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Promoting privacy

Online and reputation management as an information literacy skill

The privacy concerns surrounding Facebook and other social networking sites have brought online reputation management to the forefront of discussions of privacy within libraries. Beyond online social networking, comprehensive online reputation management encompasses a huge range of technologies capable of documenting our digital lives.

Examples emerge daily of the ability for online media to record and release every action and mistake—from unflattering photos, to scandalous text messages, to voice messages and recorded phone calls— that scatter across the Internet like so many digital ashes.

The lesson is loud and clear—maintaining one's online presence is absolutely essential in the 21st century for legal, employment, and financial reasons, as well as for personal safety. While important advocacy work is being done to encourage corporations to protect private user data,[1] libraries are also moving toward integrating online reputation management into privacy awareness events and existing digital literacy instruction.

Online reputation management is increasingly essential for every age group from middle schoolers (and even younger) through newly online retirees. For university students, it takes very little time to develop a large and complex digital legacy that has the potential to shape online reputations for years to come.

Online reputation management gets personal

While corporations and politicians have been concerned with online reputation management for some time, a small industry is now growing to help individuals manage their online presence. Companies like ReputationDefender[2] can be hired to help individuals locate and remove problematic content from the Internet. ReputationDefender offers to search for information about you or your family, destroy "inaccurate, inappropriate, hurtful and slanderous information," and "deliver control over how others are able to perceive you on the Internet." The marketing strategy—search, destroy, control—likens online reputation management to fighting a war with information, and recent research suggests that a battle over data privacy is already being fought.

In 2009, Microsoft commissioned a study to examine attitudes about data privacy, and discovered that 79 percent of human resources recruiters in the United States report researching job candidate behavior online during the recruitment process.[3] Recruiters are looking for more than Google hits; in addition to searching social media sites like Facebook, about one third of recruiters surveyed mentioned researching candidates through online forums, virtual world sites, (e.g., SecondLife), and online gaming sites.[4] The undergraduates I teach are surprised that their World of Warcraft accounts could cost them a job—and Microsoft found that consumers are less likely than HR recruiters to believe such research is

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justified. Those between the ages of 18 and 24 are more likely than the general population to believe that researching candidates' social networking sites for hiring purposes is inappropriate.[5] For the age group that is most likely to have a robust digital legacy, as well as arguably being the most at the mercy of hiring managers, such sentiments may appear naïve.

However, research conducted by the University of California-Berkeley and the University of Pennsylvania released in 2010 indicated that young people are just as likely as older adults to express concern over privacy issues.[6] The authors conclude that while those between the ages of 18 and 24 are concerned about online privacy, "the current business environment along with other factors sometimes encourages young adults to release personal data in order to enjoy social inclusion even while in their most rational moments they may espouse more conservative norms."[7] The authors also found that young adults are more likely to be ignorant of privacy laws, assuming that privacy laws are more protective of online information. These findings indicate that young people may aspire to comprehensive online privacy, and are therefore less tolerant of the researching tactics companies use to unearth and evaluate their online identities.

Jeffrey Rosen wrote in the *New York Times* that a new set of social norms may arise to encourage individuals to be aware of the potential hazards of poor security of one's online identity.[8]

He cites Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's statement that "people have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds but more openly and with more people, and that social norm is just something that has evolved over time."[9] However, as technology quickens the pace of social change, Rosen argues that "As people continue to experience the drawbacks of living in a world that never forgets, they may well learn to hesitate before posting information."[10]

Information literacy and the shape of new digital privacy norms

Librarians are in a unique position to shape and promote digital privacy norms, as promoting an understanding of online reputation management is an extension of the skills we already teach. Library professionals have always been particularly aware of the privacy implications of digital information—the flipside of the cliché, "information wants to be free," is that the information we'd most like to protect is often the most vulnerable to escape. Successful online reputation management requires an in-depth understanding of several skills that are essential for lifelong information literacy, and is an example of ACRL Information Literacy Standard 5, related to understanding the ethics of information.[11]

Managing online privacy requires prior understanding of the implications of sharing information online *before* a digital object is created. By the time a college senior conducts searches on Facebook to clear up any potentially compromising photos, it may be too late to secure complete control of one's online reputation completely. Managing one's online identity also requires an understanding of the complex web of relationships that constitute social networking sites—not only among the users themselves, but among corporate interests and other third parties that have access to user information. Most importantly, users of social media must understand the ease and rapidity with which digital information is duplicated and released once it has been generated. There are several ways information literacy librarians can integrate online reputation management into existing services and instruction.

