) in front of keywords (e.g., #OpenAccess) was developed by users as a convention for categorizing subject matter. Hashtags also affect the visibility of tweets, because users can access all tweets that are using the same hashtag by clicking on it. This facilitates the articulation of collective activities on a specific topic, which can lead to conversations and community building. Many regular hashtags emerged from Twitter usage by academics<sup>4</sup>, providing them with opportunities to interact with each other. The example of the #icanhazpdf hashtag especially echoes the mission of Aaron Swartz.

## #ICANHAZPDF: WHEN A HASHTAG IS USED TO CIRCUMVENT PAYWALLS

Swartz thought that those who can access knowledge have a duty to share it with the world, for example, by filling download requests for others. This is exactly what the #icanhazpdf hashtag is about, as it facilitates peer-to-peer access to scholarly articles that would otherwise be denied to users behind a paywall.

It all started in 2011, when Andrea Kuszewski, a cognitive scientist, suggested the use of the #icanhazpdf hashtag to anyone who wanted to request an article to which they did not have access (see Figure 1)<sup>5</sup>.

**Figure 1.** Kuszewski's tweet suggesting the adoption of the #icanhazpdf hashtag when requesting a paper

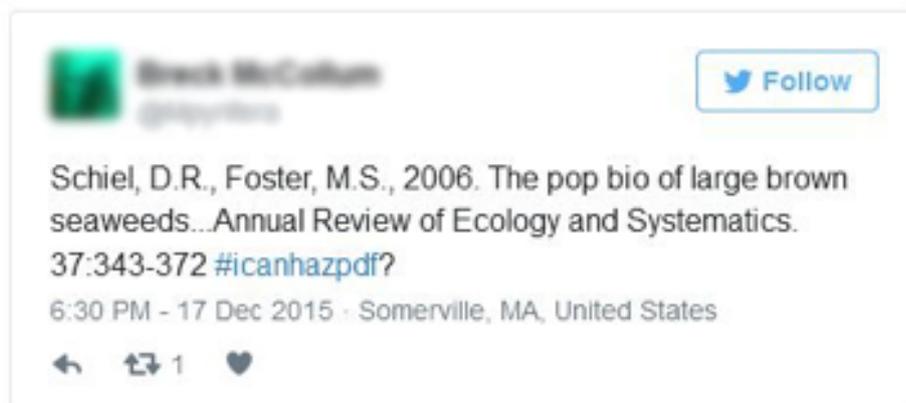


4. For example, #PhDchat, #AcWri, and #ScholarSunday.

5. The sentence "I can haz pdf" is a reference to the popular cat meme "I Can Has Cheezburger?" (Terdman, 2008).

The mechanics of this are rather simple: the requestor posts a tweet including the reference and/or link to a paywalled paper along with the #icanhazpdf hashtag (as in Figure 2). Other users browsing the hashtagged messages can then reply privately to the requestor to ask for their email address and send them the pdf file (outside of Twitter), assuming they have access to it through their own institutional subscriptions.

**Figure 2.** A typical example of a tweet using the #icanhazpdf hashtag to request a specific paywalled paper



Researchers who have studied the #icanhazpdf community have pointed out that the use of this unauthorized method is not an isolated phenomenon and that it is continuing to grow (Gardner & Gardner, 2015). The Electronic Frontier Foundation (Harmon, 2015) has related this practice to Article 27 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which says that everyone deserves the right “to share in scientific advancement and its benefits” (United Nations, 1948). The use of this hashtag perpetuates the culture of sharing promoted by Swartz and has been described as a form of “guerilla [sic] open access” in the tradition of his manifesto (Dunn, Coiera, & Mandl, 2014).

