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Library Privacy Heroes: Trailblazing Librarians Through Time

ABSTRACT

This article explores the history of privacy advocacy in American libraries, highlighting key figures who defended intellectual freedom against government surveillance and censorship. From early 20th-century anti-anarchist crackdowns to McCarthyism, the Patriot Act, and today's legislative challenges, librarians like M. Louise Hunt, Judith Krug, and the Connecticut Four have stood up for the right to read without fear. Their efforts shaped core library policies on confidentiality and continue to guide best practices in an era of mass data collection and surveillance.

KEYWORDS: *privacy, intellectual freedom, government surveillance, censorship, M. Louise Hunt, Judith Krug, Connecticut Four, McCarthyism, Patriot Act, Library Bill of Rights, Code of Ethics, confidentiality, Freedom to Read statement, Zoia Horn, Charlemae Hill Rollins, Ernestine Rose, Flora Ludington, Library Awaremess Program*

Privacy. In today's digital age of constant tracking online, social media sharing, and data collection by both corporations and governments, it's easy to forget that privacy is a fundamental right,[1,2] recognized in documents like the U.S. Constitution, which offers protections under the First and Fourth Amendments.[3] Privacy is vital to intellectual freedom and the open exchange of ideas. As the American Library Association (ALA) states, "privacy is essential to the exercise of free speech, free thought, and free association."[4]

U.S. libraries now serve as defenders of intellectual freedom, safeguarding patrons' right to seek information without fear of surveillance or repercussions. However, in earlier eras, their commitment to privacy was less certain. Throughout U.S. history, threats of government overreach, wartime hysteria, and ideological purges inspired pioneering library advocates to champion privacy, both for themselves and for their patrons. The actions of these past library privacy heroes highlight the ongoing importance of protecting privacy today and in the future.

1900s-1920s: Surveillance and Suppression

Privacy in libraries can be traced back to the early 1900s.[5] While many people were excited about new technologies and globalization at the turn of the twentieth century, others saw these same forces as silencing the voice of the individual.[6] Their anger led to bloodshed, and several high-profile assassinations by anarchists occurred, including the assassination of Russian Czar Alexander II in 1881[7] and U.S. President William McKinley in 1901. Anti-anarchist sentiments ran high.[8]

In 1906, the United States and Russia were allies to the extent that Russian spies were permitted to surveil places thought to be anarchist hangouts.

[1] American Library Association, "Privacy: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights," *American Library Association*, June 19, 2002, amended 2019, https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/privacy.

[2] International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, "IFLA Statement on Privacy in the Library Environment," 2015, revised 2020, https://www.ifla.org/publications/ifla-statement-on-privacy-in-the-library-environment/.

[3] U.S. Constitution, amends. I, IV.

[4] American Library Association, "Privacy: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights."

[5] Steven Witt, "The Evolution of Privacy within the American Library Association, 1906–2002," *Library Trends* 65, no. 4 (2017): 639–657, at 641, https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/items/110646.

[6] PBS, "Rise of Anarchism," *American Experience*, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/1900-anarchism/.

[7] David C. Rapoport, "Terrorism as a Global Wave Phenomenon: Anarchist Wave," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, ed. William R. Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, n.d.), https://oxfordre.com/politics/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-646.

[8] Thomas O'Rourke, "Chronicle Covers: The Assassination of President McKinley," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 4, 2018, https://www.sfchronicle.com/chronicle_vault/article/Chronicle-Covers-The-assassination-of-President-9200614.php.

Libraries that carried a wide range of materials, including controversial political works, became targets of such monitoring.[9] A New York court case that made national news revealed that Russian agents were watching library patrons and that "they follow all who call for books on anarchy." Testimony showed that the Russian government had "under observation all libraries in the city, including the Jewish branches."[10] In this case, an immigrant reader was followed home and arrested after stealing two German-language books, one of which was a flagged book.[11]

Public criticism at the time, however, was not aimed at the spies who violated patron privacy or the librarians who cooperated with them, but at the libraries themselves for providing anarchist materials in the first place. In 1919, Senator Clayton R. Lusk remarked that "literature of an extremely radical nature is being very generally and very openly circulated throughout the entire state, principally by organizations located in New York City."[12]

