

President Reif writes to MIT community regarding release of documents related to Aaron Swartz case

March 19, 2013

This morning, MIT President L. Rafael Reif emailed the following message to the MIT community.

To the members of the MIT Community:

I am writing to explain an important step that MIT has decided to take relating to the Aaron Swartz situation. Since this action affects members of our community, directly or indirectly, I want you to hear about it from me.

On Friday, the lawyers for Aaron Swartz's estate filed a legal request with the Boston federal court where the Swartz case would have gone to trial. They demanded that the court release to the public information related to the case, including many MIT documents. Some of these documents contain information about vulnerabilities in MIT's network. Some contain the names of individual MIT employees involved. In fact, the lawyers' request argues that those names cannot be excluded ("redacted") from the documents and urges that they be released in the public domain and delivered to Congress.

At MIT, we believe in openness, and we are not afraid to reexamine our own actions; indeed, it was with those values in mind that I asked Professor Hal Abelson to undertake his analysis following Aaron Swartz's tragic suicide. But I believe that openness must be balanced with reasonable concern for privacy and safety. That is especially true in this situation. In the time since Aaron Swartz's suicide, we have seen a pattern of harassment and personal threats. In this volatile atmosphere, I have the responsibility to protect the privacy and safety of those members of our community who have become involved in this matter in the course of doing their jobs for MIT, and to ensure a safe environment for all of us who call MIT home.

Therefore — in the spirit of openness, balanced with responsibility — we will release the requested MIT documents, redacting employee names and identifying information as appropriate to protect their privacy, as well as redacting information about network vulnerabilities. We will release these documents at the same time that we release Professor Abelson's report. In this way, our own community and those outside can examine both these primary documents and Professor Abelson's analysis, which he is now forming through a careful process that includes a review of this written material as well as extensive in-person interviews.

I am eager to receive his report; I am sure that many of you are, as well. But I trust Professor Abelson to take the time he needs to complete a thorough analysis. In the meantime — because this is being played out in public — I wanted you to know what I am thinking and doing, and why.

Sincerely,
Rafael Reif

