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'The Library is open': creating safe working environments for LGBTQ+ library employees and marketing supportive LGBTQ+ services

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The Intersection: Intellectual Privacy and Equity for Queer Library Users

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Abstract:

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, librarians and library and information science scholars debated protecting privacy, providing extensive openness and access, upholding intellectual freedom principles, and advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion. Libraries – particularly their LGBTQI2SA+ materials, programming, and even opportunities to support these communities – are under siege. This comes at a moment when librarians and other library employees – like others in public-facing roles – face ever-increasing scope, asked to serve as social workers, educators, and providers of basic needs as well as librarians, with ever-thin budgets. Furthermore, libraries have, of necessity, relied on remote, digital solutions to meet the needs of their communities through the pandemic, increasing their patrons' and stakeholders' exposure to digital surveillance. These concurrent crises throw into sharp relief the enormity of libraries and their patrons' challenges. This comes as the threats to LGBTQI2SA+ people and communities continue to increase around the world:

- *Over 650 anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been introduced across the United States to date.*
- *The murder of Trans* people is at an all-time high in Mexico, Brazil, the United Kingdom, and the United States.*
- *71 countries "ban" homosexuality (Brown, 2023).*

The cascading pandemics of COVID-19, anti-queer attacks, resource restraints, and digital surveillance also highlight the critical need for a thoughtful, nuanced approach to longstanding ethical dilemmas. This paper will focus on the relationship between intellectual privacy and equity for queer library users (including but not limited to LGBTQI2SA+ people) and the impacts of our cascading pandemics on these users and their relationship to library services and marketing.

Keywords: LBTQ; Privacy; Access;

Libraries and Privacies

The balance between privacy and access has long been critical for information institutions, including libraries and archives. Indeed, it is all but *de rigueur* for articles on library privacy to begin with a declaration that privacy is central to libraries. Campbell and Cowan note, “[p]rotecting user privacy and confidentiality is fundamental to the ethics and practice of librarianship, and such protection constitutes one of the eleven values in the American Library Association’s “Core Values of Librarianship” (2016, p. 492). User privacy has long been a priority for librarians. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions endorsed the United Nations’ interpretation of privacy as a human right (1997). McDonald et al. write “Libraries in the US have long been staunch defenders of privacy” (2023, p. 480). The 2022 American Library Association (ALA) Core Competences of Librarianship includes “understand[ing] the legal framework in which libraries operate, including laws relating to [...] privacy, freedom of expression, equal rights [...] and] open access” (2022). Clearly, libraries and librarians are committed to “privacy.” Less clear is what the privacy to which libraries are so committed is, what it entails, and what protecting privacy requires of libraries and librarians.

If it is standard to begin library papers on privacy by declaring the importance of privacy, it is a trope in privacy literature to begin by declaring the unknowability of privacy. Legal scholar Daniel Solove writes, “Privacy is a concept in disarray. Nobody can articulate what it means. As one commentator has observed, privacy suffers from an embarrassment of meanings” (2006, p. 477). Permit us to be bold: “privacy” as a concept is knowable. In our current moment of dataveillance and algorithmic decision-making, we’ve all been reduced to meaningless transparency that the philosopher Byung-Chul Han describes as “pornographic” (2015, p. 12). “Privacy” has become our shared word for *not that*. Put simply, privacy is nothing less than the sense that, as human beings, we inherently deserve the respect and freedom to develop – as individuals, in relationships, and in communities – without coercion, control, or exploitation. If, as Guyan asserts, “Data is a battlefield,” (2022, p. 456), then “privacy” is the rallying cry of a calvary facing tanks. No wonder, then, that “privacy” is stuffed with meaning. Although the potential interests and values encompassed under privacy can be typed and categorized, the potential harms are as unique as those harmed. If this assertion is correct, then Campbell and Cowan are correct when they state that “libraries could benefit by continued refinement of the ALA’s Core Value of Privacy, placing it within a growing discourse about privacy beyond libraries to reinterpret it afresh for our new technological environments (2016, p. 493).

Campbell and Cowan provocatively describe “*Privacy*, as framed by the American Library Association” as “an ideal wrapped in a paradox” (2016, p. 492), a commitment to open inquiry that requires privacy for the inquirer. In the library context, privacy is most often described as intellectual freedom’s handmade. The American Library Association (ALA)’s