As the United States entered World War I, fear of internal threats and foreign influence intensified, leading to what became known as the First Red Scare – a period marked by suspicion of radicals, anarchists, socialists, and anyone perceived as disloyal.[13] Building on earlier fears of anarchist violence, the federal government enacted the Sedition Act of 1918, an extension of the Espionage Act of 1917, which made it illegal to criticize the U.S. government, the military, or the war effort.[14] In the climate of wartime paranoia, federal officials urged libraries to remove materials considered subversive, including books on anarchism and many written in German.[15]

The shift was abrupt. Cleveland Public Library Vice Director Linda Eastman recalled that before the war her library "carefully maintained an attitude of strict neutrality in all matters affected by the war." But after war was declared, "all of the policies and methods above mentioned were reversed; not only was the Library no longer neutral, but it had its own contributions to make toward the winning of the war."[16] As women devoted themselves to the Red Cross and other wartime efforts, fiction checkouts declined. Libraries shifted their collections toward books on military affairs, food production, and conservation, selecting titles that fostered patriotic unity, avoided controversial viewpoints, and encouraged the Americanization of foreign-born citizens.[17]

Patriotism rose to such a fever pitch that even pacifist librarians were not immune to scrutiny. M. Louise Hunt, who privately opposed the war, refused to buy war bonds, even though she organized the bond drive at her Portland, Oregon, library. Her privacy was violated when Liberty Loan officials interrogated her at work after receiving an anonymous tip.[18] The press sensationalized the story, falsely claiming, "she would rather be ravished by a Hun than support the United States in this war."[19] What Hunt actually said was, "I merely wish to claim the constitutional right privately to hold a minority opinion." For that, the library board threatened her with dismissal.

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[9] Witt, "The Evolution of Privacy within the American Library Association," 641.

[10] "Russian Spies on Watch in New York Libraries," *The New York Times*, June 23, 1906, https://www.nytimes.com/1906/06/23/archives/russian-spies-on-watch-in-new-york-libraries-they-follow-all-who.html.

[11] Monica Westin, "Undercover at the Library: Spies, Reference Desks, and the Invention of Privacy," *Syllabus*, June 19, 2019, https://syllabusproject.org/undercover-at-the-library/.

[12] "Anarchistic Books in Public Library, Lusk Agent Testifies," *New York Tribune*, December 27, 1919, https://www.newspapers.com/image/79077741/.

[13] Roland Martin and the Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Red Scare," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last updated October 2, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Red-Scare-politics.

[14] Christina L. Boyd, "Sedition Act of 1918," *First Amendment Encyclopedia*, Middle Tennessee State University, January 1, 2009, last updated November 13, 2025, https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/article/sedition-act-of-1918/.

[15] Kathleen Doane, "Anti-German Hysteria Swept Cincinnati in 1917," *Our History* (Cincinnati.com blog), June 6, 2012, archived January 20, 2014, https://web.archive.org/web/20140120043547/http://cincinnati.com/blogs/ourhistory/2012/06/06/anti-german-hysteria-swept-cincinnati-in-1917/.

[16] Wayne A. Wiegand, *An Active Instrument for Propaganda: The American Public Library during World War I* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1989), 30.

[17] Wiegand, *An Active Instrument for Propaganda*, 32.

[18] Kimberly Jensen, "Women's 'Positive Patriotic Duty' to Participate," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 118, no. 2 (2017): 199–233, at 210, https://www.ohs.org/oregon-historical-quarterly/award-winning-articles/2018-joel-palmer-award.cfm.

[19] F. J. D. John, "'Traitorous' Librarian's Crime: Not Buying Bonds," *Offbeat Oregon*, May 20, 2018, https://offbeatoregon.com/1805c.traitor-louise-hunt-wouldnt-buy-war-bonds-496.html.

