Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Academic Librarians in Canada Concerned About Online and Patron Privacy but Lack Knowledge About Institutional Procedures and Policies

A Review of:
Tummon, N., & McKinnon, D. (2018). Attitudes and practices of Canadian academic librarians regarding library and online privacy: A national study. *Library and Information Science Research, 40*(2), 86-97. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2018.05.002

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Abstract

Objective – To assess attitudes of Canadian academic librarians regarding online privacy issues and to gauge their knowledge of related procedures and policies at their institutions.

Design – Attitudinal online survey in English.

Setting – English-language academic libraries in 10 Canadian provinces.

Subjects – English-speaking academic librarians across Canada.

Methods – Survey, based on Zimmer's 2014 study of librarians in the United States of America, announced via email to 1,317 potential participants, managed using LimeSurvey, and available from April 7 to May 5, 2017. In 28 optional multiple choice or Likert scale questions, the survey prompted participants to express their attitudes regarding online privacy scenarios and privacy-related library practices, including patron data collection. Results were analyzed in Microsoft Excel and SPSS.

Main Results – The survey response rate was 13.9% (183 respondents). Job position, age, or geographic location did not appear to influence attitudes towards privacy, with almost all respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing that individuals should control who sees their personal information (96.2%) and that companies collect too much such information (97.8%). Respondents voiced slightly less concern about government information collection, but nearly all respondents agreed that governments should not share personal information with third parties without authorization and that companies should only use information for the purposes they specify. When asked if privacy issues are more important today than five years ago, 69.9% of respondents said they were more concerned and 78.1% noted they knew more than five years before about privacy-related risks.

Regarding online behaviour, 53.3% of respondents felt web behaviour tracking is both beneficial and harmful, with 29.1% considering it harmful, and 13.7% finding it neither beneficial nor harmful. Online shopping and identify theft, social media behaviour tracking, search engine policy display, and personal information sharing were also areas of concern for respondents, with the majority noting they were somewhat or very concerned about these issues.

In terms of library practices, most respondents strongly agreed that libraries should not share personal information, circulation records, or Internet use records with third parties unless authorized, though 33% of respondents noted they could neither agree nor disagree that libraries are doing all they can to prevent unauthorized access to such information. The majority of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that libraries should play a role in educating patrons about privacy issues. Many respondents (68.9%) did not know if their libraries had practices or procedures for dealing with patron information requests from law enforcement or governmental representatives. The majority of respondents did not know if patrons at their libraries had inquired about privacy issues, 42.3% did not know if their libraries communicate privacy policies to patrons, and 45.4% noted their libraries did not inform patrons about library e-resource privacy policies. Many respondents (55.2%) had attended educational sessions about online privacy and surveillance in the past five years, while 52.2% noted their libraries had not hosted or organized such sessions over the same period.

Conclusion – Survey participants showed concern about online and patron privacy, though their lack of knowledge about local procedures and policies highlights a potential need for enhanced privacy education.

Commentary

This study adds a Canadian perspective to the corpus of attitudinal studies of academic librarians and online privacy issues, thus enriching international perspectives in this area of investigation. The area of privacy and libraries is complex and referenced in many professional library organization statements at the international level (O'Brien, Young, Arlitsch, & Benedict, 2018, p. 737). But how much academic librarians understand about developments—particularly in areas such as the tracking of reading behaviours (Lynch, 2017) or against the backdrop of legal obligations such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union (Bailey, 2018) – may not necessarily be deep enough to ensure libraries are following their professional privacy statements and institutional policies. This study, by identifying a lack of knowledge about privacy-related procedures and policies, can inspire future researchers to investigate perceived educational gaps in more detail.

The study, which used Zimmer (2014) as a guide, provides an illustration of how surveys about privacy can be replicated and compared, with this survey notably including a comparison of attitudes about the sharing of patron information with both Zimmer (2014) and a 2008 American Library Association survey. While not a standardized questionnaire since the original Zimmer survey was tailored to the Canadian context,

the comparability of results across these three studies indicates the study is valid according to the guidelines laid out in Boynton & Greenhalgh (2004) for questionnaire research (p. 1313). The full survey instrument is an appendix to the article.

The survey included librarians whose emails were checked on institutional websites and the response rate to the study was low (13.9%), so attitudes expressed in this study are perhaps not generalizable or representative of all Canadian academic librarians. Additional surveys and more inclusion of the second official Canadian language, French, might enable deeper examination into national attitudes and provide insight into the question of generalizability.

Researchers in other countries could easily use this study as a template for conducting their own research, translating the survey into other languages, and tailoring it to local contexts. The questions raised here about a potential education gap are important and deserve not only the attention of future researchers, but also should inspire library leaders, professional organizations, and individual institutions to analyze their local situations and implement training on privacy-related trends where there are gaps.

References

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