

Tutus on Subaru, Technocratic Coups, and Literacy to Refuse: Provocations for Integrating Privacy Literacy in LIS Education

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ABSTRACT

Privacy is associated with self-determination, identity, and dignity, and with the exercise of free expression and other freedoms. A significant majority of U.S. adults say that privacy matters to them more than ever. Privacy literacy (PL) programming presents an opportunity for libraries to meaningfully serve our communities on a topic of growing personal and social significance. PL comprises knowledge, skills, and attitudes about privacy, and is characterized as a subspecialty of information literacy, but library-based PL practitioners report that their LIS education did not adequately prepare them to engage in this work. This paper poses provocations for integrating PL in LIS education. It canvasses practitioner views on library-based PL programming in public libraries and K-20 education and shares preliminary professional competencies and frameworks from a national forum on PL in libraries. The paper concludes with considerations for LIS educators, programs, and accreditors regarding the integration of PL in LIS education.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Information privacy; Education; Information literacy; Education programs/schools; Social justice.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Privacy literacy; Professional competencies; Community engagement; Forum (event); K-20 education.

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“I would ground privacy in a creaturely resistance to being used against one’s will.” Garret Keizer¹

“Another word for privacy is agency.” Alison Macrina²

Privacy, an optimized state of accessibility to others, is associated with a human right to self-determination, identity, and dignity, and to the exercise of free expression and other freedoms (Alibeigi, Munir, & Ershadul Karim, 2019, p. 7). A significant majority of U.S. adults say that privacy matters to them now more than ever (McClain et al., 2023; TELUS, 2024), especially in the context of artificial intelligence (Tyson & Kikuchi, 2023) and the growing significance of social media news influencers (Stocking et al., 2024). Privacy is a core value of libraries, and the Library Bill of Rights calls on libraries to “advocate for, educate about, and protect people’s privacy” (ALA, 2019). Privacy harms also have a disparate impact on members of vulnerable communities that libraries endeavor to uplift (Citron & Solove, 2022, p. 855).

Privacy literacy (PL) programming presents an opportunity for libraries to meaningfully serve our communities on a topic of growing personal and social significance. PL comprises conceptual knowledge, practical skills, and social attitudes about privacy, and is characterized as a subspecialty of information literacy that “addresses many of the metaphysical and social dynamics of information” (Hartman-Caverly & Chisholm, 2020). Libraries have first-mover advantage in this area (Chisholm & Hartman-Caverly, 2023b, p. 382; Hartman-Caverly & Chisholm, 2020, p. 314); nevertheless, library-based PL practitioners report that their LIS education did not adequately prepare them to engage in this work (Chisholm & Hartman-Caverly, 2023b, p. 382). In order for information professionals to answer the growing call for PL learning opportunities, there is an urgent need to include PL in LIS degree programs.

This paper poses provocations for integrating PL in LIS education. It canvasses practitioner views on library-based PL programming in public libraries and K-20 education and shares preliminary ideas from a national forum on PL in libraries. The paper concludes with considerations for LIS educators, programs, and accreditors regarding the integration of PL in LIS education.

PRIVACY LITERACY IN LIBRARIES: CANVASSING PRACTITIONER VIEWS

Privacy programming presents a growth area for public services librarians across public, school and academic libraries. PL is an emerging component of digital literacy and digital citizenship in K-12 education and library programming for youth and families (Rivera & Grotewold, 2023, p. 252). Rivera and Grotewold note that uncertainty surrounding PL’s place in K-12 curricula is an opportunity, and propose that school librarians are well-positioned to deliver

¹ (Keizer, 2012, p. 20).

² (Macrina, 2025, 35:43).

PL learning experiences, but that they need professional development and resources to support this work (2023, pp. 252, 254). Similarly, Subramaniam et al. (2019) note that school and public libraries serve as critical “‘community’ funds of knowledge” about privacy issues (p. 252), and that these community institutions can undertake additional collaborative work to offer privacy resources for youth and families.

