President's Message

Dear Members

CSI has just completed its Annual Elections, for different positions for the terms 2013-14 and 2013-15. I would like to congratulate the Chair and Members of the CSI Nominations Committee (2012-13), who have completed their task successfully, smoothly, and on time. I would like to congratulate everyone who participated in the elections, and would like to welcome the winners to the national ExeCom, and remind them that they have assumed a position of responsibility in the leadership of the Society that they need to deliver on.

I am also happy to note that all the Constitutional amendments proposed by the Committee set up for this purpose and approved by the ExeCom have also been passed by the members through balloting. I'd like to place on record the work done by Shri Lalit Sawhney, past-President and Chair of the Constitutional Amendment Committee set up in 2011-12, who has been working on this for more than a year. I hope that these amendments will lead to even more effective functioning of the Society.

One of the most significant events in the technology space last month was a death of a 26-year programmer, writer, and Internet activist. In this message, I would like to touch upon the tragic legacy of Aaron Swartz.

In January 2011, Swartz was arrested by the police and charged with 13 counts including wire fraud and theft of information, charges that could have got him up to 35 years in prison. There was general agreement that the charges were hugely disproportionate to what he had done, in particular because both MIT and JSTOR not only wanted to settle the issue out of Court, but JSTOR even changed their policies, opening a part of its archive for public access as argued by Swartz.

The adamant position of the prosecutors, and reportedly to a certain extent of MIT, to seek the maximum punishment in the case, even though these were clearly disproportional to the magnitude of the offence, led Swartz to end his own life on 11 January 2013. Immediately after his death, the prosecutors dismissed all charges against Swartz.

Swartz was a gifted programmer, who, in his short life, contributed more to the transformation of the Internet than most eminent engineers in a lifetime. Born in Chicago, Swartz dedicated himself to the study of computers, programming, the Internet, and Internet culture. At age 13, he won the ArsDigita Prize, a competition for young people who create “useful, educational, and collaborative” noncommercial websites, and had an opportunity to visit eminent Internet engineers and scientists at MIT through this prize. At the age of 14, Swartz contributed to the creation of the RSS 1.0 standard, the XML-based format, later versions of which are widely used today.

Later, he attended Stanford, but left after a year and founded the company Infogami, funded by YCombinator, a well-known venture funder. Through a suggestion from YCombinator, Infogami merged with another start-up, Reddit, in 2005. Although Reddit initially struggled for survival, it was shortly thereafter acquired by Condé Nast Publications, the owners of Wired magazine. Reddit is today one of the most popular sites on the Internet, visited by millions of users every day, and a originator of a large number of artifacts of the Internet Culture.

Swartz was a fierce advocate of freedom of, and open access to, information. He was a vocal opponent of Governmental controls over the Internet. For instance, he was against the policies of the popular digital library/archive of academic journals, JSTOR, of rewarding publishers rather than writers. This prompted Swartz to use skills programming skills to create a Python script that downloaded and published 4.8 million pages through the MIT Library system, despite efforts by MIT Library to block him (Swartz was a researcher at MIT). In a similar fashion, he had earlier ‘liberated’ 19.9 million pages of the Federal records and posted them to the cloud for public access.

Swartz’s tragic legacy will continue to impact the discourse for some time to come. He has been an early pioneer for a futuristic cause that many identify with. Let’s hope the world of tomorrow—of which the Internet and cyber world would be an integral component—is more receptive to the creative, if counterintuitive, ideas of thinkers like Aaron Swartz.

With greetings

Jai Hind!

Satish Babu
President