“Core Values of Librarianship” states that “Protecting user privacy and confidentiality is necessary for intellectual freedom and fundamental to the ethics and practice of librarianship” (2006). IFLA also situates privacy within the intellectual freedom ambit: “Freedom of access to information and freedom of expression, as expressed in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are essential concepts for the library and information profession. Privacy is integral to ensuring these rights” (2015, p. 1). Richards and Cornwell (2014) similarly argue that intellectual freedom and privacy are distinct concepts, but they are related and mutually reinforcing; Richards in an earlier work noted that “libraries are the traditional institution in which the right to read privately and autonomously has been developed and protected” (2008, p. 420). In particular, library privacy is seen as a good in a democratic society because it allows library users to engage with information and ideas – especially unpopular ideas – and form their own thoughts. Without such privacy, we are forced from independence and the space – both literal and metaphorical – to develop our thoughts and capacities enough to exercise the duties of democratic citizenship. As a support of intellectual freedom, intellectual privacy is a necessary underpinning for a competent citizenry. Library privacy is important, as we face “steadily narrowing opportunities for serenity and reflection. Without such opportunities, freedom of thought becomes a mocking phrase, and without freedom of thought, there can be no free society” *Kovacs v Cooper*, 336 U.S. 77 (1949) at 97 (Frankfurter, J., concurring). This, at least, is the ideal within the paradox.

However, libraries *qua library* are institutions, embedded in broader systems of regulation, including legal, economic, technological, and social regulation (Lessig, 2006), and of oppression. Internet services and technological infrastructures are fraught, potentially exposing their users – including library users – to “discriminations [...] by police, the government, and online” (McDonald et al., 2023, p. 481). Indeed, “[t]he world has never seen anything like the power held and used by modern technology companies. It has never been easier to surveil people and collect, store, search, analyze, and share their personal information” (Hartzog, 2021, p. 1682). However, the risks imposed by these systems of dataveillance depend upon one’s positionality. Many LGBTQ+ South Koreans forewent reporting their illness – and receiving treatment – early in the pandemic because the ways in which contact tracing was conducted risked outing; as Guyan explains, “Queer individuals leave behind a data trail of locations, contacts, messages, likes, check-ins and purchases that contribute to an evidence base of information about one’s gender, sex, and/or sexuality” (2022, p. 455). I needn’t click a box that says “nonbinary, assigned female at birth”: behavioural data, collected from everything from period trackers to Spotify, speaks for me. Of course, it speaks in “measurable types,” a deceptively univocal “discursive world constructed according to, and for, those who are in power [...] where] the complexities of our emotional and psychological lives online are flattened out for purposes of mass-scale, approximate data analysis” (Cheney-Lipold, 2017, p. 53).

When we provide digital services from third-party vendors – everything from basic Internet to e-books – we become a party, in at least a small part, to the loss of our patrons’ privacy. And LGBTQ+ library employees, depending on the jurisdiction in which they live, may have very little legal protection for their privacy or employment. And yet, both patrons and employees will engage with the library out of necessity. Particularly for low-income patrons, the library’s digital resources can be a critical lifeline, connecting them with employment resources, government supports, community, and yes, enjoyment. However, these free resources come at the high cost of data collection; “decisions about data – what to count, how to count, and who to count? – invite differential harms for queer communities” (Guyan 2022, p. 457). McDonald et al. found that “librarians act as ‘privacy intermediaries’ for

patrons” (2023, p. 480). In this role, librarians must develop a concept of privacy that is far more than intellectual freedom. As Poole (2020) notes, “social justice has vital implications for the ethics of access and the roles and responsibilities as well as the agency of archivists [and other LIS professionals]” (p. 1). Queer privacy – and visibility – has long been subject to policing in information institutions. The commitment to “[a]ll points of view” that is meant to be embodied in intellectual freedom was not sufficient to protect queer people from being fired by the Library of Congress during the McCarthy era (Seiter, 2020, p. 110).

There has been a strong legislative turn with regard to privacy, away from notice-and-consent-based privacy self-management regimes towards what can be called a data protection approach. Perhaps best exemplified by the EU’s *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR), data protection regimes focus on organizational compliance, requiring technical and organizational measures to provide for the security of personal data, that personal data only be processed on a lawful basis, and that organizations be prepared to respond when people (“data subjects”) assert any of a number of individual rights regarding their data. In contrast to the data protection approach, which focuses on privacy from individual rights and compliance-oriented perspectives, privacy in communities and within institutions is fundamentally relational. This is because, as noted above, “privacy” is more than compliance, rights, and intellectual freedom. Privacy is fundamentally human, inescapably tied to questions of identity, power, and belonging.

Equity Impact

As noted by Farkas (2019), “Libraries rarely design services to specifically exclude certain patron groups, but exclusion is often the unfortunate result of not considering the unique needs and circumstances of all community members” (para. 2). The work with LGBTQ+ people is critical for not only improving customer service but to provide equitable access to information. Article 2 of the IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and Other Information Workers explicitly states, “in order to promote inclusion and eradicate discrimination, librarians and other information workers ensure that the right of accessing information is not denied and that equitable services are provided for everyone whatever their age, citizenship, political belief, physical or mental ability, gender identity, heritage, education, income, immigration and asylum-seeking status, marital status, origin, race, religion or sexual orientation.” Kosmicki (2019-2020) notes that, “when libraries are actively attempting to understand and participate in their communities, they can develop services tailored to meet community needs” (p. 56).

