

ALA

Office for
INTELLECTUAL
FREEDOM

WITH SUPPORT FROM THE OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Rallying Americans to Defend Their Rights in a Digital Age

Librarian Attitudes and Behaviors Regarding Information Privacy

my personal data . . . my web searches . . . my browser histories . . . my email . . . my blog posts . . . my credit card purchases . . . my photos . . . my library records . . .

I want the power to decide who sees what.

privacyrevolution.org

In the Battle for Privacy Rights Libraries Are On the Front Lines

The freedom to read and receive ideas anonymously is at the heart of individual liberty in a democracy. It ensures a person's right to gain knowledge and form opinions according to his or her own conscience.

Patron privacy in libraries is under threat. Law enforcement agencies exploit fears about terrorism and child safety to strip away privacy protections for patron reading records. Gag orders and national security claims prevent judicial review.¹ This state of affairs has placed librarians at the forefront of an issue that will test the strength of our society's commitment to the First Amendment.

The Office for Intellectual Freedom at the American Library Association has been defending privacy rights for nearly 40 years and has been studying privacy concerns unique to the digital age since 2003. This most recent survey sought to understand librarians' role in and attitudes toward protecting patron privacy. In summer of 2008, ALA surveyed over 1,100 librarians, allied library professionals, and interested library users.² Respondents revealed strong opinions about the importance of information privacy, and overwhelmingly indicated that they consider it a critical issue in the library profession and in society today.

The online survey was presented as series of questions about information privacy policies and practices in libraries, especially with regard to law enforcement agencies. It was intended to determine the impacts, if any, of law enforcement contact or the prospect of increased law enforcement demands on public, academic, special, and school libraries across the United States. Some questions and responses were omitted from this report because they called for respondents' personally identifiable information.

1. "Librarian Fights Gag Order on Records Request," All Things Considered, Larry Abramson, National Public Radio. 23 November 2005.

2. "Librarian Attitudes and Behaviors Regarding Information Privacy" Survey. 29 June – 31 August 2008.

Research Highlights

Librarians see themselves as staunch protectors of patron privacy.

In fact, 80 percent of respondents said librarians are doing all they can to prevent unauthorized access to the personal information and circulation records of patrons. But, after decades of fearlessly fending off federal and local law enforcement demands for patron records in the 20th century, the explosion of Internet use in libraries has ushered in a new era of risk to the First Amendment that extends beyond the control of librarians.

Self-censoring is more common among librarians than among the general public.

As connoisseurs of information, librarians and loyal library users understand how online search behavior can leave an identifying trail. Twenty-four percent of survey respondents indicated that they self-censor their search and/or reading habits. That's five points higher than the national percentage.

People should have control over their privacy.

A robust 96 percent of the survey respondents agree that people should have more control over their personal information. Yet many services and companies today are automatically “opting-in” users — signing them up for online newsletters, tracking programs, and direct-marketing campaigns — and often using the information in myriad ways without the user's knowledge or permission. Librarians express particular concern about privacy protections for the information that patrons type into databases.

The public should be educated on matters of information privacy.

As information professionals in their communities, an overwhelming majority of librarians — 88 percent — believe they have an important role to play in educating the public about the privacy risks they face when using the Internet.

The time for a change is now.

Sixty-one percent of respondents said they are concerned that search engines are sharing their information with the government, and 60 percent said that Congress should adopt more laws to protect personal information from unauthorized disclosure.

Key Findings



96%

People should have control over their privacy.

A robust 96 percent of the survey respondents agree that people should have more control over their personal information. Yet many services and companies today are automatically “opting-in” users — signing them up for online newsletters, tracking programs, and direct-marketing campaigns — and often using the information in myriad ways without the user’s knowledge or permission.

61%

The time for a change is now.

Sixty-one percent of respondents said they are concerned that search engines are sharing their information with the government, and 60 percent said that Congress should adopt more laws to protect personal information from unauthorized disclosure.

80%

Librarians see themselves as staunch protectors of patron privacy.

In fact, 80 percent of respondents said librarians are doing all they can to prevent unauthorized access to the personal information and circulation records of patrons.

