

MIT RELEASES ITS OWN SWARTZ INVESTIGATION AFTER STALLING RELEASE OF SECRET SERVICE'S

MIT has just released its report on the university's role in the investigation into Aaron Swartz.

Part of it explains how the Secret Service came to be involved in the investigation.

The MIT Police decided that the situation required expertise in computer crime and forensics, which they did not have. They therefore telephoned the Cambridge Police Department detective who is their normal contact for assistance with computer-related crime activity.¹⁹ The Cambridge detective they contacted was a member of the New England Electronic Crimes Task Force.²⁰ When he received the call for assistance from the MIT Police, the detective was working at the Task Force field office in a federal building in Boston, together with other law enforcement officers whose agencies participate in the Task Force. He responded to the call, accompanied by two other Task Force members: a special agent²¹ of the U.S. Secret Service; and a detective from the Boston Police Department. They arrived at the Building 16 closet around 11:00 a.m.

We note that no one from MIT called the Secret Service. The MIT Police contacted the Cambridge detective by calling him on his individual cell phone. The special agent became involved because he accompanied the Cambridge detective. As

a Task Force member, the detective would sometimes respond to calls alone, and sometimes respond in the company of other members of the Task Force. The MIT Police were aware that other members of the Task Force might accompany the detective, and that Task Force members included Secret Service agents.

[snip]

During the morning's activities in the basement closet, the special agent had asked for whatever electronic records MIT might have on the matter. As it is IS&T's protocol to obtain approval from MIT's Office of the General Counsel (OGC) before releasing information or materials to outside law enforcement agencies, IS&T contacted the OGC, which responded that it was appropriate to comply with the agent's request in view of the fact that law enforcement was conducting an investigation into what was potentially ongoing criminal activity of unknown scope, and it did not appear to OGC that such information would disclose personally identifiable information.

The report also provides this far less convincing description of how an MIT cop just happened to see Swartz close to his home and the Secret Service Agent just happened to be present at the time.

At approximately 2:00 p.m. an MIT Police officer was driving to the Stata garage after his shift in an unmarked police cruiser. He was familiar with the investigation and had been informed by radio that the laptop had been removed from the basement closet. He had seen the January 4 video of the suspect, as well as stills made from the video, and he had a still with him in his cruiser. On Vassar Street, near Massachusetts

Avenue, he saw a cyclist pass him heading in the opposite direction. Based upon the stills and video, and given the backpack and clothes the cyclist was wearing, the officer observed that the cyclist matched the description of the suspect from the basement closet. He made a U-turn to follow the cyclist, who turned onto Massachusetts Avenue and proceeded north towards Harvard Square. When the officer reached the cyclist and pulled alongside, he rechecked the still photos that he had in his car and concluded that the cyclist was in fact the person in the photos. He immediately called his department for backup. A second MIT Police officer, accompanied by the special agent, responded by car from the MIT Police station.

This may well be how the federal investigation into Aaron Swartz started and how it happened that the Secret Service immediately took the lead.

But I do find the timing of MIT's report release rather interesting. After all, just 12 days ago, they successfully moved to prevent the imminent disclosure of the Secret Service's own reports on the investigation to Wired's Kevin Poulsen.