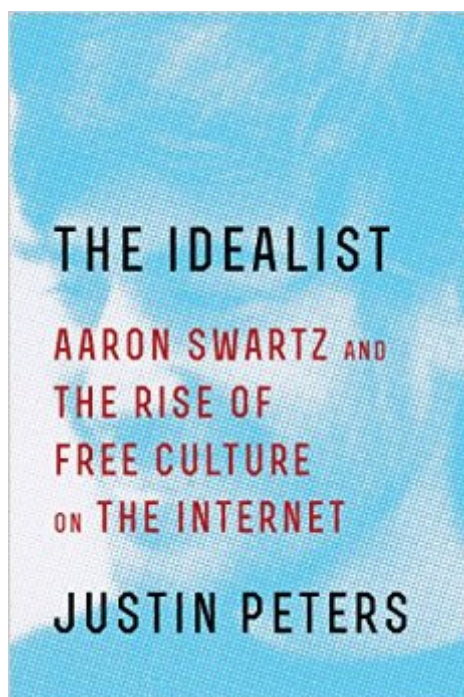


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# The Idealist: Aaron Swartz And The Rise Of Free Culture On The Internet



## Synopsis

A smart, lively history of the Internet free culture movement and its larger effects on society—and the life and shocking suicide of Aaron Swartz, a founding developer of Reddit and Creative Commons—from Slate correspondent Justin Peters. Aaron Swartz was a zealous young advocate for the free exchange of information and creative content online. He committed suicide in 2013 after being indicted by the government for illegally downloading millions of academic articles from a nonprofit online database. From the age of fifteen, when Swartz, a computer prodigy, worked with Lawrence Lessig to launch Creative Commons, to his years as a fighter for copyright reform and open information, to his work leading the protests against the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA), to his posthumous status as a cultural icon, Swartz's life was inextricably connected to the free culture movement. Now Justin Peters examines Swartz's life in the context of 200 years of struggle over the control of information. In vivid, accessible prose, *The Idealist* situates Swartz in the context of other "data moralists" past and present, from lexicographer Noah Webster to ebook pioneer Michael Hart to NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden. In the process, the book explores the history of copyright statutes and the public domain; examines archivists' ongoing quest to build the "library of the future"; and charts the rise of open access, copyleft, and other ideologies that have come to challenge protectionist IP policies. Peters also breaks down the government's case against Swartz and explains how we reached the point where federally funded academic research came to be considered private property, and downloading that material in bulk came to be considered a federal crime. *The Idealist* is an important investigation of the fate of the digital commons in an increasingly corporatized Internet, and an essential look at the impact of the free culture movement on our daily lives and on generations to come.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I purchased *The Idealist* at a book reading by the author (who, full disclosure, is a friend of mine from high school) knowing nothing about copyright law and next to nothing about Aaron Swartz. For a book about what I previously considered to be an arcane subject and a person whose story was, to me, just another fleeting headline, I was shocked by just how quickly and completely this book enveloped me. Peter's deft writing style and expertly applied wit not only held my attention, but pulled me into a fascinating world I otherwise would have known nothing about. (And yes, I realize you probably think I'm just giving my old friend a good review because we used to dress up in tights and sing Christmas songs together 20 years ago, but what can I say, I really liked this book, so I guess you'll just have to trust me) *The Idealist* tells the history of copyright from the 15th Century to modern day, using Swartz's life to explore issues of power, access, freedom, and morality that have only become more pressing in our digital age. Beyond a biography, *The Idealist* tells the story of Aaron Swartz in the larger context of a centuries old battle between those who want to charge for information and those who want it to be free; entrenched interests who want to hang onto the past and technologists who want to drive disruptive change. Peter provides the facts and walks you through the story, introducing you to a cast of inspiring - sometimes tragic and sometimes comical - characters along the way, including geniuses, misanthropes, "animals" and of course, idealists.

I'd heard the story of Aaron Swartz in the hustle and bustle of technology blogs posting about the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA). Even after that news story wound down, there was plenty of focus on Swartz and his alleged copyright violating download of documents from JSTOR. A decade ago, I could imagine a younger me being outraged over the insinuation that he'd done anything illegal or immoral. Now I'm much more in the grey area of the illegal and leaning toward doubting the immorality of his activist rebellion. What this book does is not tread through the same A to Z on Swartz's mass downloading, but to put his actions in the context of the increasing and growing scope of Copyright law that seems to surpass the logical protection afforded to inventors and

creators. Popular culture and modern news largely ignore this broadening of power and rights, but when they even deign to explore the issue, they tend to take the easy path and lay the blame at the feet of Disney wanting to keep Mickey Mouse out of the public domain. There is so much more to blame than The Mouse. What Justin Peters does is bring us from Gutenberg, through Edison Wax Recordings and on to ebooks and blu-ray rips to show just how this snowball has grown into a mountain of obstructionist law. The book pulls the curtain back on the loopholes and avalanche of law that helps line the pockets of multinational companies. And yet, Peters doesn't seek to exonerate Swartz, but to provide some context to the story that gets lost when we only focus on the recent history of copyright law and ignore 300 plus years of growing protections. In the end, I don't know that I even agree with Swartz's actions. If pressed, I'd probably say that he was a bit reckless and probably should not have done what he did.

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