

Why access to government records matters

Heather Anne Wakeling Lister - June 2026

I am extremely careful when researching background information concerning articles. Like many others, much information is gleaned via the internet, yet even with my mind in full-skeptic mode, I was very nearly taken in as accepting as truth what was masquerading as a 'breaking news' broadcast.

But, then again, I checked, as false information disguised as 'news' has become a major source of concern for me, both as a citizen, and a freelance writer. For in order to publish truthful news reports, journalists must have access to all types of records to discern credibility and ensure fact checking.

Particularly troubling are 'news' broadcasts that address issues of vital importance regarding current Canadian - American relations. Decades of integration that have for the most part, benefited both nations, is rapidly morphing in significant ways affecting all aspects of trade and commerce.

American dictates, erratic, unpredictable, are not only destabilizing general populations of the U.S. and Canada, but those living within many of our global-neighbouring, legal, sovereign countries.

Factual and accurate news reporting is for me, of vital importance, as many of us are running on the proverbial Ferris-wheel, doing our best to keep the basics in hand. Far too busy to see the whole picture. My father used to say this purposeful scarcity created between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' is deliberate, and that relying on the democratic right of free speech won't always equate to being truthfully informed.

And when journalists are banned from important community-related public forums, or when public policy is based on secrecy and omission of factual background information and financial connections that avert the full story from the public ear, I worry. Because if one cannot make an informed decision based on what is actual fact, it becomes impossible to envision equitable social constructs.

Conversations that are fact checked remain a vital porthole when releasing reliable and truthful information through various forms of media, and it is becoming increasingly concerning that access to background factual information previously gleaned through the Freedom of Information Act is being tightened, eroded in many cases. I understand that the Ontario Conservative government recently passed significant, controversial changes to the act in April, thereby reducing access previously allowed through the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA). Meaning that premier, cabinet ministers, and their political staff are exempt from disclosing emails, texts, and other records. These changes, passed in the 2026 budget, are said to be retroactive to 1988 and will no doubt restrict public access to high-level decision-making, in addition to doubling the response time for Freedom of Information requests to 45 business days, which now can also be released in increments over an unspecified amount of time.

This is problematic, when reporting on valid, current issues that effect community and public policy, funded by tax dollars, journalists will soon find that the overruling and reversal of a court ruling that required the premier to begin to release government-related phone records a barrier to speaking truth to the citizen population. Simply because not all information that is necessary in order to report in an accurate manner is effectively excluded.

Then there are the secondary extensions that are now being allowed, and cybersecurity-related information have been explicitly excluded from access. Accordingly, Privacy Enhancements (MFIPPA) have been expanded as the powers of the Information Privacy Commission of Ontario now reach over municipalities and school boards, introducing mandatory privacy impact assessments, mandatory breach reporting, and new whistleblower protections.

All effectively excluding journalists or concerned citizens from obtaining disclosure of emails, texts, phone records or any other documents that the premier, his cabinet or staff have created in regards to governmental business is, to my mind, weaponizing secrecy to favour backroom deals.

Granted, personal privacy is important, however, speaking truth to power becomes even more difficult, when facts worth reporting on direct government business and policy are now legally being withheld from scrutiny, especially where it concerns environmental safeguards meant to protect us all.