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Richard Stallman's Exit Heralds a New Era in Tech

Accused of minimizing the harms from sexual assault and child sex slavery, the free-software icon has been banished. Now begins the hard work of making tech welcoming and inclusive.

PHOTOGRAPH: ALLAN BAXTER/GETTY IMAGES

What happens to a dream deferred?

Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?
—Langston Hughes, "Harlem"

Richard Stallman, the 66-year-old programmer and animating spirit behind the free-software movement, was underlined this week. He was told to leave the MIT offices he worked from, and sometimes slept in, for decades. He was removed as president of the Free Software Foundation, an organization he founded in 1985.

The moves were in response to Stallman's objectionable comments on the Jeffrey Epstein case posted to an MIT email list, which confirmed a new reality: Minimizing the harms from sexual assault, sex slavery, and sex with children is simply beyond the pale. But more than this one man's story, Stallman's banishment can be seen as a first reckoning for so many dreams deferred, as Langston Hughes delicately describes lives thwarted before full bloom.

Stallman is typically called eccentric or strange or, more frequently—and by the MacArthur Foundation, no less!—a genius. But the occasional WIRED contributor was, most significantly, accused of being a formidable impediment to the careers of women interested in the free-software movement and computer science more generally.

The testimony was all there on Twitter to read. Christine Corbett Moran, a technical group supervisor at NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab, wrote of meeting Stallman in her first year at MIT at a hacker conference—he's a legend, he's a hero. She's 19. She is

She says no. He moves on. (Stallman did not respond to requests for comment.)

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Also on Twitter, Star Simpson recalls taking a walk on the MIT campus with an upperclassman, who points out all the foliage in one woman professor's office and tells her that women in computer science keep plants because, as the rumor went, Stallman hates them. "I am still struck by the idea that all of the professors in the lab would keep special charms and amulets to ward off a specific person," she writes. "If nothing else, this is an incredible illustration of the lack of functional recourse that professional women there previously had." A message is sent: No one in power is going to protect you. If you want to survive, you're on your own. Better get creative.

So much of life is about girding oneself against disappointment and adversity, but must those lessons begin freshman year at MIT?

Most of the testimony against Stallman is from women who opted out of the free-software movement but stayed in tech, even though the sensible decision upon meeting Stallman and his enablers may well have been to leave the field entirely. When news leaked out Monday night of Stallman's punishments, there was an explosion of joy, rage, disbelief and "what now?" frenzy on Twitter. Many of his critics expressed precisely the same message: Now begins the hard work of making the free-software movement welcoming and inclusive.

Hardly a household name, Stallman is the stuff of myth among male techies—a John Henry who single-handedly tried to beat Big Tech at its own game, with a touch of Robin Hood thrown in. He was seen as a freedom fighter on behalf of the little people being surveilled, overcharged, and disempowered.

Back in the 1980s, Stallman was a researcher at MIT angered at the thought of the public's being at the mercy of big companies and their hegemonic proprietary

world giving talks about this dream, and along the way he met a young undergraduate in Finland in 1991—Linus Torvalds—who took up the cause and created Linux, which keeps the tech giants' computers operating without onerous licensing fees.

During his work on the operating system that would become Linux—which Stallman insists be called GNU/Linux to acknowledge the part he worked on—Stallman devised an ingenious licensing system, which has come to be known as copyleft. (GNU is, of course, a recursive acronym that stands for GNU's not Unix.) A copyleft license shares code with anyone who wants to use it under the condition that any additions to the code likewise be shared with further recipients. Wikipedia, among other things, operates that way—you contribute to Wikipedia, you are sharing with everyone.

Stallman has been a singular figure in geek culture for nearly four decades, dubbed "the last of the true hackers" by Steven Levy in his 1984 book *Hackers*, and more recently lionized by the likes of xkcd, the Randall Munroe comic strip beloved by the programming class.

Stallman is a recurring character in xkcd, a swashbuckling foe of the Microsoft, drawn as a beard attached to a stick figure, scabbard at his side. He speaks heroically: "Cease this affront to freedom or stand and defend yourselves." And, notably, the Stallman of xkcd has no problem with women, and women have no problem with him. In one case, he encounters a talented programmer and invites her to join the movement— unlikely, given Stallman's treatment of women face-to-face; in another strip, a woman programmer is said to have a picture of Stallman next to her desk.

In one fanciful strip, which imagines the world ending in 2050, the caption reads: "One of the survivors, poking around in the ruins with the point of a spear, uncovers a singed photo of Richard Stallman. They stare in silence. 'This,' one of them finally says, 'This is a man who BELIEVED in something.' "

Stallman becomes an inspiration for the great man myth of Silicon Valley, the brilliant programmer who codes to change the world. He battles the status quo and the stupid —usually one in the same. He is invariably misunderstood and harshly judged by those who fear his powers. Later, he becomes so enthralled by his vision that he excuses—

the brilliant young man who dreamed of connecting the world and instead made everyone isolated and angry—very different? Is Sergey Brin or Larry Page?

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I first spent time with Stallman a decade ago, in Buenos Aires, where I was covering Wikipedia's global meetup for *The New York Times.* He was invited to speak there, though he made clear that his project doesn't adhere to Wikipedia's more decentralized anyone-can-edit, no-one-is-in-charge philosophy.

