

DAILY TROJAN

Online piracy poses little risk to business

Payal Mukerji- January 14, 2013

When 26-year-old computer programmer and political activist Aaron Swartz committed suicide last Friday, news of his death spread across the Internet with the same speed as the viral videos and the applications he had helped to produce.

At the time of his death, he faced unnecessarily harsh felony charges entailing a possible 35-year sentence and a \$1 million fine. His crime? The theft of some scholarly articles from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology JSTOR digital library with the intent to distribute the papers to the public. MIT announced yesterday that they were investigating its role in his death.

The issue of online piracy has incited passionate debate since the creation of the World Wide Web. Aside from the ethical issues of using another person's property without their permission, U.S. Congressmen have recently argued that online piracy is severely detrimental to the American economy and is destructive to individual businesses.

Both of these claims are misleading.

Recent articles have indicated that online piracy has little to no effect on businesses, and that the restriction of free, public information sharing could actually work against the favor of the economy. Moreover, these restrictions stifle creativity, encourage censorship and are a disservice to the budding social entrepreneurs of the 21st century.

The emphasis of the U.S. government on prosecuting and restricting "information-sharers" such as Swartz is unnecessary and ultimately counterproductive. In the past year, Congressional bills such as the Stop Online Piracy Act and Protect Intellectual Property Act, known as SOPA and PIPA, have invoked uproar in the online community because of their intent to restrict and limit the flow of information flow on the Internet, essentially censoring online interactions.

Though neither bill passed, Congress continues to contend that online piracy costs the U.S. economy between \$200 and \$250 billion per year, resulting in a loss of around 750,000 jobs.

If those figures sound too high to be true, it's because they are. Julian Sanchez, a research fellow from the Cato Institute, investigated those claims last year and found they "[could not] be substantiated or traced back to an underlying data source or methodology," suggesting that the U.S. government might have just made them up. In fact, Sanchez argued that it was virtually impossible to measure the effects of online piracy on the economy, because of the variable nature of its economic effects. Any attempt to do so, Sanchez argues, is misleading and most likely exaggerated.

Instead, research suggests that music and entertainment businesses, which are most likely to be affected by online piracy, have done better in recent economic crises than similar businesses in other industries.

Despite this evidence, threats of legal action against illegal downloads continue to escalate. Most common are the pre-movie advertisements that ominously send the message that piracy is a social evil. “Would you steal a purse? Would you steal a car?” the advertisements ask viewers, implying that clicking a button to download a song or a movie is the legal equivalent of petty theft. It’s, of course, not as simple as that.

Unlike the theft of a car, the illegal downloading of a song does not necessarily imply tangible loss or harm to another. Equally compelling is the increasingly obvious truth that online piracy restrictions are difficult to enforce. Illegal downloading has become a norm for the Millennial Generation. We would all be hard-pressed to find someone who hasn’t downloaded something off the Internet without permission.

The openness and anonymity of the Internet has afforded the Millennial Generation enormous advantages, enabling individuals access to music, entertainment, information and community where they otherwise might be deprived.

The resources of the U.S. government could perhaps be better spent by enacting policies that will actually benefit the economy and potential business leaders. Losses caused by piracy are far outweighed by the benefits of a free, unrestricted flow of information. In the case of Swartz, the real loss is the incalculable tragedy of an inspirational and influential talent gone too soon.

As Swartz said, “It’s called stealing or piracy, as if sharing a wealth of knowledge were the moral equivalent of plundering a ship and murdering its crew. But sharing isn’t immoral — it’s a moral imperative. Only those blinded by greed would refuse to let a friend make a copy.”

Tragically, it may indeed have been greed that led the U.S. government to its decisions.