



STEVEN LEVY

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# Richard Stallman and the Fall of the Clueless Nerd

The controversial pioneer of free software resigned from MIT over his remarks on Jeffrey Epstein and Marvin Minsky. Stallman won't be the last.



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A few days ago I got a tweet directed to me:

*If I find another copy of the Blue Cover version of Hackers could I get you to autograph it again? The one I currently have was signed by you and Richard Stallman at LinuxWorld in 1999, and I'm afraid I'm going to have to burn or shred it.*

This requires some decoding: Thirty-five years ago I wrote a book called *Hackers*. The last section centered on a hugely odd young man who considered himself the lone

RMS (his email handle), later achieved fame in the digital realm as the champion of free software. Last week Stallman (who has in the past written for WIRED) penned some comments related to the Jeffrey Epstein case that implied sex with young women was not “sexual assault.” A deep dive into his archive revealed some questionable comments about pedophilia. Now Stallman is a pariah, even to former fanboys who find themselves flinging books into the flames to immolate his signature.

Yesterday RMS resigned from MIT and the Free Software Foundation he founded. For those who have followed his free-software movement, Stallman leaving MIT is like the big dome on Massachusetts Avenue itself getting an eviction notice. But after decades of tone-deaf comportment and complaints now emerging from women about his behavior, Stallman’s time was up.

The moment goes beyond Stallman, a MacArthur “genius” grant recipient and author of key pieces of the open source software that basically runs our world these days. MIT itself is melting down because of Epstein, the now deceased serial rapist who insinuated himself into the Media Lab with his money and what its leaders considered his charm. The lab’s director, Joi Ito (who was a contributing writer to WIRED), resigned under pressure, and now people are calling for the ouster of MIT’s president, who apparently OK’d the payments. But the Stallman affair touches on something else: a simmering resentment about the treatment of women by the scruffy brainiacs who built our digital world, as well as the Brahmins of academia and business who benefited from the hackers’ effort. With the Epstein revelations that resentment has boiled over.

Stallman put himself in the path of that outrage by contributing to a CSAIL mail thread defending the late artificial intelligence guru Marvin Minsky. (The acronym stands for the MIT Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Lab.) In a deposition, one of Epstein’s victims says he instructed her to have sex with Minsky. Stallman reacted in a way that anyone who knew him would not be surprised to see. Instead of considering the pain of a young person treated in such a manner, he nitpicked about whether such a case would be a proper instance of “sexual assault,” since the young woman, he reasoned, would have seemed to be presenting herself to Minsky willingly. (It is far from resolved whether Minsky had sex with the woman.) In the email thread there is



someone to send it to him.

Stallman showed a similar blindness more than 10 years ago with idiotic comments on pedophilia, opining that 14-year-old girls have free will and therefore may not be victims of older men who have sex with them. More recently he recanted, saying that people took pains to explain to him that girls actually suffer harm from those interactions, and that his mind was changed. He did not respond to requests for comment by the time of this article's publication.

Stallman's foibles are legend in the computer science world. People who never met him know about his quirks. There are many. When he travels to give speeches, he likes to stay with hosts rather than at hotels. A few years ago, a list of instructions emerged for those lucky hosts. It made the Rolling Stones look easy to please. He specifies, for example, that he likes parrots and would love to interact with a friendly parrot, but he hoped his hosts would not feel obliged to therefore buy a parrot just for his visit.

Generally, the word *inappropriate* doesn't seem to be in his vocabulary. He once invited a friend of mine to lunch at a fancy restaurant, and she accepted, on the condition that he comb his hair and wear suitable attire. After a pleasant meal, he asked her if she minded if he danced. (Stallman is famously a lover of folk dancing.) "Go ahead," she said, and he pranced around the tables, solo, in high-stepping glee, oblivious to the discomfort of diners.

That same obliviousness probably led to jokes in bad taste on email lists, and the scrawled name card on this door at MIT, where he was until yesterday a Visiting Scientist. "Richard Stallman," it read, in black Sharpie, "Knight for Justice (Also: Hot Ladies)."

That name card is an image in the recent Medium post of MIT alumnus Selam Jie Gano, in which she demanded that he be tossed off the campus. Her essay is an example of the raised voices of women at MIT in the post-Epstein era, and maybe even in the tech world at large. "There is no single person that is so deserving of praise their comments deprecating others should be allowed to slide," she wrote.



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If the question was *When does obliviousness become inexcusable?* Selam Jie Gano had an answer. Now. Especially when it goes hand in hand with a culture where, for decades, casual sexism has not been called out. Last week MIT graduate [danah boyd](#), accepting a well-deserved award from the Electronic Frontier Foundation, [unloaded](#) on her alma mater, citing years of sexual harassment, including an inappropriate comment from Minsky. The outrage is real and justified. This is the moment for amends.

And it's certainly a terrible moment for Richard Stallman to dismiss the pain of sexual abuse by way of a semantic argument.

Stallman keeps a running log of "[political notes](#)"—things that catch his interest, where he'll post a link and often a comment. (That was the source of his earlier remarks on pedophilia.) On Monday, between entries on the Sacklers' financial dealings and climate change, he slipped in a personal comment that ended an era, in many ways: "I am resigning effective immediately from my position in CSAIL at MIT. I am doing this due to pressure on MIT and me over a series of misunderstandings and mischaracterizations." Later, the Free Software Foundation announced that its founder and president had resigned from that as well.

There are tragic threads to this Stallman story. His inability to understand the hurt that comes from insensitivity led to his expulsion from the world he knew and loved. I worry what will happen next for him. But the greater tragedy is how long it took for such behavior to become disqualifying. While Stallman is uniquely Stallman, he was also a representative of a culture that failed to welcome the women who could have led hacking, and computing, to even greater heights. Stallman is now more alone than I found him 35 years ago. But do not call him the last of his kind. More will fall as the reckoning continues.

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[Steven Levy](#) covers the gamut of tech subjects for WIRED, in print and online, and has been contributing to the magazine since its inception. He has been writing about technology for more than 30 years, writing columns for Rolling Stone and Macworld; leading technology coverage for Newsweek; and cocreating a... [Read more](#)

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