Equity comes in many forms and is different from equality. Equity considers all aspects that may affect opportunities, while equality refers to the treatment of everyone the same. For example, one challenge in serving vulnerable populations is that of transportation. Social equity programs are becoming more common in libraries partnering with agencies to support and offer transportation, food, shelter, etc. Libraries are catalysts to help with social inclusion (Kosmicki, 2019-2020, p. 58), which then has an equitable impact on LGBTQ+ populations. For example, LGBTQ+ are often faced with higher levels of isolation and lack support from society often to move forward in life. Librarians may not realize that the services and resources provided can impact the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth who have higher levels of suicide, as noted by Di Giacomo et al. in 2018.

McDonald et al. describe librarians’ privacy efforts as “intersectional thinking: taking into account not only patrons’ identities as users of the library system, but as individuals with

a host of identity characteristic that represent potential vulnerabilities; and not only the system of the library itself, but the multiple potentially oppressive systems that converge to allow for information access in that space” (2023, p. 480). How do we embed such intersectional thinking in our institutions and our profession? Libraries can begin by connecting equity to their culture; it must be the heart of the libraries' identity. This could come in many forms. Firstly, using equity audits to determine the gaps is a good start. Specifically considering LGBTQ+ populations – are they getting hired? Promoted? Is there disrespect present? Examining your organization is not only a process but may uncover sensitive findings. Library policies are another critical aspect that can have a direct equity impact. While policies may look fair on paper, how LGBTQ+ library workers experience them may differ. Ask library workers to find out but operate sensitively because many workers may hesitate to respond to such questions truthfully. Provide multiple channels, including anonymous channels, and work towards creating safety and belonging. Breeze and Leigh write about the context of universities in the UK, but their observations ring true in information institutions as well: “Institutional approaches to sexuality, gender diversity, and LGBTQ+ people in education are overwhelmingly articulated as inclusion, which in practice means policy development, training, diversity monitoring, and accreditation schemes [...] Inclusion implies that LGBTQ+ people are external [...] to be invited in, and puts belonging in question” (Breeze and Leigh, 2023, p. 97). Building safety, belonging, and community cannot be done by fiat, policy, or data collection. It must be done through relationship. While the library community has the desire to support LGBTQ+ stakeholders, there are still less consistently available knowledge, resources, and information to help them locate resources despite challenges due to the pandemic. In fact, Villagran and Hofman (2023) remind us that for LGBTQ+, there is a requirement of “willingness as well as institutional responsibility and cultural competence to support LGBTQ+” stakeholders and protection of privacy in the interest of equity and justice.

Impacts on Library Services and Marketing

To be an intermediary – of information, privacy, and of access – is a tremendous responsibility and privilege. Libraries, in ensuring safety and belonging who they are and for LGBTQ+ stakeholders, including employees and users, must accept the seemingly dual nature of that responsibility. In particular, libraries must work to increase the access and visibility of services, programming, and materials to and for LGBTQ+ folks, without forcing LGBTQ+ people or communities into visibility. According to Mehra & Braquet (2007), there are many barriers unique to LGBTQ+ people, which include social isolation, perceived negative responses, lack of political representation and formalized support systems, and "inadequate information support services and no awareness of existing resources" (p. 547). “Inadequacies of informational services and awareness speak largely of deficiencies in library collections and/or services and marketing practices” (Pierson, 2017, p. 248). Addressing those inadequacies in order to build relationship requires – like all relationships – commitment.

In times of literal plague, fire and flood, where book bans and armed confrontations of drag queen storytimes are becoming far too familiar, libraries are coming together to utilize marketing strategies to strengthen not only who they are but what libraries do. These challenges, while often a threat, can strengthen libraries (Dankowski, 2023). For example, Kobabe’s award-winning book, *Gender Queer*, the autobiography of a nonbinary person’s journey of self-identity, was the most-banned book in the United States in 2021 and 2022 (Italie, 2023). When libraries remove such books or limit access to them, this invalidates the story of any person that may identify with that narrative. Many school libraries have fought back to keep challenged texts on their library shelves, arguing against challenges on the basis

of the “literary value and impact” (Alter, 2022; Krauth, 2022) that these texts have on LGBTQ students when it comes to identity and representation. Even if the library loses the challenge to keep a text like *Gender Queer* on its shelves, community involvement with these discussions is valiant as this creates a deeper connection with a library's customer base. Having the library step into these discussions – always, of course, guided by and highlighting the voices of LGBTQ+ people who have chosen to be visible – changes the picture. The library should become a visible support for its LGBTQ+ stakeholders, and a bigger, more visible target for the homo- and transphobic attackers. But it can only do this effectively if, in making its offerings more visible, the library is scrupulously conscientious of the privacy of the queer folk it serves, who are much more vulnerable than the institution.