When her director defended her, she, too, was threatened with dismissal, and Hunt ultimately resigned to keep the peace.[20] Hunt left Portland to go back to her home state of Maine. She continued her career as a librarian, and rose to be head librarian at the Racine Public Library in Wisconsin.[21]

1930s: Birth of Ethical Standards and the Library Bill of Rights

After the upheaval of World War I and the First Red Scare, librarians sought to define their professional values more clearly. A code of ethics for libraries had been proposed for decades, but it was Flora B. Ludington who took a ten-year-old draft and shaped it into a formal statement which was approved in 1939.[22] Ludington later served as ALA president (1953-1954), created the National Book Committee, and received the Joseph W. Lippincott Award in 1957.[23]

Ludington's *Code of Ethics* has changed several times in eighty-five years, but one constant has been its intention to protect privacy, as evidenced in the words, "It is the librarian's obligation to treat as confidential any private information obtained through contact with library patrons."[24]

At the same time Ludington was helping formalize the profession's ethical foundations, Ernestine Rose was broadening its reach to include diverse and underserved communities. A World War I Service librarian in France and Germany,[25] Rose later worked at New York City's Seward Park Branch, serving a predominantly Jewish community, before transferring to the 135th Street Branch in Harlem, which had become a majority African American neighborhood after the war.[26] There, she integrated the library staff by hiring the first African-American librarians[27] and purchased Afro–Puerto Rican scholar Arthur A. Schomburg's collection of African American literature in 1927, which became the foundation of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.[28] Her commitment to expanding access was so well regarded that M. Louise Hunt contacted her in 1936 for help locating books written by a prominent African American bishop from Racine, Wisconsin.[29]

In support of minority rights, Rose introduced the first *Library Bill of Rights* in 1939. The document reinforced every person's right to read and access literature that reflected their own experiences and voices.[30] The original version did not mention privacy, but its principles laid the foundation for later additions. In 2019, in response to expanded surveillance under the PATRIOT Act and Edward Snowden's revelations about NSA monitoring, the ALA added Article VII to the *Bill of Rights*, stating that "all people, regardless of origin, age, background, or views, possess a right to privacy and confidentiality in their library use."[31]

1940s-1950s: McCarthyism and the Fight Against Loyalty Oaths

After World War II ended in 1945, the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union esca-

[20] Jensen, "Women's 'Positive Patriotic Duty' to Participate," 209.

[21] John, "'Traitorous' Librarian's Crime."

[22] American Library Association, "Midwinter Council Minutes," *ALA Bulletin* 33, no. 2 (February 1939): 127-132, at 128, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25690092.

[23] Margaret L. Johnson, "Flora Belle Ludington: A Biography and Bibliography," *College & Research Libraries* 25, no. 5 (1964): 375–379, at 376, https://crl.acrl.org/index.php/crl/article/view/11711/13157.

[24] ALA, "Midwinter Council Minutes," 128.

[25] April Sanford, "Rescuing Ernestine Rose (1880–1961): Harlem Librarian and Social Activist," *Long Island History Journal* 22, no. 2 (2011), https://lihj.cc.stonybrook.edu/2011/articles/rescuing-ernestine-rose-1880-1961-harlem-librarian-and-social-activist/.

[26] Betty L. Jenkins, "A White Librarian in Black Harlem." *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 60, no. 3 (1990): 216–31, at 218, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4308477.

[27] Jenkins, "A White Librarian in Black Harlem," 225.

[28] Jenkins, "A White Librarian in Black Harlem," 223.

[29] M. Louise Hunt, "Hunt, M. Louise (1936)," New York Public Library Digital Collections, 1936, https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/ae5feba0-c31e-0139-94e3-0242ac110004?canvasIndex=2.

[30] Jenkins, "A White Librarian in Black Harlem," 225-226.

[31] American Library Association, "Privacy Article Added to Library Bill of Rights," *American Libraries* (May 2019), 7, https://alair.ala.org/items/6c399c9f-5b75-4d62-933b-cba03cf3a3f7.

lated, sparking the Second Red Scare. Fear of communist infiltration permeated every level of American society, giving rise to McCarthyism – a campaign led by Senator Joseph McCarthy to expose alleged subversives.[32] In response to this tension, President Harry S. Truman initiated the Federal Employee Loyalty Program, which subjected government workers to loyalty screenings in an effort to ensure their allegiance to the United States.[33]

Although the program only applied to federal employees, similar loyalty requirements soon appeared at the state and local levels, fueled by public fear and political pressure. State-employed librarians who followed the ALA principle that people should have access to multiple viewpoints found themselves under investigation for their associations and subscribed reading material, like newspapers. Some states like California had extremely strict loyalty oaths. In 1947, when half the Los Angeles County library staff resigned rather than sign such an oath, librarian Julia L. Steiner sued.[34] Described at the time as "a country librarian of old New England Stock,"[35] Steiner's case became the first loyalty-oath challenge to reach the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court found she lacked standing because she had not been fired,[36] but later plaintiffs who were fired also lost their cases.[37] Loyalty oaths remain legal in some forms to this day.

