

# Privacy, Libraries, and Engaging the Public: ALA's Choose Privacy Week Initiative

By Angela Maycock

Privacy serves as one of the foundations of intellectual freedom and, as such, is a compelling concern for libraries of all types. Today, we live in an era where more of our personal information is made available than ever before, both online and otherwise. The ease of communicating information in the digital age has changed the way we live, work, and learn – often in wonderfully exciting and positive ways. But the capacity of computers, online networks, and databases to collect and store personal information presents growing challenges to individuals' privacy. Surveillance cameras have become prevalent in our libraries, schools, and communities, as has software monitoring our Internet use. These realities present the potential for constant, penetrating surveillance and virtually unlimited storage and scrutiny of data. As a result, many see our privacy as rapidly vanishing. Yet, privacy is a fundamental right of library users and a necessary condition for the unique and important work of all types of libraries – facilitating open access to information for all.

Libraries today are under increasing pressure to discard their long-standing commitment to readers' privacy rights. Fears ranging from terrorism to child safety have been used to strip away statutory privacy protections for library records, eliminate anonymity in the library, and encourage the philosophy that “good” people should have nothing to hide. This situation demands a renewed advocacy for readers' rights to privacy. Beyond crafting effective library privacy policies, librarians must also envision a role for themselves in the broader struggle to preserve and protect their users' privacy rights.

## Libraries' Commitment to Privacy

Protecting reader and online privacy and confidentiality has long been an integral part of the mission of the American Library Association (ALA) and the library profession. As early as 1939, librarians affirmed a right to privacy for library users in the ALA *Code of Ethics*. By 1973, librarians were encouraging state legislators to adopt library records laws to protect users' privacy, a campaign that continues today all across the country. Article III of today's *Code of Ethics*, last revised in 2008, asserts library users' “right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted” (American, 2008).

In addition to their shared ethical framework and core values, librarians in this country also have direct and immediate

day-to-day experience with privacy issues. Library staff members handle users' personally identifiable information and reading records daily. Other privacy concerns that affect libraries directly include questions about individuals' expectations of privacy, about the rights of others (including parents and law enforcement) to access reading records, and about appropriate uses of surveillance technologies.

Privacy is also a vital component of information literacy and of any efforts to educate library users about responsible Internet use. It is a particularly relevant topic in the case of children and young adults using online resources, and is a cause of great anxiety for many individuals, including parents. While adults may be inclined to limit Internet use to protect young people's privacy, “Minors and Internet Interactivity: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*” states: “Prohibiting children and young adults from using social networking sites does not teach safe behavior and leaves youth without the necessary knowledge and skills to protect their privacy or engage in responsible speech. Instead of restricting or denying access to the Internet, librarians and teachers should educate minors to participate responsibly, ethically, and safely” (ALA, 2009).

## Do Library Users Care About Privacy?

Librarians share a long history and strong commitment to protecting user privacy because of its impact on one of our most basic core values, intellectual freedom. True intellectual freedom cannot exist without privacy. An expectation of privacy is necessary for individuals to feel free to seek and receive information on any topic, and to form opinions according to their own conscience. Yet, in light of various erosions of privacy and new social norms that encourage disclosure, many have questioned whether the average person truly cares about privacy today.

Despite repeated public statements from prominent individuals that “privacy is dead,” research consistently shows the opposite – that people in general have an active and vested interest in the privacy of their personal information. A June 2010 survey, for example, “found that 81 percent of those polled said they were ‘somewhat’ or ‘very’ concerned about companies tracking their Web surfing habits and using that information for advertising, while 88 percent said it is ‘unfair’ for companies to do such tracking without an Internet user's permission” (Gruenwald). These findings are consistent with

other polls and research showing that a majority of Americans desire more control rather than less over how their online information is collected and used.

Adults are not alone in their concerns about privacy. Young people also have a deep and abiding interest in how their information is used (and sometimes abused), particularly when it resides online. Teens and young adults are avid users of social networking tools, and research shows that they take advantage of online privacy controls to a greater extent than many adults. In 2007, the *Pew Internet & American Life Project's* "Teens, Privacy and Online Social Networks" report found that a majority of teens are actively engaged in maintaining their privacy online. "While many teens post their first name and photos on their profiles, they rarely post information on public profiles they believe would help strangers actually locate them such as their full name, home phone number or cell phone number" (Pew, 2007).

Research reported by Hoofnagle et al. has shown that "young-adult Americans have an aspiration for increased privacy even while they participate in an online reality that is optimized to increase their revelation of personal data" (2010). The study, "How Different are Young Adults from Older Adults When it Comes to Information Privacy Attitudes and Policies?" found that, contrary to prevailing opinions, many young people's attitudes on information privacy line up with those of adults. Yet young people may lack knowledge or be misinformed about privacy issues, keeping them from taking full advantage of available privacy controls. Librarians – whether in school, public, or academic library settings – can help fill this gap by providing teens and young adults with information and promoting meaningful dialogue about privacy online.

