

A Community Approach to User Privacy: An Invitation to Participate

The rapid evolution of technology in the last decade prompted substantial changes across libraries as well as the vendors that serve the library community. From digital resources and online services to the software and hardware used for critical library infrastructure, libraries increasingly rely on library vendors to provide products, resources, and services to serve their users.

This increased reliance on third parties has also introduced and perpetuated legitimate concerns about surveillance of user identities and activities, which have at times been exacerbated by conditions including:

1. In general, unpermitted tracking and retention of user identities and their activities that is easily carried out on the web;
2. Inconsistent privacy policies and practices across third party products and services that can make it difficult to discern the baseline protections that consumers and libraries can or should expect from those third parties; and
3. A lack of intentional communication between libraries and vendors that articulates clear privacy expectations. This leads to a lack of transparency, which can foster distrust.

It is this third statement that has created a cyclical obstacle to the discussion around user privacy. Vendors want to learn more about how to meet the needs of the library community above and beyond the letter of the law, but are challenged by a lack of an open, centralized forum for discussion of these complex, commercially and otherwise sensitive issues.

To date, libraries have contributed much valuable work in this area - as evidenced by the [ALA Bill of Rights' positions on privacy](#), focused library/provider product reviews, and recent work to synthesize guidance and expectations in the [Vendor Contract and Privacy Rubric](#), developed by the [Licensing Privacy](#) project. This latter exemplifies a clear resource that informs service and content providers as much as libraries. However, providers are also often faced with feedback and requests from their customers that conflict with published guidelines and blur the lines of what is expected.

The ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee's Vendor Privacy Resolution Working Group kicked off in mid-2021. Our group was tasked with completing a study of current vendor privacy policies, identifying key issues, and developing a shared set of privacy guidelines. It includes participants from across the community, from service and content providers as well as libraries, universities, and the data privacy community at large.

Acknowledging the current state and perception of privacy practices, our working group's activities focus not just on assessing vendor privacy policies and practices but also largely on building trust, transparency, and a shared understanding of the problems we seek to solve. Questions specific to our roles, such as...

- As a library worker, how can I identify privacy red flags and make informed licensing decisions? How can I add my voice and position to this discourse?

- As a service or content provider, what are the most critical priorities of my community? How can I learn where improvements are desired, without opening the door to unconstructive, public critique?

...segued into questions that require all our input, such as *how might we create an open, shared community of practice that fosters a mindset of continual improvement around library user privacy?*

This last question is rooted in the current reality that as the use of third party technology products and services continues (and even increases more over time), concerns about surveillance and user privacy will persist. It also acknowledges that data can be valuable, when anonymized and in the aggregate - to decision making for libraries, and product improvement for vendors - but that responsible data practices are important to agree upon.

At ALA Annual 2022 on June 24 2022, from 10:30 - 11:30 AM, the Vendor Privacy Resolution Working Group plans to kick off its transition into a community of practice. Motivations for growing to a community of practice include providing a forum where past and existing efforts can be socialized, and to foster a community-wide culture of iterative improvement.

Importantly, these goals are dependent upon stakeholders across the community getting involved - service and content providers, in addition to libraries. Involvement could include attendance at the initial kick-off but also engagement with ongoing work and discussions.

Pragmatically, a shared community of practice is an opportunity to address concerns specific to each of our roles as well as those that are shared.

- As a library worker, I need to be a good steward of institutional resources. This includes minimizing the risks our users take when using electronic resources we license. I need to advocate for their right to pursue their own intellectual paths.
- As a service provider to libraries, I need to clearly understand the community's expectations around privacy practices and policies to ensure I'm investing in the right improvements, and balance that work against my organization's existing objectives and initiatives. I need to iterate over time, and want to be more transparent about timelines, limitations, and my need for more feedback from my community.

To help shape and grow this initiative, please join us at our first convening at the ALA Annual Convention in Washington, D.C. this June. We will also be launching an online space for discussion and announcements. Visit bit.ly/privacycommunity to RSVP to the in-person event and sign up for the online community.

Vendor Privacy Resolution Working Group

Members:

Erin Berman, IFC Privacy Subcommittee Chair, Alameda County Library
 Adam Chandler, Cornell University
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