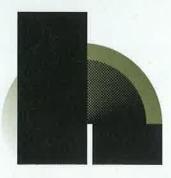▶ Indicted hacker Aaron Swartz photographed in 2008 by his then-girlfriend, Quinn Norton.

Hacker

THERE IS NO SOLACE for the loss of the brilliant 26-year-old coder and activist Aaron Swartz, who killed himself in January under the shadow of a relentless federal prosecution. (His alleged crime involved copying academic articles.) But the outpouring of grief after his death—and the firestorm that erupted over the circumstances—

signal a profound change. Hackers are no longer dismissed as masked figures of the underground, or even as obsessive programmers. Swartz has become emblematic of a new hacker ethic—a political and philosophical force that corrects the misalignment of our laws, regulations, and thinking.

To the first hackers of the 1950s, freedom of information was as essential as breathing. Early coders went to great lengths to access rare and closely guarded computers and shared what they learned. Few viewed the practice in a political light. Meanwhile, the media portrayed hackers as teenage trespassers (think *War-Games*). By the late 1980s, *hacker*, once a sobriquet of distinction, connoted thievery, destruction, and threat.

Swartz was barely out of diapers when those battle lines were drawn. While researching my book *Hackers*, I learned that precociousness has long been a part of the profile. When I met Swartz, I quickly identified him as one of those prodigies. I now realize that he augured something more significant.

Swartz displayed the classic hacker impulse to fix any flaw he saw in the world around him, whether a broken gadget or a broken law. In previous eras, most would have exercised those impulses in service of personal or professional projects. Swartz applied those values to reforming The System: He worked on copy-

right issues with Creative Commons, helped to build Reddit, liberated publicly owned court documents (an act that got him on the FBI's radar), and led the fight against the Stop Online Piracy Act. All along, he made his case in passionately argued journal articles, charming blog posts, and stem-winding manifestos.

But the greater impact of Swartz's legacy may be how it signifies the mainstreaming of the hacker ethic. We now speak of hacking as a way of life, a gleeful corrective to any mired process: hacking airline bookings, Ikea furniture, and even the government to the benefit of all citizenry. Whether or not we code, we all have a bit of the hacker in us now.

Swartz stuck out his neck to correct what he saw as excessive doctrine—laws that kept us back rather than moving us forward. He was a leader of a growing effort destined to shape our future, and his loss will only inspire that movement. Swartz's views will prove to be on the right side of history. He was Our Hacker. And we will have many more. —STEVEN LEVY