At the 1948 ALA Conference, members debated how to resist these pressures. Members recognized that librarians must be free to practice their profession without fear of dismissal for political, religious, or racial reasons.[38] One memorable voice was Charlemae Hill Rollins, an African American librarian at the Chicago Public Library for more than thirty years and a pioneering figure in children's literature. She advocated for the creation of African American literature written free of racial and ethnic stereotypes and wrote *We Build Together: A Reader's Guide to Negro Life and Literature* (1941).[39] During the conference, Rollins spoke candidly about government surveillance:

> I am speaking as a librarian under investigation…. They say my husband [federally employed meat inspector] is under investigation, but all the questions are about me. All the people up and down my stairway have been questioned as to what do I read, what magazines do I take, what organizations do I belong to?[40]

Her concerns were justified. Materials received by the author in response to her Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request revealed that while no FBI file existed under her name, forty-six pages about her husband contained thirty-three pages dedicated to her activities. This information included club memberships, public appearances, and teaching work, which documented an indirect connection to a local Communist Party.[41] Despite the revelations, neither Rollins faced professional consequences, and both continued their distinguished careers until retirement.[42,43]

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[32] Martin and the Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Red Scare."

[33] Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, "Truman's Loyalty Program," *National Archives*, https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/education/presidential-inquiries/trumans-loyalty-program.

[34] Louise S. Robbins, "After Brave Words, Silence: American Librarianship Responds to Cold War Loyalty Programs, 1947–1957," *Libraries & Culture* 30, no. 4 (1995): 345–365, at 348, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25542799.

[35] American Civil Liberties Union, "ACLU Seeks to Enjoin Los Angeles 'Loyalty Test,'" *ACLU-News* 12, no. 10 (October 1947): 2, https://digitallibrary.californiahistoricalsociety.org/object/14421?islandora_paged_content_page=2.

[36] Edwin N. Hughes and John E. Smith, "Loyalty at the Los Angeles County Library," *California Librarian*, December 1950, 107, https://archive.org/details/sim_california-librarian_1950-12_12_2/page/106/mode/2up.

[37] Louise S. Robbins, "The Library of Congress and Federal Loyalty Programs, 1947–1956: No 'Communists or Cocksuckers,'" *The Library Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (1994): 365–385, at 370-377, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4308967.

[38] "Council." *ALA Bulletin* 42, no. 9 (1948): P18–22, at P21, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25693048.

[39] Carolyn Tiedt, "Charlemae Hill Rollins," *Jim Crow Museum,* 2018, https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/question/2018/october.htm.

[40] *Proceedings, Sixty-Seventh Annual Conference of the American Library Association: Council Meetings, 14–18 June 1948, Atlantic City, New Jersey*, Record Group 1/1/1, Box 9, American Library Association Archives, photographed copies of quote provided to author via email.

[41] Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Rollins, Joseph Walter Sr. FBI Investigation Records During Truman's Loyalty Oath Program Began 1947*, FOIA Request No. 1645409-000, email to author, September 20, 2025.

[42] Tiedt, "Charlemae Hill Rollins."

[43] FBI, *Rollins, Joseph Walter Sr. FBI Investigation Records*, FOIA 1645409-000.

In 1950, the ALA formally protested such investigations with the passage of its *Resolution on Loyalty Programs*, declaring "the ALA strongly protested loyalty programs which inquired into a library employee's thoughts, reading matter, associates, or membership in organizations."[44]

By 1953, book burnings and censorship had become so pervasive that President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned in a Dartmouth College speech, "Don't join the book burners. Don't be afraid to go in your library and read every book, as long as any document does not offend our own ideas of decency. That should be the only censorship."[45]

That same year, ALA President Flora B. Ludington – the same Ludington who drafted ALA's *Code of Ethics* – released the *Freedom to Read Statement*, which reinforced Eisenhower's message and became a cornerstone of intellectual freedom.[46]

> We are aware… that books are not alone in being subjected to efforts of suppression. We are aware that these efforts are related to a larger pattern of pressures being brought against education, the press, films, radio and television. The problem is not only of actual censorship. The shadow of fear cast by these pressures leads… to an even larger voluntary curtailment [self-censorship] of expression by those who seek to avoid controversy.[47]

This seminal statement affirmed that patron reading choices should not be subject to external judgment or pre-labeling, thereby protecting patrons' right to privately explore ideas without intrusion or having their selections publicly scrutinized.