24%





Self-censoring is more common among librarians than among the general public.



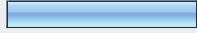

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1. What is your age?				
			Response Percent	Response Count
18-25			5.6%	75
26-34			17.5%	234
35-43			18.2%	244
44-62			52.9%	708
63 or older			4.8%	64
Prefer not to respond			1.0%	14
			answered question	1,339

2. Please tell us a little bit about yourself: I am a...				
			Response Percent	Response Count
Librarian in a public, academic, or special library (active or retired)			32.5%	435
School Media Specialist or School Librarian (Grades K – 12)			37.1%	496
Librarian (not currently employed)			1.5%	20
Library paraprofessional or library worker in any library			5.8%	77
Student enrolled in a graduate library or information science program			4.3%	57
Library Trustee or Board Member			0.1%	2
Library Consultant			1.0%	13
Library User			8.0%	107
Other (please specify)			9.7%	130
			answered question	1,337


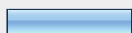

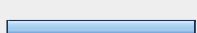

Responses from academic, special, and public librarians



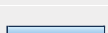
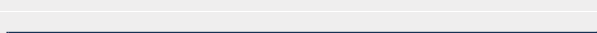
3. 1. Individuals should be able to control who sees their personal information.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		3.3%	14
Disagree		0.7%	3
Agree		19.7%	83
Strongly agree		76.3%	322
I prefer not to answer		0.0%	0
<i>answered question</i>			422

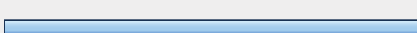
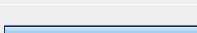



4. 2. I'm concerned that <u>companies</u> are collecting too much personal information about me and other individuals.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		1.2%	5
Disagree		4.0%	17
Agree		27.0%	114
Strongly agree		67.8%	286
I prefer not to answer		0.0%	0
<i>answered question</i>			422

5. 3. I'm concerned that the <u>government</u> is collecting too much personal information about me and other individuals.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		1.4%	6
Disagree		10.4%	44
Agree		28.3%	120
Strongly agree		58.3%	247
I prefer not to answer		1.7%	7
<i>answered question</i>			424




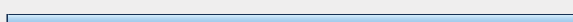

Responses from academic, special, and public librarians






6. 4. <u>Librarians</u> are doing all they can to prevent unauthorized access to individuals' personal information and circulation records.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		2.4%	10
Disagree		17.6%	74
Agree		51.8%	218
Strongly agree		26.8%	113
I prefer not to answer		1.4%	6
<i>answered question</i>			421






7. 5. When people give personal information to a <u>company</u> for a specific purpose, the company should only use the information for that purpose.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		1.0%	4
Disagree		0.5%	2
Agree		13.8%	58
Strongly agree		84.8%	357
I prefer not to answer		0.0%	0
<i>answered question</i>			421

8. 6. I don't mind if the <u>government</u> knows what I've been reading.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		59.5%	244
Disagree		27.6%	113
Agree		9.0%	37
Strongly agree		3.2%	13
I prefer not to answer		0.7%	3
<i>answered question</i>			410

Responses from academic, special, and public librarians




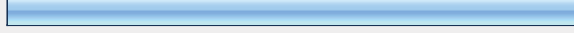

9. 7. <u>Government</u> agencies should not share personal information with third parties unless it has been authorized by the individual or a court of law.			Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree			1.0%	4
Disagree			1.2%	5
Agree			16.1%	66
Strongly agree			81.2%	333
I prefer not to answer			0.5%	2
			<i>answered question</i>	410

10. 8. I don't mind if people can view my personal information on the Internet. I have nothing to hide.			Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree			55.2%	227
Disagree			34.1%	140
Agree			7.5%	31
Strongly agree			1.2%	5
I prefer not to answer			1.9%	8
			<i>answered question</i>	411






11. 9. <u>Libraries</u> should never share personal information, circulation records, or Internet use records with third parties unless it has been authorized by the individual or by a court of law.			Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree			1.0%	4
Disagree			1.5%	6
Agree			19.2%	79
Strongly agree			78.1%	321
I prefer not to answer			0.2%	1
			<i>answered question</i>	411

Responses from academic, special, and public librarians






12. 10. Companies and government agencies that collect personal information should take more steps to prevent unauthorized access to individuals' personal information.

