

**Skits Performed at the 2001 ALA Annual Conference
by the ALA Committee on Professional Ethics**

I Know Who You Are

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12/30/00

To be read by someone (non-skits participants?) to the audience before the skit.

“There must be a way for a person to prevent information about the person that was obtained for one purpose, from being used or made available for other purposes without the person’s consent.” Code of Fair Information Practices

“We protect each individual’s privacy and confidentiality in the use of library resources and services.” Libraries: An American Value

“We protect each library user’s right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted.” ALA Code of Ethics

Scene: Three people sitting in chairs in a triangle, somewhat far away from each other. On the left side of the room is a researcher, sitting at a terminal. On the right side is a librarian also sitting at a terminal. One in the center is farther back and represents a vendor technician. Their lines are their thoughts, they are not speaking to each other.

To be read:

The cast of this skit includes a researcher, seated here, a librarian, seated here, and a vendor technician, seated here. They are connected to each other through the internet.

Researcher: The library’s new electronic reference service is great. I can ask questions through the web about my research project on sexually transmitted diseases, and the librarians can push my web browser to high quality web pages and articles.

Librarian: Oh, here’s another email question from Dr. Infectious Disease. From his personal profile I see that he’s asked five questions this month on gonorrhea. I’m going to open up our health web page and go into our medical databases.

Vendor Technician: This question answering and web pushing software we’re selling to libraries is really increasing the traffic on our servers. We’re going to have to add more memory to keep up with the data flow.

Researcher: It's amazing how they seem to know beforehand what I'm going to ask.. I wonder if they're keeping some kind of electronic log of my questions.

Librarian: This user profile feature upset me at first. I wasn't used to seeing someone's entire question-asking history whenever they ask a question. As a librarian, I was always taught to be very careful about people's privacy. But the world is changing. We've got to do something to keep our users. This allows us to provide a better, more customized reference service. And the users don't seem to have a problem with it.

Vendor Technician: These files always take so long to load. Let me check my stock portfolio real quick. Dude! Tech stocks are tanking again! I'm down 800% this year!

Researcher: Ah, here's their privacy policy. Let's see. "By submitting this form the user agrees to have their questions collected in a file viewable by all reference librarians. This allows us to provide better customized service. This information is not shared or sold to outside parties." (Pause.) Hhmm.

Librarian: The only thing that worries me is that some user data is housed on the vendor server. I would have rather the library retained control. But our systems department doesn't have the staff to maintain the hardware.

Vendor Technician: I wonder if there's any code I can write so we can make even more money off this library software. Jerry is always talking about coming up with a profitable dot-com business model.

Researcher: I'm not sure I want all the librarians looking at what questions I ask. (Pause.) On the other hand, I do like the service and I really don't want to walk all the way over to the library. Plus, since it's the library, they must take better privacy precautions than commercial sites.

Librarian: Our vendor has a strict privacy policy and assures us that all files will remain confidential.

Vendor Technician: Let's see what kind of data we have here. Whoa. We're talkin diseases. I bet the biotech and pharmaceutical companies would be interested in this.

Researcher: Oooh. The librarian has just pushed me a high quality web page on the increase of gonorrhoea among urban males. Exactly what I wanted!

Librarian: I hope that web site is authoritative enough. I did notice some banner ads on it.

Vendor Technician: I think I can write a script that downloads this information into a database. Then we could sell this information to biotech companies so they can create targeted advertising. Of course we'll have to strip out the personal information, but that's easily done.

Someone walks by and says "Two weeks later."

Researcher: (calling the library on the telephone on an imaginary receiver) Hello, electronic reference service? I'm calling to complain about your privacy standards.

Librarian: (talking to an imaginary phone receiver) Our privacy policy is posted on our web page, and by using our service you have agreed that reference librarians will have access to your personal profile.

Vendor Technician: Uh-oh. I forgot to write the code that strips the identifying information out of the user profiles.

Researcher: (still talking on phone) Well I'm ok with reference librarians, but somehow the university is saying I've been looking at too much internet porn, my wife thinks I'm having sex with urban males, and my insurance company says I lied about my preexisting condition for gonorrhea.

Librarian: But that's impossible. Unless the vendor has violated our contract. I will call them immediately. (hangs up, calls vendor). Hello Electronic Reference Vendor? One of our patrons is complaining about our privacy policy. Have you been releasing any of our users' personal information?

Vendor Technician: (with surprised look on face and pretending to be voice mail) All of our technicians are currently busy cashing in their stock options and snowboarding in Denver. To get back to the main menu, please press 1.

End

Notes/Questions:

Does the Library bear any responsibility here?

Why do we protect user privacy?

Is technology privacy neutral, or does technology tend to be intrusive?

Should we abandon traditional conceptions of library privacy to provide new services?

Have we outgrown the traditional concept of library privacy, are we moving toward a new notion and what is that notion?

What are some ways you are protecting user privacy in your library?

From Library Journal's Net Connect supplement to Library Journal, Winter 2001:
Is Patron Privacy Sacrosanct?

In an article in LJ in 1996, Leigh Estabrook (dean, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois, Urbana-Campaign) noted that both in academic and public library settings, "Our obsession with user privacy stifles electronically targeted library services." Among them she cites offering proactive reader's advisory and reference services and creating communities of interest among our users. If we can't find ways to provide the personalized, niched, consumer-oriented services our users need, they'll go elsewhere for them. We've answered the dicey questions before, and we'll do it again."