## ALA's Privacy Initiative

In 2010, ALA launched Choose Privacy Week to highlight privacy concerns and library users' rights in a digital age. The first-ever Choose Privacy Week took place May 2-8, 2010. Choose Privacy Week grew out of an ALA Council resolution in 2006, calling on intellectual freedom and other groups within ALA to develop a "national conversation on privacy." The goal of this program is to spark a nationwide move toward education and discussion around today's most pressing privacy issues.

Choose Privacy Week is sponsored by ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom. Like Banned Books Week, Choose Privacy Week will be celebrated annually. Libraries are at the core of this effort because they play such a vital role in sharing information in this country. As the information hubs of their communities, libraries are naturally positioned as the perfect places for individuals to learn about, think about, and talk about today's privacy issues. ALA has developed ideas, tools, and resources specifically relevant to academic, public, and school libraries and that can help target particular library users with privacy messages.

During the first-ever Choose Privacy Week in 2010, many libraries in Indiana and hundreds across the country took part in a variety of ways. The Hamilton East Public Library (in Fishers and Noblesville, IN) was inspired by the Choose Privacy message to plan a "Be Good to Yourself Night," with an underlying theme about the value of public and personal privacy, for library users 12-19 years old. They combined information on cyber-safety and technology with fitness, volunteerism, self-esteem assessment and several other topics.

The Pulaski County Public Library in Winamac, IN celebrated Choose Privacy Week by equipping patrons with Privacy Toolkits. The toolkits included information on digital privacy, bookmarks, and buttons. Patrons were also able to sign a large poster board proclaiming that they "Choose Privacy" and encourage others to do the same. Each participant was entered into a drawing for local theatre tickets. To learn more about these and other libraries' 2010 Choose Privacy Week events, visit [www.privacyrevolution.org/index.php/privacy\\_week/choose\\_privacy\\_week\\_events](http://www.privacyrevolution.org/index.php/privacy_week/choose_privacy_week_events).

## Resources and How to Get Involved

ALA realizes that in May some school and academic libraries are nearing the end of their instructional year and may be hard-pressed to devote an entire week to the topic of privacy. However, like Banned Books Week, Choose Privacy Week can be celebrated at any time during the year. ALA encourages librarians to use the resources provided by ALA to spark a conversation on privacy in their communities, and to choose the day, week, month that is most appropriate for them to do so.

ALA has developed a set of posters, bookmarks, and buttons to help libraries raise awareness and celebrate Choose Privacy Week. They are available for purchase through the ALA Store at [www.alastore.ala.org](http://www.alastore.ala.org). The key resource for libraries is the *Choose Privacy Week Resource Guide*. This print guide provides basic information both on how to effectively maintain privacy in the library and on how to engage users on privacy issues today. The guide includes separate sections specifically targeting academic, public, and school libraries. However, the sample workshops, games, displays, and discussion series in each section can be adapted for use in any library setting.

Learn more about ALA's privacy initiative and Choose Privacy Week by visiting [www.privacyrevolution.org](http://www.privacyrevolution.org), and contact Deborah Caldwell Stone, Deputy Director of ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom, with any questions or to share your own experience with Choose Privacy Week. She may be reached at 312.280.4224, 800.545.2433, ext. 4224 or [dstone@ala.org](mailto:dstone@ala.org).

## References:

American Library Association (ALA). (2008). *Code of Ethics of the American Library Association*. Retrieved from <http://www.ifmanual.org/codeethics>

ALA. (2009). *Minors and Internet Interactivity: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/minorsinternetinteractivity.cfm/>

Gruenwald, J. (2010, June 8). Poll Finds Public Concern Over Online Privacy. *National Journal: Tech Daily Dose*. Retrieved from <http://techdailydose.nationaljournal.com/2010/06/poll-finds-public-concern-over.php>

Hoofnagle, C. J., King, J., Li, S., & Turow, J. (2010, April 14). *How Different are Young Adults from Older Adults When it Comes to Information Privacy Attitudes and Policies?* Retrieved from <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1589864/>

Pew Internet & American Life Project. (2007). *Teens, Privacy and Online Social Networks*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2007/Teens-Privacy-and-Online-Social-Networks.aspx>

## Author:

Angela Maycock is the Assistant Director of the Office for Intellectual Freedom at the American Library Association. Ms. Maycock directed the ALA's Choose Privacy Week initiative for its first three years and edited Library Technology Reports issue, "Technology, Security, and Intellectual Freedom at Your Library." [amaycock@ala.org](mailto:amaycock@ala.org)