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) identified PL as an expanding literacy in its 2021 environmental scan (ACRL, 2021, p. 18); elsewhere, researchers assert that “staffing and strategizing for meaningful researcher privacy are in fact *essential* to the flourishing of academic libraries” (Bettinger, Bursic, & Chandler, 2023, p. 3). Participants in a qualitative study of academic instruction librarians expressed “a deep need for PL in their work... guided by their belief in its significance to students’ lives and society” (Chisholm & Hartman-Caverly, 2023b, 379). These librarians cited doxxing and intellectual freedom as further justifications of their PL efforts: “we do it because we don’t want there to be a chilling effect on what people are researching, people’s ability to speak freely or engage freely with the world” (Chisholm & Hartman-Caverly, 2023b, 379). Additionally, study participants recognized the disparate impact of privacy harms on vulnerable student and researcher populations, including identity-based groups like race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and immigration and socioeconomic status (Chisholm & Hartman-Caverly, 2023b, p. 377). Study participants also shared that PL work enhanced the library’s reputation on campus, leading to new collaborations (Chisholm & Hartman-Caverly, 2023b, p. 383).

Despite the growing significance of PL work, librarians cite a number of barriers to their efforts, including a perceived lack of content knowledge contributing to impaired self-efficacy; a need for learning frameworks or standards and professional competencies; and inadequate preparation in LIS degree programs. One study participant observed, “I did not receive enough foundational education about the informational structures that dominate our world today, which is not the library” (Chisholm & Hartman-Caverly, 2023b, p. 382). There is an urgent need for LIS education to foster professional competencies for library-based PL programming.

TUTUS ON SUBARUS: PRACTITIONER COMPETENCIES

In March 2025, library-based PL educators convened Libraries Stand for Privacy: National Forum for Privacy Literacy Standards and Competencies to begin the work of designing consensus frameworks and competencies. More than fifty library-based privacy educators from public, school, and academic libraries in the United States and Canada, along with allied LIS scholars and independent information professionals, learned from expert speakers and engaged in participant-driven roundtable and working group sessions to ideate consensus frameworks and professional competencies for privacy education in libraries across the K-20 education spectrum.

The national forum opened with an artist talk by Julia Weist, who explained how she integrates the investigative research skills she honed in her MLIS studies with privacy advocacy to produce art that exposes the ubiquity of surveillance in contemporary American society and inspires social change. For her series *Vehicle Sightings*, Weist turned her investigative and artistic prowess on the investigative tools themselves, deploying her private investigator license and access to license plate reader databases to create art that reveals the extent of street-level surveillance in the U.S. She explained, “I learned so much about how this system works that I was able to manipulate it artistically,” including by dressing up her Subaru in a tutu “for its encounter with the surveillance state” in order to “do something that makes the people who have the power over others through their access to this information to feel embarrassed about that position of power” as seen in Figure 1 (Weist, 2025, 22:29).

Figure 1
Tutu (2023).



Julia Weist, *Tutu* (from the series *Vehicle Sightings*) 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Moskowitz Bayse. Used with permission.

Weist shared that her artistic methodology, which interweaves research, open records requests, and political advocacy, “often turns adversaries into co-conspirators,” including in the context of an administrative trial to renew her private investigator license amidst her suspended

database access following her whistleblower account of excessive data capture and access within license plate reader databases (Burgess & Mehrotra, 2024; Weist, 2025, p. 10). She attributes her dispositions of “curiosity, rigor, and humor” to successful privacy advocacy that also produces provocative works of art (Weist, 42:48).

These same dispositions suggest professional competencies for library-based privacy educators. Curiosity is the intellectual virtue that first prompted Weist to wonder, “if there is a public record, is there a private record?”, transitioning her artistic practice from open records research toward the interrogation of proprietary surveillance tools (Weist, 2025, 4:17). Intellectual humility and open-mindedness are other intellectual virtues particularly applicable to the work of PL education, because the continually changing technology landscape means we are necessarily “learning as we go” (Chisholm & Hartman-Caverly, 2023b, p. 379; see also Chisholm & Hartman-Caverly, 2023a, p. 129). Fostering intellectual virtues in LIS coursework prepares librarians with the mental habits demanded of PL work within the agile turn of contemporary technology culture.

