Technology in Practice. Too Much Information?

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Too Much Information?

Navigating the privacy-expectation continuum

by Meredith Farkas

I have many friends who use the mobile location-based networking site Foursquare to broadcast exactly where they are at various points during their day using the GPS on their phone.

In my Twitter feed, I see posts stating that one friend is at a conference, another is out to lunch, and another is at the grocery store.

With all due respect to those friends, not only can I not envision who would want to know that I'm at the grocery store, but I don't think I'd want the world to know where I am at all times. The universe of what I am comfortable sharing doesn't extend that far.

Some might argue that we're in a post-privacy world, but I've seen the opposite end of the spectrum as well. I've had students in my Web 2.0 class at San José State University's School of Library and Information Science who are unwilling to create an account on Facebook because they are concerned about sharing any personal information online.

I also know people who are happy to share information about themselves online, but never post anything about their children. The continuum of comfort with sharing online is vast, and the people I know represent just about every point on that continuum.

Social media has rapidly blurred the boundaries between private and public, but we live in a world where people have widely varying expectations of and desires for privacy.

There is no right or wrong in people's comfort with sharing. Problems emerge, however, when our lives collide at conferences, in the library, and in social situations. In those moments, the person who broadcasts every aspect of his or her life, which others are certainly a part of, might just violate the privacy of someone in a very different place on that sharing continuum.

At ALA Midwinter, a board member set up a video and audio stream of the Library and Information Technology Association's board meeting. It was an open meeting, of course, but a number of participants were uncomfortable with video streaming for a variety of reasons (privacy, the fact that it had not been discussed in advance, etc.) and the stream was shut down. While I am a vigorous advocate of open meetings being made accessible to members who cannot afford to attend conferences, I also agree that this should be done with the knowledge of everyone who will be attending those meetings so they can make an informed decision regarding their participation.

Librarians have always had a role in protecting the privacy of their patrons—sometimes even going to court over it. As our libraries have moved into the social media world, Facebook pages, and using third-party sites to extend their reach. It's important that libraries protect the privacy of their patrons in these spaces, both by examining the privacy policies of any sites they're using that patrons might contribute to and by educating patrons about online privacy. Our educational role is especially valuable when working with teens who may not understand the long-term consequences of posting sensitive information about themselves online.

In spite of what Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook may say, privacy is not dead, and certainly not when it comes to the relationship between a library and its patrons. Life would certainly be easier if we all had the same boundaries when it comes to sharing information online, but in the complex social media environment we all navigate, we must strive to be cognizant and respectful of the boundaries of others.

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