1) Expand the ethics conversation. ACRL Standard 5 emphasizes the ethical dissemination of information; these ethics certainly also cover the ethical treatment of private information. Just as students are fully aware of how easy it is to gain access to copyrighted content over the Internet, consider how easy it is for others to gain

access to their private online information. The legal implications of sharing private information online are a particular area of focus, as even dedicated social networkers lack knowledge in this area.

2) Promote user empowerment. In workshops or classes, it's important to emphasize the incredible self-marketing opportunities that exist through online social networks and media, rather than focusing solely on the potential negative outcomes and privacy horror stories. We know that students of all ages are already concerned about privacy; focus on the ways that users are empowered to shape their online reputation and promote themselves through awareness, vigilance, and critical thinking.

3) Set an example. Promote privacy from within the library's existing digital technologies and online reference tools. If your library provides text reference services, post the library's privacy policy along with the text number. Such a notice is an indication that these communications should be private, and are a subtle way to influence these developing social norms. Use the advertisement of your social media services as a springboard for discussion of these issues involved, perhaps by linking to a YouTube video that discusses privacy issues.

4) Make connections. This issue provides a great opportunity to coordinate with campus career services and freshman and senior seminars to create workshops and collaborate on creating awareness materials. Courses are increasingly being offered by business schools examining the implications of social media marketing, and faculty members teaching these classes are excellent people to collaborate with.

5) Celebrate privacy. ALA's first Privacy Week was May 2-8, 2010, and International Data Privacy Day[12] was January 28, 2011. These events offer great opportunities to promote online privacy as an issue of user empowerment, encourage dialogue across your campus, and expand the library's visibility and relevance.

New technologies to meet changing privacy needs

As awareness of privacy issues increases, new technologies will emerge to address user concerns. Researchers at the University of Washington are working on a project called Vanish that would "ensure that all copies of certain data become unreadable after a user-specified time, without any specific action on the part of a user, without needing to trust any single third party to perform the deletion, and even if an attacker obtains both a cached copy of that data and the user's cryptographic keys and passwords."[13] The idea of digital "expiration dates" may soon be applied to other applications, including social networking, and developments in this area will have wide-ranging implications on issues ranging from online privacy to intellectual property.

Another development to watch for is Diaspora, currently being developed as an open-source social network.[14] The project is conceptualized as a "privacy-aware" social

network; while the specifics of the privacy controls have yet to be fully articulated, I suspect that we will see many new open-source technologies released in the near future to address user demand for greater privacy control.

Developments in online reputation management are rapidly changing, but increased awareness and innovation should be greeted as an opportunity for information literacy librarians to engage directly with the privacy issues that will affect our patrons and our online culture well into the future.

Notes

1. See ALA's Privacy Revolution campaign at www.privacyrevolution.org (accessed February 16, 2011).

2. "ReputationDefender," 2010, www.reputationdefender.com (accessed February 16, 2011).

3. "Online Reputation in a Connected World, Cross-Tab," January 2010, available at download.microsoft.com/.../DPD _Online%20Reputation%20Research _overview.pdf (accessed February 16, 2011).

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Chris Jay Hoofnagle, Jennifer King, Su Li, and Joseph Turow, "How Different are Young Adults from Older Adults When it Comes to Information Privacy Attitudes and Policies?" April 14, 2010, available at SSRN: ssrn.com/abstract=1589864 (accessed February 16, 2011).

7. Ibid., 20.

8. Jeffrey Rosen, "The Web Means the End of Forgetting," *New York Times,* July 19, 2010.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, ALA, 2000, www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/standards.pdf (accessed February 16, 2011).

12. See dataprivacyday2010.org.
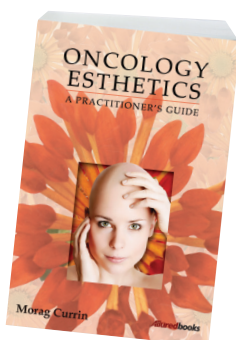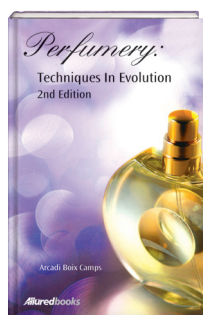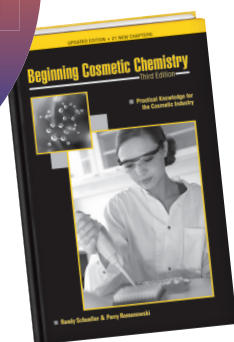
13. See vanish.cs.washington.edu/index.html.

14. See joindiaspora.com. ℵ