Next, Weist described the rigorous methodology she brings to her discipline. She revealed how she thoroughly documents her investigatory artistic process in her private investigator license application, and how maintaining the legally required records of her “legally permissible purposes” and results of her proprietary database searches became media for artwork (Weist, 2025, 10:27). LIS scholars and library-based privacy educators must approach privacy work with a comparable degree of rigor. This includes applying our knowledge of the structure and flow of information to the mixed methods analysis of surveillance practices, such as that documented by Becky Yoose and Nick Shockey in their investigations into library vendors (2024, p. 8), as well as infusing privacy pedagogy with rigorous attention to both theory and learning design (Chisholm & Hartman-Caverly, 2023b; Wharton, Dunne, & Beauchamp, 2023).

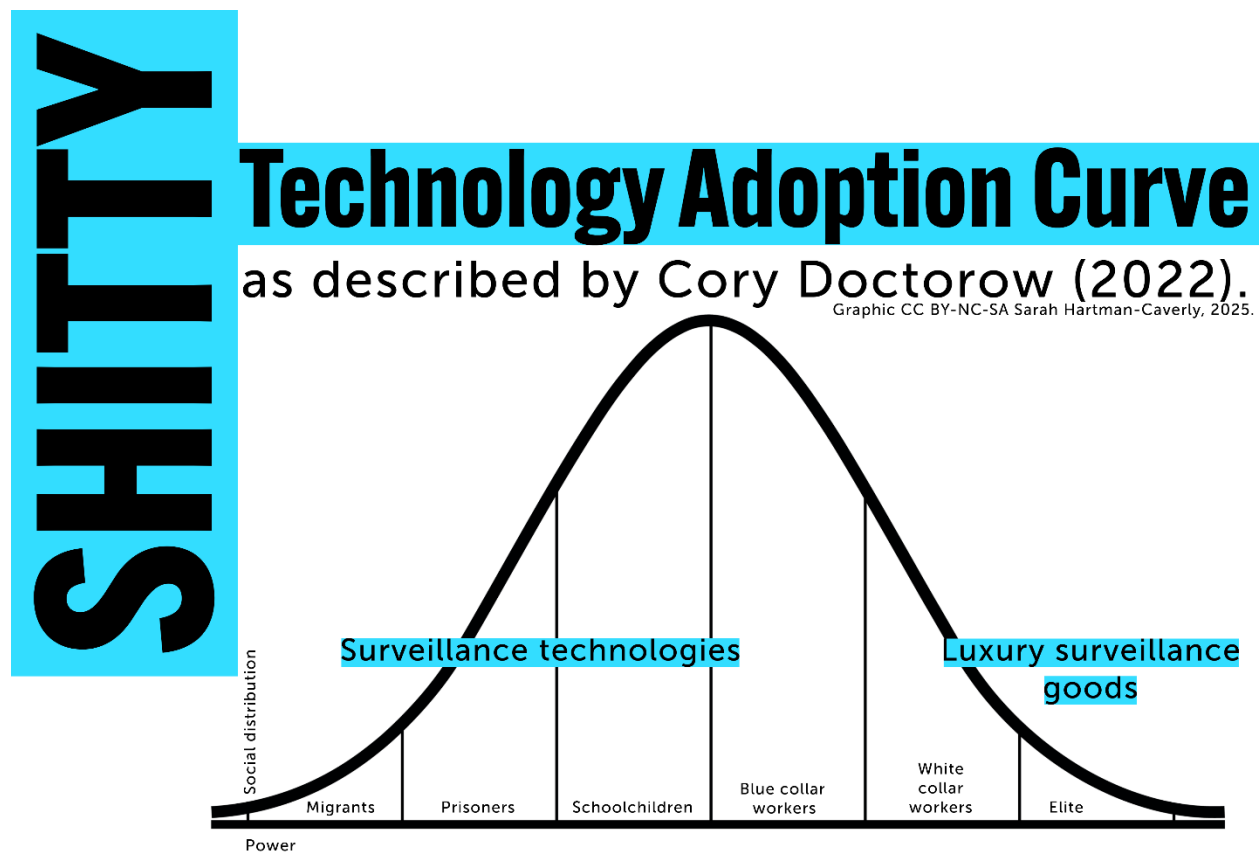
Finally, Weist credits the sense of humor she brings to her privacy advocacy-turned-artistry with “disarming all the people involved to get to a realer conversation” (Weist, p. 11). The image of a Subaru wearing a tutu, captured by a vehicle repossession towing company and retrieved from a license plate reader database, pokes fun at the watchers while inspiring the watched to pause and notice what is otherwise invisible by design. While out-and-out humor is not going to suit every privacy educator’s authentic teaching persona, it is useful to account for the affective learning experience of studying privacy harms (Hartman-Caverly & Chisholm, 2021), especially with youth who bring their prior negative experiences with technology to the learning environment.

