Discussion prompt 1: Radford suggests a use for the written record from digital reference sessions: to conduct research about the quality. She suggests that we take advantage of the relative permanence of the written word (as opposed to the fleeting nature of oral reference interactions). She provides pretty compelling reasons for adopting digital reference and saving transcripts. How might this relative permanence affect the way that reference services are perceived and used? How else might we make use of this recorded history of reference interactions that previously were not available to us? How might privacy issues complicate our use of this information?

Privacy concerns with digital reference services

I agree with Radford (2006) that written records from digital reference sessions can be useful for research about the quality of digital reference services. However, I do think that there are several issues related to digital reference and privacy that need to be considered. Most libraries uphold patron privacy and confidentiality as values of the highest importance and have made concerted efforts to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of patron information in both the digital and analog realms. However, many digital reference services make use of third-party software (and possibly hardware such as off-site servers), so the question arises, who else (besides the library) might have access to this information? And do they adhere to the same standards as library staff? I find myself wondering about other questions as well. If the transcripts of these sessions are retained, even with identifying information removed, is that a violation of privacy and confidentiality policies? Are patrons aware of how this information may be used? Do they have the choice to opt in or out of participating in research? Are privacy statements regarding the use of digital reference services prominently displayed?

The implications of the privacy and confidentiality issue with respect to digital reference services are significant. First, many Internet users are accustomed to a degree of anonymity in using the Internet and posting content. They may expect to be able to remain anonymous in their digital reference interactions as well, but depending upon the policy of the particular library they are using, this may or may not be possible. The requirement to provide identifying information may cause some patrons to avoid using the service at all. In addition, most users of digital reference services are probably experienced users of the Internet in general and expect to see privacy policies prominently displayed (though most probably rarely read them). Libraries should add this information to the web forms for chat and email reference services. If libraries and researchers wish to retain information from digital reference interactions, this should be stated up front and users of the services should have the ability to opt in or out. By being forthcoming and transparent about policies and use of information exchanged in digital reference services, libraries can build trust with their users and make the services more successful.

References

Radford, M. (2006). Encountering virtual users: A qualitative investigation of interpersonal communication in chat reference. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, 57*(8), 1046-59.

Discussion prompt 2: Neuhaus discusses the issues of patron confidentiality in digital reference. Continuing our discussion from last week, how might Neuhaus' analysis inform your views on this issue? Keep in mind that this article was published in 2003, so some of the details about various chat programs will likely have changed by now, but the overall points of his article are still valid.

The importance of digital privacy and confidentiality

Last week, I posted about privacy and confidentiality concerns with digital reference and specifically with the use of information collected during digital reference transactions for research purposes. This week, we read Neuhaus' article, "Privacy and Confidentiality in Digital Reference" (2003), which provided a much more in-depth treatment of this topic than either last week's readings or my post on the topic. I found Neuhaus' article very valuable, as it presents a clear, organized, and thorough description of the various issues surrounding privacy and confidentiality in the digital reference realm. I think this piece would be particularly useful to administrators or staff who are responsible for making decisions about digital reference services, such as whether to change vendors, whether to renew a contract, or whether to offer a new service.

In today's society, it is easy to grow complacent about privacy and confidentiality. On the one hand, many people take these for granted as fundamental rights; as Neuhaus (2003) points out, "Over time, Americans have increasingly come to believe that they possess certain privacy rights and that these rights are embodied in law" (p. 31). He points out, however, that "a right to privacy was neither written into the original United States Constitution nor any of the subsequent amendments. The right to privacy is considered a penumbra right, which means that it flows from other rights" (p. 31). For this reason, I believe that if we as Americans *value* privacy, we must actively strive to protect our privacy, for it is not necessarily assured. As librarians, we are in a position to help protect the privacy of our patrons.

On the other hand, perhaps due to the influence of our digital society, many Americans seem more willing than ever before to "waive" their privacy rights or to subordinate privacy to other values or concerns. For example, I have been actively using the Internet for many years. When I first started participating in online forums, back in the days before Facebook, YouTube or even MySpace, everyone used a screen name, and people's avatar photos were generally not personal photos. In those days, I really felt like anything I posted online was anonymous and not easily traceable to me. However, with the surging popularity of Facebook, that seems to have changed. I remember that when I was first invited to join Facebook, I ignored the invitations. I wasn't thrilled about the prospect of revealing so much information about myself online when I was accustomed to anonymity. However, when I realized that most of my friends were leaving other sites and moving to Facebook, I finally joined. Although my profile is private and I usually employ the strictest privacy controls, over time I have become increasingly open, sharing more information about myself, knowing full well that much of it is discoverable. Knowing that, I am thoughtful about what I share, but my point is that I, and many others, choose to subordinate my privacy concerns to my desire to remain socially networked. Another example of people's willingness to waive or subordinate their privacy rights is when people click "Agree" when

presented with a privacy notice on a website without even reading the notice itself. Many of us, although we may value privacy and confidentiality, when confronted with the choice to either waive some of our rights in order to use a service or to not use the service at all, will very likely choose to waive our rights and use the service. It is unfortunate that we must make such decisions at all, but it is the reality. I hope that in the future, libraries will be in a position to offer valuable and useful digital services to patrons without requiring them to sacrifice their privacy or confidentiality.

References

Neuhaus, P. (2003). Privacy and confidentiality in digital reference. *RUSQ, 43*(1), 26-36.