1960s-1970s: Rise of Government Surveillance and Fight for Confidentiality

In 1970, the Vietnam War dominated headlines, and anti-war protests were widespread. Librarians began reporting that so-called "IRS agents" were asking staff for lists of patrons checking out any bomb-making books. When these reports reached the press, North Carolina Senator Sam J. Ervin, Jr., Chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights, summoned Treasury Secretary David M. Kennedy to testify. Ervin said:

> I know that many members of Congress share my concern that practices so contrary to the Constitution of the United States and so inimical to intellectual freedom could be allowed or authorized by any federal department for any purpose. This is so because throughout history, official surveillance of the reading habits of citizens has been a litmus test of tyranny.[48]

Ervin discovered that the agents making the inquiries were not from the IRS but from another Treasury division – the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF). Kennedy responded, "The names of certain individuals were copied from the [library] records for comparison with suspects in specific bombings.... This information was furnished to the... police.... the FBI, County Sheriff… and.... the Secret Service." Although Ervin received answers, Kennedy did not commit to end the practice of seeking patron records.[49]

Among those alarmed by the revelations was librarian Judith Krug, a staunch First Amendment advocate who would become one of the most influential defenders of library freedom. Krug later helped found the Freedom to Read Foundation, launched Banned Books Week, and served for forty years as the first director of the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF).[50] In response to the ATF's overreach, she introduced ALA's *Policy on Confidentiality of Library Records*, asserting that "circulation records and other records identifying the names of library users [are] confidential in nature" and should not be released

[44] American Library Association, "Resolution on Loyalty Programs," *ALA Bulletin* 44, no. 8 (1950): 306, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25693425.

[45] Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Don't Join the Book Burners… Dwight David Eisenhower," *Library of Congress,* 1953, https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.0980090c/?sp=1&st=image.

[46] Johnson, "Flora Belle Ludington," 376.

[47] American Library Association, *The Freedom to Read* (May 2–3, 1953), https://www.library.illinois.edu/ala/wp-content/uploads/sites/74/2023/06/FreedToReadStatement_May1953.pdf.

[48] Judith F. Krug and James A. Harvey, "[Intellectual Freedom]," *American Libraries* 1, no. 9 (October 1970): 843–845, at 843, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25618054.

[49] Krug and Harvey, "[Intellectual Freedom]," 844.

[50] Leonard Kniffel, "We Remember – Judith Krug," *Jewish Women's Archive*, https://jwa.org/weremember/krug-judith.

"except pursuant to such process, order or subpoena" supplied by law enforcement.[51]

Zoia Horn, a Jewish immigrant from Ukraine, had come to the United States in 1926 at the age of eight.[52] Her love of libraries began soon after, during visits to New York's Seward Park Branch Library – the same branch where Ernestine Rose had worked. One of Rose's successors nurtured Horn's passion for reading and inspired her to become a librarian.[53]

By 1971, Horn was head of the reference department at Bucknell University and an active participant in the peace movement. While working at the library, she became acquainted with a new employee who later turned out to be an FBI informant. Through that connection, she was introduced to antiwar activists later known as the "Harrisburg Seven." That association brought her under FBI scrutiny when the activists were accused of conspiring to bomb heating tunnels in Washington, D.C. When asked to testify against them, Horn refused, explaining, "Spying in libraries and schools is something I protest."[54]

Horn was held in contempt of court and jailed for twenty days, becoming the first U.S. librarian ever jailed for an act of conscience. After the case collapsed when a key witness's credibility fell apart, she was released.[55] In the years that followed, she joined the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC), where her ethical reform efforts at times conflicted with those led by Judith Krug, Director of OIF.[56] In the wake of her arrest, Horn also introduced ALA's *Resolution on Governmental Intimidation*, urging that "the confidentiality of the professional relationship of librarians to the people they serve… be respected in the same manner as medical doctors to their patients, lawyers to their clients, and priests to the people they serve." The resolution was adopted in 1971.[57]

