

The Telegraph

Only one person is responsible for Aaron Swartz's death, and that is Aaron Swartz

By Brendan O'Neill – January 25, 2013

In the two weeks since he committed suicide at the tragically young age of 26, American internet activist Aaron Swartz has become a hero among hackers. This young man who was a whizz at web development and who at the time of his death was being investigated by federal prosecutors over his illegal downloading of thousands of documents from an educational website is being memorialised all over the web. The Cato Institute calls him simply: "American Hero". He was a "martyr to openness", says the Toronto Star, depicting his self-inflicted death as a blow against those who are determined to punish hackers simply for liberating information. Swartz is morphing into a "political martyr", says Yahoo!. He's being lionised as a "well-loved and popular cult figure" and as a "Hero and Martyr".

Treating Swartz as a hero is fine, of course. There's nothing wrong with having heroes. In fact we could do with more of them in this deeply cynical era of ours, and Swartz was by all accounts a web genius, helping to develop the RSS system so many of us use when he was a mere 14 years old. But there is a darker, weirder, more problematic side to the idolisation of Aaron Swartz: the belief that he was effectively killed by the American authorities. Among the growing army of Swartzites, it's becoming accepted wisdom that Swartz was, in essence, killed by those prosecutors who were investigating him. Their questions, their pressure, their pursuit apparently left Swartz with no choice but to commit suicide. As one pro-Swartz article graphically puts it, prosecutors "tightened the noose – again and again and again". The USA itself – supposed "land of the free and home of the brave" – "abetted this suicide", says another commentator. One writer pompously tells prosecutors that Swartz's mourners "find you guilty", in a kind of kangaroo court judgement reached by emotional web-users.

"Was Aaron Swartz really killed by the government?", asks Time magazine. His supporters say yes – he was "murdered by intimidation". Prosecutors were "complicit in his death", we are told. Now, there is no question that Swartz was put under pressure by the authorities, as everyone who breaks the law is and ought to be. After he downloaded those educational documents – breaking copyright law in the process – he was charged by prosecutors in Boston with 13 felony counts that could have potentially landed him in jail for 30 years. But to make a leap from criticising the prosecution for being heavy-handed, which it may well have been, to saying that the prosecutors actually helped kill Swartz is bizarre – it robs Swartz of his agency, treating him as an automaton who was programmed to self-destruct by evil people in authority, and it makes prosecutors responsible for something that they couldn't possibly have foreseen, far less desired.

The truth is that only one person is responsible for Aaron Swartz's death, and that is Aaron Swartz. It is reported that he had struggled with depression for a long time, even before this prosecution started; and no matter how desolate and desperate suicides are –

as they so often are – they still make a conscious decision to end their lives; they are still human agents, the authors of their destiny. Turning Swartz from a tragic suicide case into a political martyr who was "murdered by intimidation" is a really low form of politics. The aim is quite explicitly to force the American authorities to rethink their laws against hacking and how they pursue hackers, through effectively saying: "If you carry on with the status quo, more people will die." In place of a serious political argument against apparently unjust laws, campaigners turn dead Swartz into a ventriloquist dummy, a political prop, a moral spectre, a ghost who says: "You killed me – don't kill any more."

The politicisation of suicide is a cowards' game, yet sadly it happens a lot these days. Activists opposed to David Cameron's welfare cuts claim he is pushing the poor and disabled towards suicide, effectively killing them by taking some of their money away. When Jacintha Saldanha, the nurse caught up in the Australian DJs / Kate Middleton hoax phone-call, committed suicide, that was held up by some as hard evidence that low-rent, tabloid-style media outlets can harm individuals and society. There is a strong whiff of moral blackmail in this politicisation of suicide, where the message is in essence "Stop cutting welfare or people will die", or "Stop making prank calls or people will die". Pushing suicides to the forefront of political or moral campaigns takes opportunism to a new, unprecedented low.

It is a terrible idea to change laws or policy in response to isolated suicides. Think about the message this would send out – that the best way to get rid of an injustice or to transform society is to kill yourself and hope that your death will become a rallying cry for change. If we politicise suicide, we can expect to see more so-called political suicides.