TECHNOCRATIC COUPS: SITUATING THE WORK

Cory Doctorow’s framing of the “shitty technology adoption curve” employs dark humor to pinpoint the grim reality of privacy harms: they have a disparate impact on society’s most vulnerable, including students in the K-20 education system, as depicted in Figure 2 (2022; see also Barocas & Selbst, 2016, p. 677; Citron & Solove, 2022, p. 855). National forum panelists Elizabeth Laird and Virginia Byrne unpacked this disparate impact for students in K-12 schools and higher education, respectively. Laird shared findings from the Center for Democracy and

Technology that concerns about student privacy rose among K-12 students and their parents and caregivers over the past five years, while concern and continuing education about student privacy among K-12 educators have stagnated (2025, 23:48). Laird further revealed that surveillance technologies, including content filtering and blocking software and student activity monitoring platforms, are implemented in nearly every school system, where they disproportionately censor and discipline communities of color, LGBTQ+, and neurodivergent people (26:15). “The result is that three in four teachers and three in four students said that they have not been able to complete a school assignment because of overly restrictive content filtering and blocking” (Laird, 2025, 28:03). Byrne observed how college students experience digital coercion (Barassi, 2019, p. 419) through the platformization of teaching and learning with education technology, where their learning behaviors are shaded by prior harmful online experiences. “These concerns about privacy, their online image, their reputation, and their academic trajectories, these are real stressors in college students’ lives” which undercut their willingness to be vulnerable as learners and impair the cognitive work of learning (Byrne, 2025, 7:28).

Figure 2
Shitty Technology Adoption Curve.



Shitty Technology Adoption Curve based on observations by Cory Doctorow (2022). Graphic CC BY-NC-SA the author.

The platformization of K-20 education is part of the broader landscape that panelist Alison Macrina dubbed a technocratic coup (2025, 33:28). While Macrina emphasized the

contemporary, big-picture geopolitical context, librarians are survivors of a less visible but no less disruptive technocratic coup closer to home – that of the digital transformation of our libraries and institutions. Digital transformation, or Dx, is the intentional restructuring of human values, relationships, and work for the express purpose of collecting and mining data for actionable intelligence, or – less euphemistically – for surveillance and control. In higher education, EDUCAUSE defines Dx as “a series of deep and coordinated culture, workforce, and technology shifts that enable new educational and operating models and transform an institution’s operations, strategic directions, and value proposition” (EDUCAUSE, 2025).

No development better encapsulates the technocratic coup of library Dx than the transmogrification of library database vendors into what Sarah Lamdan calls “data cartels” – data analytics and brokerage companies that are “taking over markets for different categories of information and exploiting their stronghold on multiple information sectors to amass more power and profit” (2022, p. 2). Erstwhile content database vendors like Elsevier (RELX Group) and Thomson Reuters now operate primarily as data brokers, selling library subscriptions as a loss leader while providing premium surveillance services to law enforcement agencies (Lamdan, 2019).

Among the analytics products these vendors generate are academic analytics, which mine scholar behaviors to populate dashboards that university administrators employ in hiring and promotion decisions (Pooley, 2022, pp. 44-45; Pooley, 2023). Academic analytics are one vertical in the full-stack surveillance publishing business model that commercializes the digital transformation of libraries by exploiting our dependence on an increasingly concentrated field of monopolistic content and systems vendors while undermining our core values of privacy, intellectual freedom, and academic freedom (Colbert-Lewis et al., 2024, p. 11; Bettinger, Bursic, & Chandler, 2023, p. 4).

PL education and advocacy is a natural role for librarians engulfed in the technocratic coup of Dx (Isiaka et al., 2024, p. 17, 22). Practitioners associate PL with knowledge and dispositions encompassing “privacy values and awareness of sociotechnical systems impacting privacy” (Chisholm & Hartman-Caverly, 2023b, p. 384). According to Macrina, “privacy literate people have an analysis of power” (Macrina, 2025, 40:02) to critically engage with technology, identify the actors who amass transnational power through the tech sector, and to exercise agency within the global power structures these actors construct. PL is a relevant competency and programming area for librarians working in all sectors because “[privacy and tech] touches on everything else in the world” (Macrina, 2025, 38:52). This capacity for a power analysis of technology-as-politics positions librarians and the constituencies we serve for a PL of refusal.

