McGill attempts to bar student journalists from ATI requests

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MONTREAL (CUP) — McGill University has filed a motion that would grant it the ability to deny access to information (ATI) requests from The McGill Daily, The Link, the website McGillLeaked and any known associates of these organizations, among others, in response to what the university is describing as a "complex system of repetitive and abusive requests." Future requests could also be denied if they were found to be "excessively broad," "frivolous" or if they target "trivial documents and information."

According to the Canadian Access to Information Act, publicly-funded, government-run institutions and universities are required to release certain documents to the public when officially requested.

The McGill Daily reported on Jan. 12 that the university had filed a motion to the Commission of Access to Information, the provincial body which oversees access to information requests, claiming that the ATI requests were set up "as a retaliation measure against McGill in the aftermath of the 2001-2002 student protests."

The motions, which names 14 respondents, seeks the authority to disregard "irrelevant" information requests and any future requests made by the respondents or any persons who can be linked to them, essentially barring the individuals named from ever submitting ATI requests to McGill.

It also seeks the right to deny future requests on a variety of subjects, including military research requests and "requests that intrude into the privacy of individuals." McGill currently has filed over 60 ATI requests for information.

"We did not submit them together, we did not add some part of some requests through access to information requests, so the fact that they were all submitted at the same time does not give McGill University the right to deny both the requests made by The McGill Daily and McGillLeaked," said the spokesperson for the McGill student newspaper.

"We do not think that this is in accordance with the law, because these requests are legitimate, and we do not think that this is a case of abuse of the law."

"But it seems that McGill University is trying to use this as a tool to prevent us from publishing certain information that we think is important for the public."

"We are concerned about this situation, and we believe that McGill University is violating the Access to Information Act, which is meant to ensure the public's right to know."

"We are considering legal action to challenge this motion, and we urge McGill University to withdraw it in order to respect the public's right to access information."