## **WHEN TWEETS CALL FOR ACTS OF COLLECTIVE CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AND BOYCOTT**

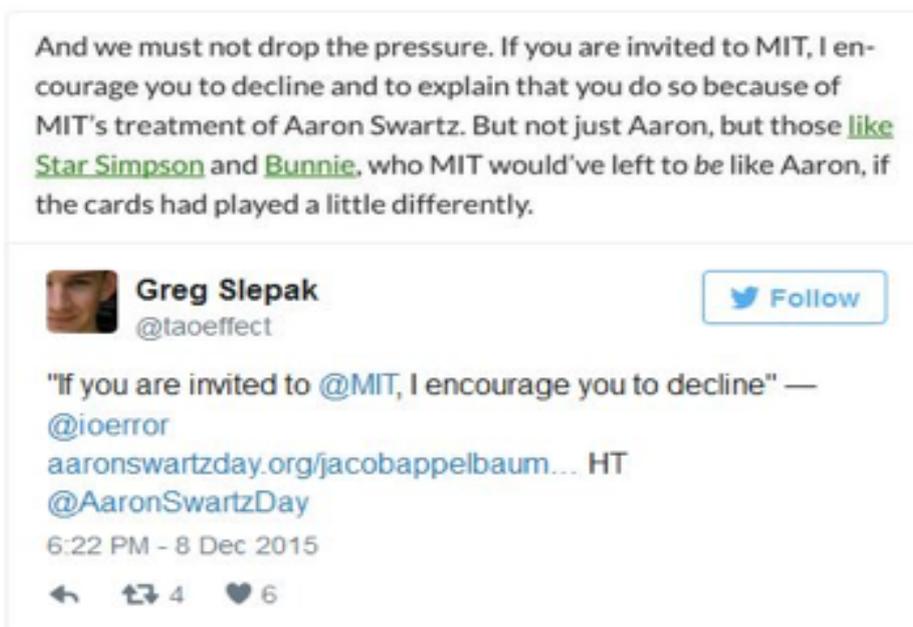
In the spirit of the battle for open access that has taken place on Twitter, there have been several instances of tweets calling for diverse forms of protest against academic institutions. One such instance concerns the prosecution of Aaron Swartz, which is discussed in his biopic mentioned above. In late 2010 to early 2011, while Swartz was working as a research fellow at Harvard University, he used a guest account on the network of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to bulk download the journal archives of the JSTOR database with a Python script Swartz had written that grabbed articles one after the other. He initially used MIT’s Wi-Fi connection to access the JSTOR website, but when JSTOR cut off the access he entered an unlocked wiring closet located in MIT’s basement and plugged his laptop directly into a network jack (Hockenberry, 2013). His equipment was found by the authorities, which did not stop the download but instead installed a surveillance camera (a still from the surveillance recording can be seen in Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Swartz used MIT's network to access JSTOR's database and was caught by a surveillance camera, as shown in the documentary *The Internet's Own Boy: The Story of Aaron Swartz* (43:05)



Swartz was arrested soon after by MIT police and the US Secret Service. Elliot Peters, his defense attorney claimed they have been gathering evidence to make a case<sup>6</sup>. To this day, many of Swartz's supporters feel that MIT played a role in his prosecution, even though the institution publicly distanced itself from the case and tried to maintain a position of neutrality (Bombardieri, 2014). MIT was accused of not defending Swartz, despite being recognized as "a place that encourages hacking in the bigger sense of the word<sup>7</sup>." The incident led some members of the academic community to take to Twitter, invoking MIT's treatment of Swartz to incite colleagues to decline invitations made by the institution (one such tweet can be seen in Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** An example of a tweet invoking the name of Aaron Swartz when calling for the boycott of invitations from MIT