		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		1.2%	5
Disagree		0.2%	1
Agree		16.9%	69
Strongly agree		81.4%	333
I prefer not to answer		0.2%	1
<i>answered question</i>			409




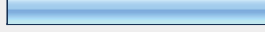

13. 11. Librarians should play a role in educating patrons on the potential privacy rights risks resulting from using the Internet, such as search engines and ISPs storing queries and tracking individual web surfing for targeted advertising.






		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		1.0%	4
Disagree		9.2%	38
Agree		48.8%	201
Strongly agree		38.8%	160
I prefer not to answer		2.2%	9
<i>answered question</i>			412






14. 12. Libraries should not collect information about library users' web surfing habits.

		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		1.0%	4
Disagree		13.9%	56
Agree		35.0%	141
Strongly agree		48.6%	196
I prefer not to answer		1.5%	6
<i>answered question</i>			403

Responses from academic, special, and public librarians


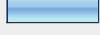


15. 13. Libraries have an important role to play in educating the general public about issues of personal privacy.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		0.7%	3
Disagree		10.1%	41
Agree		50.0%	202
Strongly agree		36.9%	149
I prefer not to answer		2.2%	9
<i>answered question</i>			404

16. 14. Congress should adopt more laws that protect personal information from unauthorized disclosure.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		0.7%	3
Disagree		3.0%	12
Agree		34.2%	138
Strongly agree		59.6%	240
I prefer not to answer		2.5%	10
<i>answered question</i>			403

17. 15. Search engines such as Google, Yahoo and Ask should prominently display policies on how user's information is treated.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		0.2%	1
Disagree		2.5%	10
Agree		39.2%	158
Strongly agree		57.3%	231
I prefer not to answer		0.7%	3
<i>answered question</i>			403

Responses from academic, special, and public librarians

18. 16. I'm concerned that search engines are sharing my personal information and search records with the government.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		2.5%	10
Disagree		32.3%	130
Agree		35.5%	143
Strongly agree		24.8%	100
I prefer not to answer		5.0%	20
<i>answered question</i>			403

19. 17. I self-censor my search and reading habits out of fear that my records could be misunderstood.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		28.6%	115
Disagree		53.0%	213
Agree		12.7%	51
Strongly agree		3.5%	14
I prefer not to answer		2.2%	9
<i>answered question</i>			402



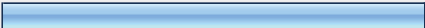
Responses from academic, special, and public librarians


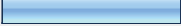
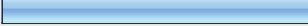
21. 2. What is your library's operating budget for the current fiscal year?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Less than \$10,000		2.5%	9
\$10,000 to \$49,999		5.3%	19
\$50,000 to 99,999		5.0%	18
\$100,000 to \$199,999		5.3%	19
\$200,000 to \$399,999		8.1%	29
\$400,000 to \$699,999		9.5%	34
\$700,000 to \$999,999		6.7%	24
\$1,000,000 to \$4,999,999		32.0%	115
\$5,000,000 or more		25.6%	92
		<i>answered question</i>	359



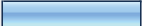
22. 3. Does your library have any established practices or procedures for dealing with requests for information from patron records by officials?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		69.9%	272
No		10.8%	42
Don't know		19.3%	75
		<i>answered question</i>	389

23. 4. Does your library train staff on how to handle requests or orders for information from patron records made by officials?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		51.4%	200
No		32.1%	125
Don't know		16.5%	64
		<i>answered question</i>	389

Responses from academic, special, and public librarians

24. 5. Has your library changed any of its policies regarding the collection and retention of patron information in response to anti-terrorism laws? (e.g., stopped maintaining public access workstation sign-up sheets)?			Response Percent	Response Count
Yes, the library collects and retains MORE information about patrons than before the Act			1.6%	6
Yes, the library collects and retains LESS information about patrons than before the Act			37.7%	140
No, we have not changed any policies regarding the collection and retention of patron information			60.6%	225
			<i>answered question</i>	371

25. 6. Have patrons made inquiries to library staff regarding privacy of patron records, or any other surveillance issue?			Response Percent	Response Count
Yes			30.9%	121
No			25.3%	99
Don't know			43.7%	171
			<i>answered question</i>	391




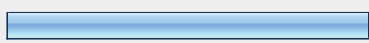

26. 7. Does your library communicate privacy policies to patrons?			Response Percent	Response Count
Yes			55.6%	217
No			24.6%	96
Don't know			19.7%	77
			<i>answered question</i>	390

Responses from academic, special, and public librarians


29. 10. Have any aspects of your library's resources or services been restricted or removed from public review and/or circulation in reaction to anti-terrorism measures.




