

How public should public records be? Increased availability sparks privacy concerns

May 16 2012, By Peter Kelley

Online technology has vastly increased citizens' access to public records such as political campaign contributions and real estate transactions. But that explosion of information availability also sparks privacy concerns and may dampen some people's willingness to engage in public activities, according to recent research.

Six researchers, including two from the University of Washington, co-authored the paper "[Attitudes Toward Online Availability of U.S. Public Records](#)." It was presented at the [Proceedings of the 12th Annual International Digital Government Research Conference](#) in College Park, Md. An expanded version of the article will appear in a forthcoming issue of [Information Polity](#).

The UW authors are Batya Friedman, professor in the UW Information School; and James Fogarty, associate professor of computer science and engineering. Lead author is Sean Munson of the University of Michigan, who has since joined the UW.

"In American society we have a strong commitment to transparency in public records, but we also have a commitment to privacy in our voting at the polls," said Friedman. "Putting campaign contribution information online with greater accessibility upsets the previously established balance between those two competing goals within U.S. democracy."

Before the age of the Web and online searches, people got information from public records mainly through [news reports](#) and face-to-face encounters at county clerks' offices. The Internet changed all that.

Increased availability of searchable public records online — including detailed real estate information provided online by companies such as Zillow and Redfin — brings ever-easier ways to mashup or aggregate that information. A decade ago, it would have been impractical to learn which campaigns had received large contributions from friends, but today's mashups of campaign records and Facebook allow people to learn this information in just a few clicks. "Such ability, however, also creates value tensions with privacy and other important human values," the authors state.

The researchers sent surveys of 26 questions to 1,000 Pacific Northwest residents in November 2008, and received 134 replies pretty evenly divided between women and men. Respondents were asked about their campaign donations and real estate purchases, whether they had displayed political bumper stickers or signs, their comfort with this sort of information being available online and how that availability might affect their future plans.

About three-quarters — 73 percent — of respondents were aware that real estate records are available online, while 47 percent knew that campaign contributions are accessible online. Those not previously aware of disclosure laws were more likely to want the records restricted in some way.

Most respondents were comfortable with information being searched by region or zip code, but that comfort level dropped in reference to searches revealing more specific information such as names, addresses and occupations. They also showed more comfort with real estate information being searchable by neighborhood and address than

campaign contributions. One respondent wrote, "This issue has already made us unlikely to ever donate to a presidential campaign again."

Respondents expressed greater comfort with fellow U.S. citizens accessing their records than noncitizens or those living in the country illegally, and were more comfortable with neighbors learning of their real estate transactions than their campaign donations.

Respondents were divided over whether access should change; 53 percent felt real estate records should stay as they are, and 57 percent felt contributions should remain fully accessible. Others said the information should be reduced, such as by removing names from [real estate](#) records and employer/occupation [information](#) from campaign contributions.

Only a few respondents — about 2 percent — suggested online access to such records should be expanded. About one percent said they believe access to such records should be eliminated.

The researchers wrote, "These findings support concerns that increased availability of public records and decreased privacy may reduce people's discretionary activities in the public sphere." The researchers suggest more study be done on the extent to which "the attitudes revealed in our study translate to changes in behavior."

Provided by University of Washington

Citation: How public should public records be? Increased availability sparks privacy concerns (2012, May 16) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-05-availability-privacy.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.