

User-Generated Content in Library Discovery Systems: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*

Libraries offer a variety of information-retrieval systems to provide access to the resources in their collections. Such systems include, but are not limited to, the library catalog, institutional repositories, digital collections, and discovery services.¹ Many of these systems have the ability to include social-media components and knowledge-sharing tools that allow libraries to provide greater opportunities for engagement through user-generated content. The inclusion of this content presents an opportunity for users to engage in conversation with the library and the community, creating shared knowledge and demonstrating the value of libraries as institutions for information and learning.

Discovery systems that offer user-generated-content features may allow users to contribute commentary and reviews, use simple point-and-click rating systems (e.g., one star to five stars), or engage in discussions. To avoid appearance of library endorsement or disapproval, libraries should make efforts to differentiate between user-generated content and library-generated content within discovery systems. When user-generated content has the potential to influence the retrieval function (e.g., content with more stars could appear higher in search results), such features should not be applied by default but presented as a clearly labeled choice for users.

Libraries are not obligated to open discovery systems to user-generated content. A publicly funded library can limit user-generated content to a defined class of users or limit the subject matter of user-generated content as long as any restrictions do not pertain to the views, beliefs, or affiliations of the user.² For example, the library could require that users contributing content to the library's discovery system possess a valid library card or an online account with the library.

If a publicly funded library does choose to allow users to contribute content to the library's discovery system, the commenting system may be considered a limited public forum. Libraries that allow users to contribute content should adopt policies that define the time, place, and manner in which the user contributes the content to the library's discovery system. Any restrictions must be reasonable and cannot be based upon the beliefs or affiliations of the user or the views expressed in the user-generated content.³ Policies should be regularly reviewed with legal counsel, shared with staff, and made available to the public in all of the commonly used languages within the community served.

Libraries should safeguard the privacy of users who contribute content to library discovery systems and should review—and encourage users to review—the user-data-collection policies of any third-party providers involved in managing or storing the user-generated content. User consent should be obtained before any personal data is collected and shared with third-party providers, and libraries should protect all library-use data collected from library users.⁴

1. [Library Privacy Guidelines for Library Websites, OPACs, and Discovery Systems,](#)” Intellectual Freedom Committee, June 24, 2016. “A discovery service provides a single web-based user interface to search across multiple resources such as library catalogs, periodical databases, institutional repositories, and digital collections.”
2. *Knight First Amendment Inst. at Columbia Univ. v. Trump*, 302 F. Supp. 3d 541 (S.D.N.Y. May 23, 2018).
3. *Knight First Amendment Inst. at Columbia Univ. v. Trump*, 302 F. Supp. 3d 541 (S.D.N.Y. May 23, 2018). See also “[Social Media Guidelines for Public and Academic Libraries,](#)” approved by the Intellectual Freedom Committee June 2018.
4. *Library Bill of Rights*, Article VII, adopted June 19, 1939, by the ALA Council; amended October 14, 1944; June 18, 1948; February 2, 1961; June 27, 1967; January 23, 1980; January 29, 2019; “Privacy: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*,” adopted June 19, 2002, by the ALA Council; amended on July 1, 2014. Revisions proposed for ALA Annual Conference.

Adopted January 12, 2016, by the ALA Council; Adopted, ALA Annual Conference 2019.