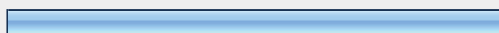

	Yes	No	Prefer not to respond	Response Count
Books	0.3% (1)	95.2% (355)	4.6% (17)	373
Print newspapers	0.5% (2)	94.6% (353)	4.8% (18)	373
Print magazines and newspapers	0.8% (3)	94.4% (351)	4.8% (18)	372
Online databases	0.3% (1)	94.9% (354)	4.8% (18)	373
Government documents	1.9% (7)	92.2% (343)	5.9% (22)	372
Internet access	3.5% (13)	91.3% (337)	5.1% (19)	369
	<i>answered question</i>			373





30. 11. Please identify the number of instances in which a federal agency served the library with an official legal order (i.e., subpoena, civil investigative demand, warrant, court order, or other form of compulsory process) for library records, materials, or other content since October 2004:

		Response Percent	Response Count
None		38.2%	148
<5		8.3%	32
10-25		0.8%	3
More than 25		0.0%	0
Don't know		51.7%	200
Prefer not to answer		1.0%	4
	<i>answered question</i>		387

Responses from school librarians, school media specialists, and others




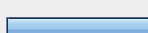

34. 1. Individuals should be able to control who sees their personal information.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		3.4%	30
Disagree		1.1%	10
Agree		22.9%	200
Strongly agree		72.5%	634
I prefer not to answer		0.1%	1
<i>answered question</i>			875

35. 2. I'm concerned that <u>companies</u> are collecting too much personal information about me and other individuals.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		1.9%	17
Disagree		2.4%	21
Agree		24.4%	214
Strongly agree		70.8%	620
I prefer not to answer		0.5%	4
<i>answered question</i>			876




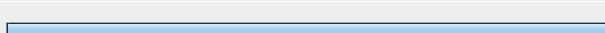

36. 3. I'm concerned that the <u>government</u> is collecting too much personal information about me and other individuals.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		1.8%	16
Disagree		7.1%	62
Agree		28.7%	250
Strongly agree		61.4%	535
I prefer not to answer		0.9%	8
<i>answered question</i>			871

Responses from school librarians, school media specialists, and others






37. 4. Librarians are doing all they can to prevent unauthorized access to individuals' personal information and circulation records.

		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		2.0%	17
Disagree		15.4%	134
Agree		56.4%	490
Strongly agree		20.9%	182
I prefer not to answer		5.3%	46
<i>answered question</i>			869

38. 5. When people give personal information to a company for a specific purpose, the company should only use the information for that purpose.



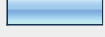
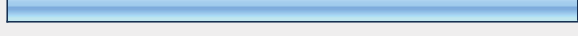

		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		1.8%	16
Disagree		0.3%	3
Agree		10.4%	91
Strongly agree		87.3%	765
I prefer not to answer		0.1%	1
<i>answered question</i>			876

39. 6. I don't mind if the government knows what I've been reading.


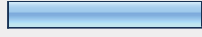



		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		54.6%	476
Disagree		28.6%	249
Agree		13.9%	121
Strongly agree		2.3%	20
I prefer not to answer		0.6%	5
<i>answered question</i>			871

Responses from school librarians, school media specialists, and others



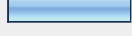
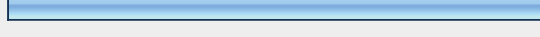

40. 7. Government agencies should not share personal information with third parties unless it has been authorized by the individual or a court of law.

