Aaron Swartz hanged himself in his apartment in Brooklyn on January 11th. He was twenty-six, but he had been well known as a computer programmer for many years. At the age of fourteen, he helped to develop the RSS software that enables the syndication of information over the Internet. At fifteen, he e-mailed one of the leading theorists of Internet law, Lawrence Lessig, and helped to write the code for Lessig’s Creative Commons, which, by writing alternatives to standard copyright licenses, allows people to share their work more freely. At nineteen, he was a developer of Reddit, one of the world’s most widely used social-networking news sites.

After Reddit was sold, to Condé Nast, he turned away from money-making start-ups and became a political activist. He spoke often at technology conferences and activist gatherings, and was admired in both those worlds. Since his death, he has become a hero to programmers who have not turned away from money but wish they had, and to those who believe that governments are crushing what was once the freedom of the Internet. When Anonymous hacked the State Department Web site on February 17th, they declared, “Aaron Swartz this is for you.”

Two years ago, he was indicted on multiple felony counts for downloading several million articles from the academic database JSTOR. It is not clear why he did this. He may have wanted to analyze the articles, or he may have intended to