What librarians did not yet realize was that the FBI had launched an initiative called the Library Awareness Program to surveil library patrons. By 1973, word began spreading through the ALA that agents were again visiting libraries to request patron information.[58] By 1975, the ALA reaffirmed that patron confidentiality was a core professional value in its *Statement on Professional Ethics*, declaring that librarians "must protect the essential confidential relationship which exists between a library user and the library."[59]

1980s-1990s: Library Awareness Program Exposed and Progress Toward Privacy

However, FBI surveillance did not stop. In fact, it intensified in the 1980s. As political and military tensions between the Soviet Union and the U.S. escalated, the rivalry between the two superpowers deepened. Called the Cold War for avoiding direct warfare, this period was marked by espionage, propaganda, and the threat of mutual nuclear annihilation.[60] As tensions rose, librarians began to notice federal agents quietly asking about patrons – especially foreign nationals – who requested scientific or technical materials.[61]

Although none of the libraries contacted held any classified or top-secret material, agents urged librarians to report patrons whose research seemed

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[51] American Library Association, "Policy on Confidentiality of Library Records (Council Document No. 46)," *American Library Association Institutional Repository,* July 4, 1975, https://alair.ala.org/items/85a5bb32-edca-4026-b9dd-e4e00f903464.

[52] Bob Egelko, "Zoia Horn, Librarian Jailed for Not Testifying Against Protesters," *SFGate*, July 15, 2014, https://www.sfgate.com/nation/article/Zoia-Horn-1st-U-S-librarian-jailed-over-alleged-5624023.php.

[53] Zoia Horn, *Zoia!: Memoirs of Zoia Horn, Battler for People's Right to Know* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1995), 16-17.

[54] Jennifer Tibbetts, "The Outlaw," *Bucknell Magazine* 15, no. 4 (Fall 2022): 34–38, at 35, https://magazine.bucknell.edu/issue/fall-2022/the-outlaw/.

[55] Tibbetts, "The Outlaw," 36.

[56] Horn, *Zoia!,* 201–217.

[57] American Library Association, Social Responsibilities Round Table, *Government Intimidation*, June 1971, American Library Association Institutional Repository, https://alair.ala.org/items/a2635d08-10da-4a48-a2ce-450fe2b4df90.

[58] Bob Egelko, "FBI Checking Out Americans' Reading Habits: Bookstores, Libraries Can't Do Much to Fend Off Search Warrants," *SFGate,* June 23, 2002, https://www.sfgate.com/politics/article/FBI-checking-out-Americans-reading-habits-2826830.php.

[59] Paul Barber, "ALA Accepts New Statement of Professional Ethics," *American Library Association News,* January 19–25, 1975, https://alair.ala.org/handle/11213/12124.

[60] "Cold War," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/event/Cold-War.

[61] Robert D. McFadden, "F.B.I. in New York Asks Librarians' Aid in Reporting on Spies," *New York Times*, September 18, 1987, sec. A, p. 1, https://www.nytimes.com/1987/09/18/nyregion/fbi-in-new-york-asks-librarians-aid-in-reporting-on-spies.html.

"suspicious." In 1987, the New York Times exposed the practice in a front-page story. Dr. Helen Flowers, then president of the ALA, immediately denounced the FBI's actions in a letter to Acting Director John F. Otto, condemning "the use of intimidation by government officials as a means of obtaining information about library users."[62]

The controversy culminated in 1988, when the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights held hearings to investigate the FBI's Library Awareness Program. The FBI maintained that its actions were intended to protect national security, but librarians challenged that justification. Representing the ALA, Judith Krug testified, "Other kinds of court orders we must, of course, abide by, but it's so that we are NOT obstructionists….[W]e do show our willingness to participate in legitimate law-enforcement endeavors where the facts warrant it." Krug emphasized that librarians were not being defiant; they were standing up for every patron's right to read without fear of surveillance. She explained that any request accompanied by a lawful subpoena would be honored in accordance with ALA policy, but she rejected the idea of blanket surveillance without cause.[63]

Another key witness in that hearing was Herbert Foerstel, head of branch libraries at the University of Maryland.[64] In 1982, a departing librarian confided to him that FBI agents had asked her to monitor patrons' use of certain technical reports and to report their names. She admitted she had stayed silent because, as a foreign national herself, she felt intimidated. Deeply concerned, Foerstel instructed his staff not to release any patron information without a lawful subpoena.[65] In 1988, Foerstel explained on a visit to the MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour, "It is our obligation to maintain what has traditionally been a relation of trust and confidence between library users and librarians…whether they have a foreign sounding name or not."[66]

