

Library Perspective on Privacy

Libraries have always had a strong interest in protecting the privacy rights of their patrons. Libraries put people together with the information that they seek. However, the record of peoples' information transactions with a library can be particularly revealing, providing insight into his or her political and religious beliefs, values, aspirations, medical condition, personal interests, and so on. The idea that such a record could be obtained and perused by a third party could even dissuade people from exercising their right to access information in a library. Thus, libraries, supported for the most part by state privacy laws, typically protect the confidentiality of such transactions.

However, the Internet poses particular problems for libraries. Because Internet users are often in two-way dialogs with web site operators outside of the library, their transactions cannot be fully under the protection of library confidentiality.

Libraries, therefore, believe that individual privacy on the Internet should receive the strongest possible protection, particularly in the case of information transactions. That is, library privacy policies move beyond business to consumer transaction issues of "consent," "opt-in" or "opt-out." We believe that strong privacy protection on the Internet is a basic requirement for a democratic society, and that the lack of privacy in the information environment can have chilling impacts on other rights such as political association and speech.