"The way free software works is, I may write a program, and I will put my version in a site, and I might then let some other people work on it with me, but I'll decide who can work on it," he <u>told me</u>. "I'm not going to let just any unknown person install changes in my version. But you, once you download a copy, you are free to distribute copies, you can make changes, you can post your version wherever you want. And then you control your version. And then they could use my version or they cooperate with me, or they could use your version and cooperate with you or make their own versions and post them. So every user has freedom. But every version that is being distributed is under the control of some group."

The accounts from women about the pall that Stallman cast at MIT first appeared on Twitter a year ago—the reason then was <u>a call to remove a joke he made about abortion</u> in the official manual for the project he runs. When the <u>manual describes</u> the "abort function," Stallman inserted a note about how federal regulations might change how the project deals with "aborting." Not a particularly funny joke, and certainly not useful. The addition, which dates to the 1990s, represents another example of Stallman trampling personal boundaries. Those who removed the joke said they didn't believe women should have to navigate Stallman's thoughts about abortion while reading a coding guide.

Stallman <u>was insistent</u> that he would not withdraw the joke: "On this particular question, I made a decision long ago and stated it where all of you could see it. If you

This is a lesson we are fast learning about freedom as it promoted by the tech world. It is not about ensuring that everyone can express their views and feelings. Freedom, in this telling, is about exclusion. The freedom to drive others away. And, until recently, freedom from consequences.

After 40 years of excluding those who didn't serve his purposes, however, Stallman finds himself excluded by his peers. Freedom.

Maybe freedom, defined in this crude, top-down way, isn't the be-all, end-all. Creating a vibrant inclusive community, it turns out, is as important to a software project as a coding breakthrough. Or, to put it in more familiar terms—driving away women, investing your hopes in a single, unassailable leader is a critical bug. The best patch will be to start a movement that is respectful, inclusive, and democratic.

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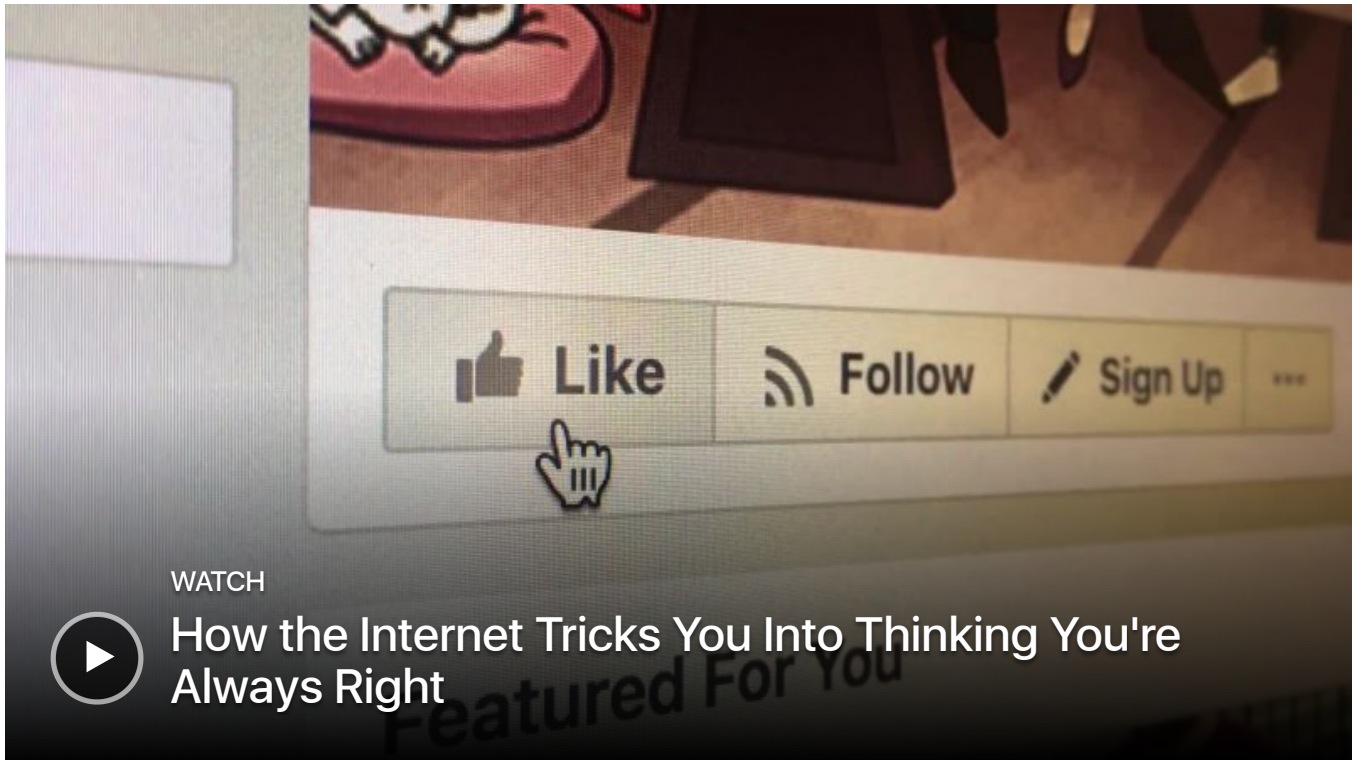
Noam Cohen is a journalist and author of *The Know-It-Alls: The Rise of Silicon Valley as a Political Powerhouse and Social Wrecking Ball,* which uses the history of computer science and Stanford University to understand the libertarian ideas promoted by tech leaders. While working for *The New York Times,* Cohen... Read more

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