		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		3.0%	26
Disagree		1.5%	13
Agree		13.3%	116
Strongly agree		81.7%	712
I prefer not to answer		0.5%	4
<i>answered question</i>			871

41. 8. I don't mind if people can view my personal information on the Internet. I have nothing to hide.



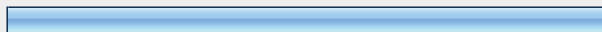

		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		65.7%	572
Disagree		27.6%	240
Agree		5.4%	47
Strongly agree		0.5%	4
I prefer not to answer		0.8%	7
<i>answered question</i>			870

42. 9. Libraries should never share personal information, circulation records, or Internet use records with third parties unless it has been authorized by the individual or by a court of law.

		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		1.4%	12
Disagree		3.4%	30
Agree		17.5%	152
Strongly agree		76.7%	668
I prefer not to answer		1.0%	9
<i>answered question</i>			871

Responses from school librarians, school media specialists, and others




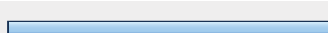

43. 10. Companies and government agencies that collect personal information should take more steps to prevent unauthorized access to individuals' personal information.

		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		1.1%	10
Disagree		0.0%	0
Agree		13.1%	114
Strongly agree		85.5%	744
I prefer not to answer		0.2%	2
<i>answered question</i>			870



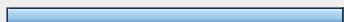


44. 11. Librarians should play a role in educating patrons on the potential privacy rights risks resulting from using the Internet, such as search engines and ISPs storing queries and tracking individual web surfing for targeted advertising.




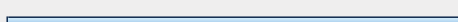

		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		1.0%	9
Disagree		2.9%	25
Agree		42.6%	371
Strongly agree		52.1%	453
I prefer not to answer		1.4%	12
<i>answered question</i>			870




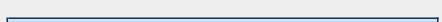

45. 12. Libraries should not collect information about library users' web surfing habits.

		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		1.5%	13
Disagree		14.5%	125
Agree		34.9%	300
Strongly agree		46.2%	397
I prefer not to answer		2.9%	25
<i>answered question</i>			860






Responses from school librarians, school media specialists, and others

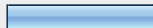

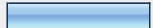


46. 13. Libraries have an important role to play in educating the general public about issues of personal privacy.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		0.5%	4
Disagree		5.6%	48
Agree		48.1%	415
Strongly agree		44.7%	386
I prefer not to answer		1.2%	10
<i>answered question</i>			863

47. 14. Congress should adopt more laws that protect personal information from unauthorized disclosure.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		0.7%	6
Disagree		3.6%	31
Agree		27.7%	239
Strongly agree		64.8%	559
I prefer not to answer		3.1%	27
<i>answered question</i>			862

48. 15. Search engines such as Google, Yahoo and Ask should prominently display policies on how user's information is treated.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		0.5%	4
Disagree		1.7%	15
Agree		35.9%	310
Strongly agree		61.7%	533
I prefer not to answer		0.2%	2
<i>answered question</i>			864

Responses from school librarians, school media specialists, and others

49. 16. I'm concerned that search engines are sharing my personal information and search records with the government.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		1.3%	11
Disagree		27.5%	236
Agree		40.2%	345
Strongly agree		27.6%	237
I prefer not to answer		3.5%	30
<i>answered question</i>			859

50. 17. I self-censor my search and reading habits out of fear that my records could be misunderstood.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly disagree		20.8%	179
Disagree		48.5%	418
Agree		20.3%	175
Strongly agree		6.5%	56
I prefer not to answer		3.9%	34
<i>answered question</i>			862

About the American Library Association

The American Library Association, the voice of America's libraries, is the oldest, largest, and most influential library association in the world. Its approximately 65,000 members are primarily librarians but also trustees, publishers, and other library supporters. The association represents all types of libraries; its mission is to promote the highest-quality library and information services and public access to information.

About the Office for Intellectual Freedom

The Office for Intellectual Freedom is charged with implementing ALA policies concerning the concept of intellectual freedom as embodied in the Library Bill of Rights, the association's basic policy on free access to libraries and library materials. The goal of the office is to educate librarians and the general public about the nature and importance of intellectual freedom in libraries.

Contact

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www.privacyrevolution.org