Foerstel also played a pivotal role in securing Maryland legislation guaranteeing the privacy of library records, and was invited to the bill's signing ceremony with then-Governor William Donald Schaefer.[67] In 1991, he published *Surveillance in the Stacks: The FBI's Library Awareness Program*, the definitive account of the controversy. His book exposed the scope of the FBI's activities and helped spark national outrage. The efforts of Krug and Foerstel not only prompted the FBI to "back away" from the program[68] but also inspired a cascade of state laws protecting library patron privacy, including in North Carolina.[69]

2000s-2010s: The Patriot Act Reverses Everything

Privacy experienced a short renaissance until 2001, when the terrorist attacks of September 11 reshaped national policy. Within weeks, Congress passed the USA PATRIOT Act, vastly expanding government surveillance powers. Under this law, the FBI could access library circulation and computer-use records without a subpoena or warrant. By June of the following year, rumors were circulating that FBI agents had begun requesting patron data again, but librarians bound by accompanying gag orders could not speak about it publicly.[70]

An anonymous 2002 survey revealed that 8.3% of 1,020 public libraries had received such requests from law enforcement. In response, the ALA released 2003 guidelines urging libraries to adopt data minimization practices – collecting and retaining only the

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[62] Ibid.

[63] House Judiciary Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights, *FBI Library Awareness Program* (video, June 20, 1988), *C-SPAN,* https://www.c-span.org/video/?3074-1/fbi-library-awareness-program.

[64] Tony Roberts, "Herbert Foerstel, Longtime University of Maryland Librarian, Dies," *The Baltimore Sun*, September 30, 2024, https://www.baltimoresun.com/2024/09/30/herbert-foerstel-librarian-obituary/.

[65] Herbert N. Foerstel, *Surveillance in the Stacks: The FBI's Library Awareness Program* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991), 60.

[66] *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*, PBS, "Focus — '88: The Big Chill," July 6, 1988, American Archive of Public Broadcasting, accessed November 20, 2025, https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip_507-804xg9fv3n.

[67] Roberts, "Herbert Foerstel, Longtime University of Maryland Librarian."

[68] Egelko, "FBI Checking Out Americans' Reading Habits."

[69] Foerstel, *Surveillance in the Stacks,* 133-137.

[70] Egelko, "FBI Checking Out Americans' Reading Habits."

information necessary for essential operations.[71]

In 2004, four librarians, dubbed the Connecticut Four, joined the ACLU in a lawsuit contesting the PATRIOT Act's gag order.[72] Although the law was framed as a tool for investigating foreign suspects, it included a "two hops" provision that enabled investigators to collect data not only on a target but also on the target's contacts – and the contacts of those individuals. This exposed tens of thousands of potentially innocent Americans to surveillance.[73] George Christian, one of the Four, said, "The fact that the government can and is eavesdropping on patrons in libraries has a chilling effect, because they really don't know if Big Brother is looking over their shoulder." The librarians eventually won their case, lifting the gag order in their instance and helping spur modest reforms to the PATRIOT Act.[74]

As concerns about patron privacy continued to surface within the library community, the ALA undertook its first revision of the *Library Bill of Rights* since 1980. In 2019, the ALA Council adopted Article VII, affirming that all people have a right to privacy and confidentiality in their library use. Developed by a joint working group of the IFC and Privacy Subcommittee and shaped by extensive feedback from librarians, Article VII reflected a renewed commitment to protecting user confidentiality.[75]

2020s: Contemporary Challenges

Book challenges, bans, and broader censorship efforts in U.S. schools and libraries increased dramatically in the 2020s due to rising political polarization.[76] According to the ALA, there were 821 documented attempts to censor library materials in 2024 alone, with the number of unique titles challenged remaining far above pre-2020 levels.[77]

At the same time, several states enacted "Parents' Bill of Rights" laws expanding parental control over curriculum, library access, and student information. In North Carolina, the General Assembly enacted its version in 2023, granting parents the right "to review all available records of materials their child has borrowed from a school library."[78] Because the law did not clarify how community colleges should interpret these provisions, librarians and administrators were left to determine how to align compliance with professional privacy standards – particularly considering many community college campuses also serve minor-aged early college students. Across North Carolina's community colleges, librarians objected to newly enabled borrower-history tracking systems, citing longstanding professional privacy standards. Most institutions ultimately chose to disable the tracking feature after consulting campus leadership.

