A Practical Guide to Privacy in Libraries

Low to no-tech!

Why Should We Bother?

There are many reasons we should care about protecting our patrons privacy, some obvious and some not so obvious. Think about why you're here and what you hope to learn. We'll begin by highlighting why privacy is important.

Why ALA matters

VII. All people, regardless of origin, age, background, or views, possess a right to privacy and confidentiality in their library use. Libraries should advocate for, educate about, and protect people's privacy, safeguarding all library use data, including personally identifiable information.

This was added to the ALA Library Bill of Rights in 2019.

Questions?

Auditing Your Privacy Policies

Before implementing any new ideas it's important to make sure you have a good handle on your own privacy policy. This will help guide every decision you make to help make sure you are keeping user privacy in mind every step of the way.

Privacy Screens

One of the easiest things you can do is purchase and set up privacy screens on the computers, this will remedy quite a few issues right off the bat. It will make sure that it is much harder for *anyone* to see what the patron is doing on their computer. This affords quite a bit of privacy no matter how your computers are set up.

Data Collection

For those of you in the position ot make or support policy make sure you aren't collecting information you don't need. There have been horror stories about libraries hoovering up data. You only want to collect the data you absolutely need and do your best to discard it immediately.

Self-Checkout

This may seem overly simple but there is a lot to be said for allowing users to check out their own materials. This increases the privacy of you users by not letting anyone know what that patron is checking out. They may be borrowing materials they want to keep extremely private because they deal with sensitive topics and you want them to be able to do it comfortable and with confidence.

User Privacy via Staff

This one is of the utmost importance because it has to do with professionalism in the field. I don't usually have much to say about professionalism, but it's important when user privacy is involved.

User Records

Never, under any circumstance, view user records without an explicit need. Never view them to get a patrons phone number unless you're calling exclusively about materials or library related business. Never view what they are reading unless you absolutely have to. And NEVER discuss a users reading habits with anyone else. A users reading history is their private business and without explicit reason or permission it shouldn't be accessed.

Sharing Records

Don't do this! If they aren't a guarantor there is no reason anyone besides the card holder should have access to their account. Again, without explicit permission that information should be barred. Not parents nor spouses nor guardians should have access to that information.

INTERMISSION

Take a few minutes to reflect and let's recap what's we've discussed. Questions welcomed!
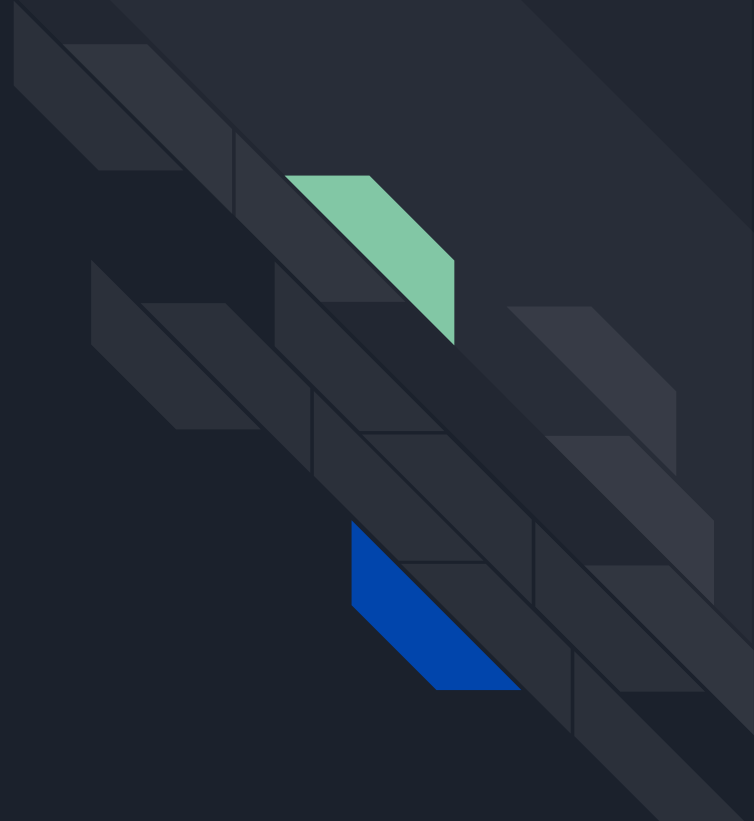
Shred It

Dispense with unneeded information as soon as it's legally okay to do so, follow your local record retention laws. But remember, you don't have to destroy any information you didn't collect!

Password Security

We aren't talking password managers or anything like that, but there are few pieces of operational security you should abide. Make sure they aren't written down anywhere anyone besides the intended user can see them. And make sure you aren't emailing passwords in plain text! I know it's inconvenience but you certainly don't want library related passwords falling into the wrong hands.

Registering Users For Events

Riddle me this? Is it ever necessary to record the names of those who attend your events? Doubt it!

It's easy to take a headcount and get the numbers for your reports. It's also okay to have people register and use a sheet with their names on it to check them in if your event requires it. Just make sure no one but staff can see it! And make sure you shred it when it's done!

Privacy and Minors

Children and teens deserve privacy as well, especially those who are old enough to pick out materials themselves. Make sure that you keep their needs in mind when they are both browsing the shelves and checking books out. Many people under 18 require materials their families may not approve of. They have the right to view these materials without their families being notified, and you must protect their reading habits as you would any adult patrons. Some libraries have guarantors on accounts which is useful for small children just getting their cards but make sure they age out of this process soon.

Vendor Contracts

Read them. That's it. Read them. Once you get in the habit you'll see all the ways vendors try to breach privacy policies.

Example: we had a vendor (they shall remain nameless for now) who wanted a list of all users physical address so they could mail them promotional material. THIS IS BIG NO NO.

Make sure vendors have a strong privacy policy as well. You're won't mean so much if all the information is being transmitted to a third party!

Privacy Into The Future

You should now have gone through your library and seen all the places you can improve your privacy without implementing new technologies. The next step is to keep up the practice. Take your new strong privacy policy and make sure you follow it. Constantly stay vigilant for new issues that you may have missed! There is no shame in this, we're all constantly learning! Work with fellow colleagues to come up with new and novel ways of securing your immediate surroundings, we can only give advice for libraries in general, you know your institution best!

Never be afraid to ask for help! We'll be here when you need us!

What Did We Learn?

Please take a moment to think about what we covered today. What can you implement in your institution?

What can you accomplish this week?

What can you accomplish this month?

This year?

Who do you need to on board?

Resources

- http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill
- https://libraryfreedom.org/
- https://www.sjpl.org/privacy
- https://www.alastore.ala.org/practicalprivacy
- https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2008/09/americas-most-dangerous-librarians
- http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/privacyconfidentialityqa#Minors'%20Privacy%20Rights
- http://www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/oif/JIFP
- http://www.ala.org/advocacy/privacy/toolkit
- https://chooseprivacyeveryday.org
- https://www.alastore.ala.org/content/intellectual-freedom-manual-ninth-edition
- https://tacticaltech.org/#/

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