6. As mentioned by Elliot Peters in Swartz's biopic (41:51).

7. A quote from the legal scholar Lawrence Lessig, who is interviewed in Swartz's biopic (1:07:29).

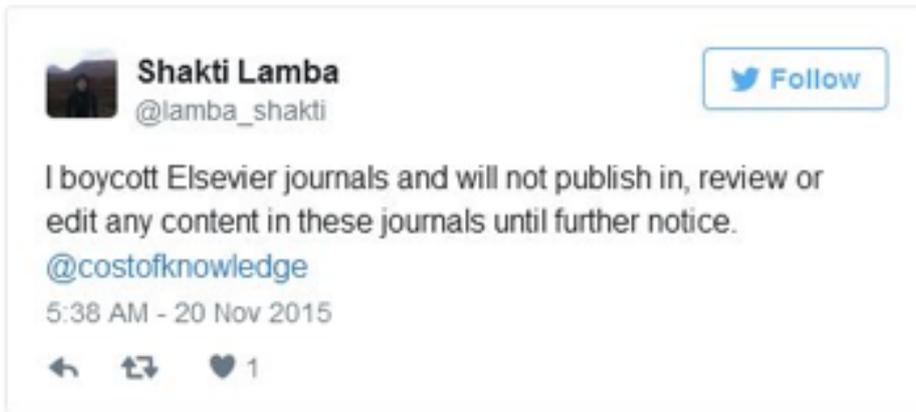
Another example of a call for collective civil disobedience explicitly refers to Swartz's Guerilla Open Access Manifesto. In a letter published on November 30, 2015 a collective of 14 scholars urged academics "to emerge from hiding and put our names behind this act of resistance" (Custodians Online, 2015). This letter was published in reaction to the copyright infringement lawsuit filed by Elsevier in June 2015 against Library Genesis and Sci-Hub, which are both websites used for the unauthorized sharing of research papers (Harmon, 2015). The letter has since been shared and retweeted on Twitter by a number of academics who have endorsed it (a retweet of a link to the letter appears in Figure 5).

**Figure 5.** A collective named Custodians Online published an online letter in which they quote Swartz's Guerilla Open Access Manifesto



Twitter also contains multiple declarations of a boycott directed toward Elsevier (e.g., Figure 6) following the decision by Tilburg University in the Netherlands to boycott the publisher (Wijkhuijs, 2015) and the resignation of the editorial board of the journal *Lingua* in protest over the refusal of the journal's publisher to convert the title to completely open access (Jaschik, 2015).

**Figure 6.** A researcher in human behavioral ecology used Twitter to publicly declare her boycott of Elsevier journals.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

These tweets make tangible and visible actions that are often conducted in the form of behind-the-scenes work that is usually not accessible to people outside these situations (Star & Strauss, 1999). Once released “into the wild,” these short textual traces can spark online conversations (Sergi & Bonneau, 2015). They have the potential to transform an individual opinion, observation or action into a collectively discussed idea.

Of course, the academics who are tweeting about their open-access-related actions are not putting themselves at risk for the cause in the same ways Swartz did. But taken together, all these recurrent forms of micro-resistance contribute something toward the continuation of Aaron Swartz’s mission, and hence pay tribute to his memory.

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## Ten Haiku's on "The Internet's Own Boy"

(1)

Brilliant: Smarter than  
Everyone else in the room  
Means waiting – catch up!

William B. Garner, Copenhagen  
Business School & California  
Lutheran University  
william.b.gartner@gmail.com

(2)

Who gets heard is for  
The gatekeeper's to decide  
Visibility

(3)

Fair use? Whatever  
I do is probably wrong.  
Post my work? Jail time!

(4)

Information is  
Free for those who can pay the  
Price. Access for All?

(5)

Creative Commons  
Greener pastures when access  
Is allowed wisely

(6)

Scholarship: A ship  
Built for curiosity  
Corporation Owned

(7)

Motive Ascertained  
In manifesto missive  
Ambiguous truth

(8)

The lesson of fear  
Is that fear is the lesson  
Speak truth to power

(9)

Numberless are the  
World's wonders... are caught in  
The net of his mind

(10)

Why go on Living?  
You never know how it will  
End until it ends

[www.management-aims.com](http://www.management-aims.com)