In response to this growing climate of restriction, North Carolina libraries took visible stands for intellectual freedom. The Chapel Hill Public Library launched its "Right to Read" campaign, hosting Banned Books Week events and postcard-writing drives to defend access.[79] Meanwhile, librarians in the Wake County Public Library system issued an open letter after *Gender Queer: A Memoir* was temporarily removed. The book was quickly reinstated, and the system revised its reconsideration policy.[80]

Nationally, libraries have continued strengthening privacy and access policies. ALA's *Privacy Guide-*

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[71] Ibid.

[72] Alison Leigh Cowan, "Four Librarians Finally Break Silence in Records Case," *The New York Times,* May 31, 2006, B3, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/31/nyregion/31library.html.

[73] Alex Abdo, "Are 'Two Hops' Too Many?" *American Civil Liberties Union News & Commentary*, March 27, 2014, https://www.aclu.org/news/national-security/are-two-hops-too-many.

[74] Cowan, "Four Librarians Finally Break Silence in Records Case," B3.

[75] American Library Association, "Privacy Article Added to Library Bill of Rights," 7.

[76] Uttara M. Ananthakrishnan et al., "Book Bans May Have Unintended Consequences in an Increasingly Polarized United States," *Heinz College Policy Impact*, Carnegie Mellon University, October 2023, https://www.heinz.cmu.edu/media/2023/October/book-bans-may-have-unintended-consequences-in-increasingly-polarized-united-states.

[77] American Library Association, *Book Ban Data*, https://www.ala.org/bbooks/book-ban-data.

[78] North Carolina General Assembly, *Senate Bill 49, SL 2023-106* (2023), https://www.ncleg.gov/BillLookUp/2023/S49.

[79] Chapel Hill Public Library, "*Right to Read*," https://www.chapelhillpubliclibrary.org/right-to-read.

[80] Anisa Khalifa, "*How a National Debate over Book Censorship Is Playing Out in North Carolina*," *WUNC*, February 1, 2022, https://www.wunc.org/2022-02-01/how-a-national-debate-over-book-censorship-is-playing-out-in-north-carolina.

lines for Vendors recommend limiting data collection and purging records regularly.[81] The *Library Privacy Checklist for Public Access Computers and Networks* emphasizes anonymizing reference interactions and establishing clear privacy policies.[82] The *Library Privacy Toolkit: Training & Programming* advises educating both staff and patrons about privacy tracking features.[83]

Learning from the Past

The story of library privacy is, at its heart, a story about courage. Across generations, librarians have stood up for the right to read freely, even when doing so carried real personal risk. From M. Louise Hunt's quiet act of defiance during World War I to Flora Ludington's work to define librarianship's ethical code, and from Ernestine Rose's fight for inclusivity to Charlemae Rollins's bravery under FBI investigation, each of them helped shape what privacy in libraries means today. Decades later, people like Judith Krug, Zoia Horn, and Herbert Foerstel carried those values forward, turning conviction into policy and giving privacy a place in library law and professional ethics.

Their influence still echoes today. As libraries confront digital tracking, data collection, and renewed censorship efforts, the same questions persist: Who gets to decide what people read? And who has the right to know what people are reading? The answer hasn't changed. Privacy is not a privilege. It is a fundamental right and the foundation of intellectual freedom. Upholding it requires vigilance, courage, and a continued commitment to the values that have defined the profession for more than a century.

For more information, see the author's LibGuide on this topic at: https://cccc.libguides.com/privacyinlibraries.

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[81] American Library Association, *Library Privacy Guidelines for Vendors* (July 30, 2015), http://www.ala.org/advocacy/privacy/guidelines/vendors.

[82] American Library Association, "*Library Privacy Checklist for Public Access Computers and Networks*," https://www.ala.org/advocacy/privacy/checklists/public-access-computer.

[83] American Library Association. "Training & Programming." *American Library Association,* https://www.ala.org/advocacy/privacy/training.

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