LITERACY TO REFUSE: APPLICATION-PROGRAMMING INTERFACES

Library-based PL programming must interface with these fractal technocratic coups that threaten to fracture our social order in order to inform and inspire relevant applications to real-world challenges. Seeta Peña Gangadharan argued for “New School” PL that accounts for the

“agile turn” in software development, deployment, and business models. This “agile turn” that undergirds software and cloud computing infrastructure as services (SaaS/IaaS) creates user conditions characterized by extreme dynamism and uncertainty, in which the ground is always shifting under our feet. According to Gürses and van Hoboken (2018), this agile turn overturns traditional notions of data privacy governance, while user behavior is engineered to increase the capacity for surveillance and value extraction and “people are made complicit in the capturing and reorganization of their own behavior” (p. 595). For Gangadharan, PL in this context must be a “literacy of refusal” that empowers individual techno-disobedience and institutional collective organizing.

Gangadharan articulated a vision of PL as counterpower (2025, 30:06) grounded in the realization that “technologies not only have politics, but they are politics” (Gangadharan, 27:00). Drawing inspiration from civil disobedience, collective organizing, and worker organizing movements (Gangadharan, 33:11), Gangadharan asserts that it is necessary to “push back” on technologies that diminish rights and access to resources (Gangadharan, 32:18) and identifies opportunities for refusal at the individual, institutional, and software development levels. Individuals can engage in techno-disobedience and self-exclusion (Gangadharan, 34:11), drawing inspiration from un-adopters: those communities that have resisted the penetration of technology into the activities of daily living, such as the Plain people (Gangadharan, 37:29). Institutions, including libraries, can engage in collective organizing to negotiate vendor contracts with privacy-enhancing terms, and develop exit strategies for contracted products and services that do not align with our ethical values (Gangadharan, 35:07). Gangadharan advocated for preserving independence in computer and data science research to foster alternative software development practices and end-user products (Gangadharan, 36:48). “In my ideal world,” concluded Gangadharan, “We’re moving from literacy to refusal, and it’s through this movement that I think we can build counterpower” (Gangadharan, 38:04).

Libraries are a promising venue for generating counterpower to refuse rampant privacy harms; but in one study, PL-active academic librarians lamented libraries’ failure to push back on intrusive third-party data capture and institutional initiatives:

“[Librarianship is] failing. It’s one of the things where, at a theoretical level, we are supposed to be strong protectors of privacy.... Yet when you look at our databases, and the licenses that we sign, and the information that we hand over to these companies, we’re not doing much.” (Chisholm & Hartman-Caverly, 2023b, p. 383)

In addition to delivering educational programming, privacy literate librarians are also better able to advocate for privacy conditions for patrons and learners. In the qualitative study of academic librarians, those engaged in PL work also participated in policy-making, conducted privacy audits and impact assessments, delivered professional development and compliance training, and fostered privacy-related campus coalitions (Chisholm & Hartman-Caverly, 2023b, p. 384). LIS education must prepare practitioners to expose and refuse privacy-impairing systems, both technical and social, and to design and build ethical alternatives.

LIS education is due for a paradigm shift that revitalizes professional ethics by centering our constituencies' privacy interests, not merely in how library practitioners govern user data, but also in programming and resources that teach learners about privacy issues and empower them to act on their privacy values. As one academic librarian asserted, “[librarians] need to think radically differently about how librarianship is done in an age of information ubiquity where everything is online” (Chisholm & Hartman-Caverly, 2023b, p. 384). LIS educators must enhance existing degree programs with multiple opportunities to examine privacy as a subject of ethical inquiry and PL as an element of public services work that complements the study of patron data governance in technical services roles. Similarly, LIS program accreditors like the American Library Association should mention privacy explicitly to characterize program-level learning outcomes related to ethics and values (ALA, 2023). By fostering professional competencies for privacy work, LIS education will prepare librarians and other information professionals to refuse the terms of the unfolding technocratic coups, to imagine and implement more just alternatives, and to teach others to do the same.

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