Annotated Bibliography

TRINA MAGI

As they engage in conversations about privacy, librarians and library users may have questions about why privacy matters, whether anyone cares about it anymore, and the historical role librarians have played in protecting privacy. The following list of resources includes selected articles, books, papers, and reports that may be helpful in answering these questions.

In general, why is privacy important?

Duke explains how monitoring, eavesdropping, and lack of public anonymity in surveillance cultures create pressure for conformity in which people modify their behaviors so they don’t stand out. In such societies, freedom of action, creativity, and uniqueness are easily lost.


A serious but accessible discussion of the importance of privacy even within America’s culture of exhibitionism. Rosen suggests that people want not the right to be left alone, but “the right to control the conditions of their own exposure,” and he says, “privacy protects us from being judged out of context in a world of short attention spans.” He argues that privacy supports the development of autonomy, individuality, and creativity; the building of friendships and intimate human relationships; the playing of appropriate roles in varied social settings; democratic political debate; and workplace productivity.


A short article claiming that “privacy is an inherent human right and a requirement for maintaining the human condition with dignity and respect.” Schneier says that privacy is not about hiding a wrong; rather it is a basic human need and protects us from abuses by those in power and allows us to be authentic in our words and actions. The real choice, he says, is not security versus privacy, but liberty versus control. “Liberty requires security plus privacy.”


A lengthy, scholarly, and compelling response to the question, “I’ve got nothing to hide, so why should I care about privacy?” Solove discusses the ways the question typically appears and is answered, explains why existing ways of understanding privacy have led to confusion, and argues that the “nothing to hide” argument stems from faulty assumptions about the value of privacy. The article ends with concrete examples of the ways in which privacy is important to other issues we may care about, such as ensuring that a range of viewpoints are expressed in society, maintaining an appropriate power balance between individuals and institutions, and deciding what kind of government we want to have.


Solove addresses the question: With so much information being gathered, with so much surveillance, and with so much disclosure, how can people expect privacy anymore? He argues that privacy law should not be about preserving the current state of affairs, but rather about shaping the future we desire. The article outlines the ways in which the concept of privacy is often understood too narrowly, leading us to neglect important privacy concerns.

In an era of internet use and social networking, do people still care about privacy?

This review article presents a summary of the results of longitudinal polls on privacy invasions and surveillance techniques over the last 15 years, showing that, generally speaking, “concern about threats to personal privacy has been growing in recent years.” An appendix to the
nine-page article provides actual language of the poll questions.


This one-page news release cites the results of a 2008 poll by the Consumer Reports National Research Center that showed Americans “are concerned with how their personal information is being collected and used by internet companies.” The poll found that consumers want more control over their personal information and think that internet companies should ask their permission before using personal information. Many consumers try to take steps to limit the information collected about them and are often unaware of what companies are able to do with their information.


A four-page report on a 2008 Harris Poll measuring the comfort level of U.S. adults with the practice of websites using information about a person’s online activity to customize Web content. The poll also measured the degree to which people would change their view after seeing potential privacy and security policies.


Johns and Lawson surveyed 444 undergraduate students and found that most students (85%) said online privacy was important or very important to them. Large majorities of students agreed that a university or library should obtain private information only with students’ consent, should collect student information only for clearly defined purposes, and should never disseminate students’ personal information to outside agencies. A large majority of students also felt it was not justifiable to develop student profiles for the purpose of improving library collections and services.


Reports the findings of a large telephone survey of American teens and their parents/guardians which examined the choices teens make in sharing information online, what teens share in various contexts, and how teens assess their own vulnerability. The survey found that most teens believe some information should be private and protected from public view and take steps to protect themselves online from the most obvious areas of risk.


A 19-page paper that examines the effectiveness of the Federal Trade Commission’s self-regulatory approach to protecting consumer privacy over the last 10 years. It cites data about Americans’ concern about privacy and finds that consumers misunderstand how their personal data is collected and shared online, and they mistakenly assume that if they see the label “privacy policy” on a website, the website will not share their personal information. The paper concludes with three recommendations for advancing the interests of privacy.

How have librarians defended privacy in the past?


Written by an attorney and MLIS student, this article traces the history of privacy as it relates to library records. Bowers provides a readable summary of the development of the concept of privacy in the U.S. Constitution, case law, and federal and state statutes, followed by a discussion of intrusions on the privacy of library records – and the responses of librarians – from the 1940s to late 2005.


These three brief articles tell the story of how members of Library Connection, a non-profit library consortium, refused to comply with a “national security letter” request for library records issued by the FBI in 2005 under authority of the USA PATRIOT Act.


This book recounts the facts and mysteries concerning the FBI’s Library Awareness Program, in which the FBI sought to recruit library workers as counterintelligence “assets” to monitor and report on the habits of library users. Foerstel places the program—which was begun in 1973 and made public by *The New York Times* in September 1987—in the context of other library surveillance efforts and offers examples of FBI visits to libraries across the country, describing the librarians’ response. With its many quotations from the librarians involved, the account is an inspiring demonstration of librarians’ commitment to the ethical principles that make libraries sanctuaries of inquiry.


Drawing on news stories and personal interviews with librarians, Garoogian uses examples of how librarians have dealt with requests for library patron information to explore the moral, legal, and professional arguments for protecting patron privacy.

Do librarians have a responsibility to protect the privacy of young people?