It is commitment that is the key. Pride Month’s corporatization and “rainbow washing” make it easy to market to queer folk without being for queer folk. Dependent upon the history of an organization and the culture, if such an above action is ‘pretending’ to be more inclusive by including such a text on the shelves, this can actually do more harm to the relationship. Trust does not happen overnight, but don’t make LGBTQ+ communities doubt your library’s integrity by only taking this one action. As Mehra & Braquet express, “lack of visibility and negative LGBTQ stereotypes can be addressed by promoting discussion surrounding sexual orientation/homosexuality/gender identity issues in an open and nonjudgmental environment” (p. 557). Library and information science professionals should make efforts to further dialogue around these topics in addition to conventional means, such as “adequate signage, advertising, and marketing to create awareness about the existence of resources.” (p. 557).

In 2021, the Swedish Library Association Expert Network for Working with LGBTQ+ Issues in the Library developed a guide with a proposed taxonomy that describes how the library can work with LGBTQ+ issues. Of particular interest to marketing was pillar number four: “LGBTQ+ perspectives are included in the physical and digital space and in public activities”:

‘The staff agree on the importance of representation and a norm-critical perspective in public activities. The library cooperates with local associations working with LGBTQ+ issues. LGBTQ+ perspectives are implemented in the collection management planning and showcasing of items, and are integrated into the work on searchability. The library works with representation on the basis of a norm-critical LGBTQ+ perspective in its external communication and marketing.’ (p. 32)

For libraries, this may mean breaking down and stepping away from stereotypes, supporting LGBTQ+ library workers and the community, and promoting awareness of LGBTQ+ issues within communication strategies.

While beyond the scope of the focus of this article, it is critical to mention the importance of social media when it comes to library marketing. Social media has given many LGBTQ+ people, especially those who are geographically isolated or unsafe to come out, a platform to connect and feel a sense of belonging. LGBTQ+ may connect with Queer influencers as they can serve as individuals that represent and validate experiences. Wexelbaum (2017) examined the global promotion of LGBTQ resources and services through social media, finding that “while social media and Web 2.0 appear to increase access to LGBTQ information, the authority, validity, objectivity, and safety of these unregulated information resources varies widely.... Public and academic librarians who wish to provide outreach to LGBTQ information seekers should join their online communities and connect a diverse population of local and global users to legitimate, relevant LGBTQ information resources and services” (p. 126). It is also critical that librarians adopt an “intersectional mindset” in supporting all patrons, but

especially LGBTQI2SA+ patrons, in protecting themselves from digital surveillance, given that “big data, including those gathered through social media, leave [marginalized] individuals vulnerable to job and education discrimination and predictive policing” (McDonald et al., 2023, p. 481).

Further, which relates to external communication above, “as libraries push more of their collections, resources, and services online, they should also continue to collect physical LGBTQ resources whenever possible, and communicate through local LGBTQ social media channels that those resources exist at the library.” (Wexelbaum, 2017, p. 128). In ads, campaigns, flyers and other visualizations created for marketing, it is essential that libraries not only include real people who identify as LGBTQ+ if they wish to but include them in the conversation and decision-making. Connect with diverse staff within the library and with the external LGBTQ+ populations that visit the library and ask their opinions. In order to make LGBTQ+ marketing work and have an impact, whether promoting a program, a resource, or a service, libraries should support these communities year-round and not just on specific ‘events’ or ‘holidays.’ Finally, it is important to honor the community’s feedback on what to include or improve, what to cease doing, what to get rid of, and what is harmful. “As a possible distraction from the root of the problems, over-attention to the question of ‘bias’ can excuse [things] that should be opposed entirely rather than merely being made more inclusive” (Guyan, 2022, p.457).

Conclusion

Privacy efforts within libraries are often checkbox exercises focused on policy and compliance. However, equitable queer privacy in libraries requires relationship building, competence building, and critical engagement with systems within and without the library with an eye to equity. There is no one way to be queer. It is important to recognize that we are not referring to a homogenous group, but rather queerness entails just as much intersectionality as other identities, gender, race, religion, age, for example. However, despite the challenges faced regarding privacy and equity for Queer (including but not limited to LGBTQI2SA+) library users, the news is not all doom and gloom. Brown (2023) shares that Pride celebrations occurred across 107 countries, and there are over 220 LGBTQ+ activist organizations worldwide. There are events hosted worldwide with calls to action, such as the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia & Transphobia, Transgender Day of Remembrance, and National Coming Out Day. There are at least 225 cities, counties, and municipalities in the United States alone that prohibit discrimination based on gender expression, and gender identity, with over 400 prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation. As libraries and librarians, we continue to fight to ensure the right to access information is not denied and that equitable services are provided for queer people.

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