

February 2020 Tuesday Topic: Protecting Privacy at the Self-Service Holds Shelf

Welcome to Tuesday Topics, a monthly series covering topics with intellectual freedom implications for libraries of all types. Each message is prepared by a member of OLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee or a guest writer. Questions can be directed to the author of the topic or to the IFC Committee.



Protecting Privacy at the Self-Service Holds Shelf

Self-service options for library patrons are gaining traction in Oregon, including an increased interest in offering self-service holds for on-the-go patrons. As librarians reexamine their service philosophies and opt for more [patron-centered services](#), considerations for self-service holds are often a part of that planning process. When done thoughtfully, self-service holds can reduce wait times and offer an increased level of convenience for library users. However, the best self-service models should take patron privacy into account as well.

If implemented and managed poorly, a self-service holds shelf can unwittingly display a patron's reading interests and circulation history to the public, undermining public trust in the library, and possibly violating [Oregon law](#) regarding the privacy of patron records and contact information. Trepidation over the privacy [risks of self-service holds shelves](#) has existed for the better part of a decade, and is part of the reason that some libraries, in Oregon and beyond, have taken time to adopt the model.

As librarians attempt to balance our professional values with responsiveness to user needs and requests, what steps can we take to ensure that our self-service holds shelves don't sacrifice user privacy for user convenience? Whether you're exploring self-service holds for the first time, or reexamining your library's current policies and procedures, the following practices have been [recommended by the ALA](#) and other [researchers](#) to ensure that patron circulation history and identifying information remain confidential:

1. Use aliases or user account numbers, rather than names, to identify materials on the self-service holds shelves. Many ILSs offer libraries the option to assign or allow users to select an alias to help them confidentially identify their holds on a shelf, or to print account numbers on a hold slip in lieu of the patron's name. Printing full names, or even truncated names, without the consent of users, should be avoided on any self-service shelving area.

2. Refrain from printing patron telephone numbers or email addresses on publicly viewable holds slips.

3. Consider adding an additional layer of protection by storing materials on the self-service holds shelf in opaque bags or cover slips, or by shelving items spine-down in the holds area. This practice may be especially worth consideration in libraries that serve rural communities, where residents can easily recognize and engage with one another in a publicly browsable holds area.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to creating the ideal self-service holds model, but librarians can support their users, and each other, by sharing their own best practices and offering support to one another as we continue our shift to more patron-centered services.

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