

IFLA Statement on Access to Personally Identifiable Information in Historical Records

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Endorsed by IFLA Governing Board, 3 December 2008

The International Federation of Library Associations affirms that free access to information and freedom of expression are principles which apply not only to present matters but to the personal and private raw materials of the historical record, which may be guarded in the short term against disclosure or debate, but must be preserved and made available in the long result of time as part of our common heritage. Accordingly be it resolved by IFLA that:

- Librarians should give their full support for access to information for researchers who require personally identifiable information for biographical, genealogical and other research and publications, and they should lobby their legislators when information is likely to be disposed of by destruction, or is closed for an unreasonable period of time.
- Librarians should oppose the destruction of records that would make it possible for the government to obscure historical data, and should work with their national archives and associations of archives professionals on criteria for transparent and rationally constructed systems of regulations for retention of and access to records.
- Librarians should lobby for the swift opening of previously closed categories of records once their content is not capable of being used to the detriment of living persons.
- Librarians should recognize an obligation to monitor their governments' legislation in regard to confidentiality of data records. In particular, librarians should support the need for privacy laws to protect library users from such abuses as government agencies monitoring their reading and research habits.

Rationale

The importance of personally identifiable information in archives is difficult to exaggerate. Records and data commonly collected by governments for a variety of the most pressing and positive reasons include but are not limited to: census (population) data; birth, death, and marriage certificates; military service records; pension records; wills and testaments; and school records. Archives, and many libraries, hold these kinds of records, or can provide access to such records for their patrons.

Such data links a particular individual's name to his or her details. Such a link creates what is called "personally identifiable information" (PII). It is possible to separate personally identifiable information from the collected data and use it for non-personal, statistical purposes, especially in today's electronic environment. However, this same environment

makes it possible to compile and reorder data from a variety of sources and create new data that may cause an official, corporate, or criminal invasion of individual privacy.

At the same time, this is precisely this type of data that researchers may need for genealogical research, as well as other historical and sociological analysis, and for researching governmental accountability for past, current, and future actions. Genealogy and family history respond to a deeply felt human need for identity that can be clarified and affirmed through family and community connection. Furthermore, the study of family history has introduced countless searchers to the techniques, as well as the joys and frustrations, of the scholarly process.

Concerns about identity theft and terrorism, and the developing law and jurisprudence of privacy are tending to encourage governments and archive repositories to impose restrictions on access to files containing personally identifiable information, and even to destroy records of this kind. IFLA accepts the necessity for protection of the privacy of living persons, for business confidentiality and for government information security insofar as these valid goals do not conflict with a higher public good. However, perpetual closure or destruction of records containing personally identifiable information, even in the name of privacy, commercial confidentiality or security concerns, is in the last analysis a pernicious form of censorship.

[Statements](#), [FAIFE \(Committee on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression\)](#), [Privacy](#), [Personally identifiable information](#), [Archives](#), [Access to information](#)

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Contact [Stephen Wyber](#)

Contact [Valensiya Dresvyannikova](#)
