Twitter Thread by Patrick Campbell



Patrick Campbell
@Patticus

This isn't what I normally post, but it's a summary of some morning reflections since Monday is the anniversary of @aaronsw's death.

He had a big impact on the world (and me). He's someone you should know.

Here's a tribute.

Aaron was "one of those kids" - he was part of the working group on early RSS at 14, dropped out of Stanford, was in @ycombinator's first summer class, and was part of the early @reddit team.

His life's work was focused on the accessibility and dissemination of knowledge.

Aaron believed public information, scientific research, and the Internet as a whole should be open and accessible to all.

Here's the preamble to his "Guerilla Open Access Manifesto".

He was the definition of mission, even if it meant flying in the grey areas of hactivism.

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Guerilla Open Access Manifesto

Information is power. But like all power, there are those who want to keep it for
themselves. 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. Want to read the papers featuring the most famous results of the
sciences? You'll need to send enormous amounts to publishers like Reed Elsevier.

There are those struggling to change this. The Open Access Movement has fought
valiantly to ensure that scientists do not sign their copyrights away but instead ensure
their work is published on the Internet, under terms that allow anyone to access it. But
even under the best scenarios, their work will only apply to things published in the future.
Everything up until now will have been lost.

That is too high a price to pay. Forcing academics to pay money to read the work of their
colleagues? Scanning entire libraries but only allowing the folks at Google to read them?
Providing scientific articles to those at elite universities in the First World, but not to
children in the Global South? It's outrageous and unacceptable.
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In 2008 he went after PACER, a database of public court documents that charged per page of access even though the documents were public (they made $100M+ per year).

Through a library loophole he downloaded 2.7 million documents and released them to the world.

The FBI investigated, but since they were public documents and he used the free library trial, nothing illegal took place.

PACER still charges to my knowledge, but @binarybits continued the mission with a browser extension that gives free access through the @FreeLawProject

Aaron co-founded @demandprogress to battle corruption and protect civil liberties, always believing that knowledge and explanation (with a little hacktivism) could make the world a better place.

He was a central organizer in stopping the SOPA legislation, which....

While hopefully well-intentioned to combat privacy, SOPA was so broad it gave the govt unprecedented powers to censor the internet.

He sat on @Wikimedia's board of trustees, helped create @SecureDrop for whistle blowers, and VictoryKit for organizing social change campaigns.

He always provided pushback on walls in front of knowledge.

He sparked many missions of openness and many other actors were a part of the movement, although as Sci Hub found recently, the movement has many skirmishes.

Snark courtesy of @conaw:

https://t.co/O3WzoZ5tAh

> Love to see big tech living their values. https://t.co/NdyKzZMYlh
>
> — Conor White-Sullivan \U000100cf\U0001f1fa\U0001f1f8 (@Conaw) January 8, 2021

I mention all this first, because his life's work was so much more than the event that lead to his suicide.

That event - he wrote a program that pulled research papers from JSTOR in accordance with their terms of service using his laptop and MIT's open internet and open campus.

I'm specific in how I describe his actions, because while not exactly what JSTOR intended, he didn't commit a felony, let alone 13 felony counts with up to 50 years in prison.

JSTOR asked for prosecution to be dropped, but US Attorney Carmen Ortiz kept going, even though...

She conceded after his suicide, prosecutors didn't have enough to show he acted for personal gain (big piece for the charges), nor that evidence supported the harshest penalties.

Lack of evidence sure didn't stop her from threatening the harshest penalties for a plea though.

I can't sum the lesson from this overzealous prosecution better than @lessig....

"Somehow, we need to get beyond the 'I'm right so I'm right to nuke you' ethics that dominates our time.

That begins with one word: Shame.

One word, and endless tears."

This dark anniversary I'm here with my own tears somehow sparked by the death of someone who was the equivalent of a "meetup friend".

The only explanation I have is that this person, while certainly not perfect, was the one person I've met (or at least idealized) who is the...

complete embodiment of truth and openness.

In an era where truth has jumped from that which frees us then to a four letter word then to an amorphous concept, we need more of the pursuit of truth, not less.

We keep forgetting...

Truth and openness shouldn't be a weapon or a liability for getting dunked on, because only with openness can we pursue truth, which is rarely binary.

Our world is too big and our problems too large for truth to be binary and our knowledge to be closed.

...anyways....

Please remember people like Aaron exist. You don't have to agree with everything he did. Just know his ideals are important.

We should try to be more like the best of him, especially when we appear to be standing on the heads of many pins, a whisper from falling into chaos.

To learn more about Aaron, his missions, and the people who've taken up his banner, check out https://t.co/B997tlxcLP

Have a great weekend and here's a poem from @timberners_lee

https://t.co/uO5wvbCIbt