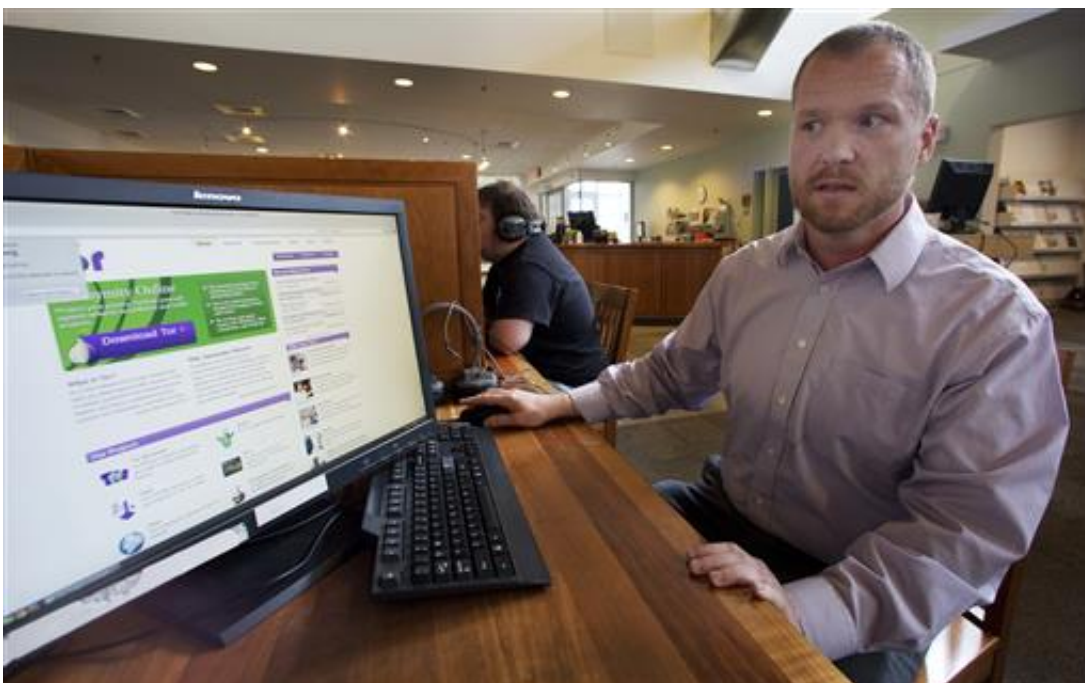


Browse free or die? New Hampshire library is at privacy fore

June 26 2016, by Lynne Tuohy



In this photo taken Thursday, May 19, 2016 librarian Chuck McAndrew shows the software, known as Tor network at the Kilton Public Library in Lebanon, N.H. The library was chosen as a test site for the Library Freedom Project that uses secrecy software that largely prevents government surveillance. (AP Photo/Jim Cole)

A small library in New Hampshire sits at the forefront of global efforts to promote privacy and fight government surveillance—to the consternation of law enforcement.

The Kilton Public Library in Lebanon, a city of 13,000, last year became the nation's first library to use Tor, software that masks the location and identity of internet users, in a pilot project initiated by the Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Library Freedom Project. Users the world over can—and do—have their searches randomly routed through the library.

Computers that have Tor loaded on them bounce internet searches through a random pathway, or series of relays, of other computers equipped with Tor. This network of virtual tunnels masks the location and internet protocol address of the person doing the search.

In a feature that makes Kilton unique among U.S. libraries, it also has a computer with a Tor exit relay, which delivers the internet query to the destination site and becomes identified as the last-known source of the query.

Alison Macrina, founder and director of the Library Freedom Project, said her organization chose Kilton for its pilot project because it had embraced other privacy-enhancing software the project recommended and because she knew the library had the know-how take it to the complicated exit-relay stage.

Tor can protect shoppers, victims of domestic violence, whistleblowers, dissidents, undercover agents—and criminals—alike. A recent routine internet search using Tor on one of Kilton's computers was routed through Ukraine, Germany and the Netherlands.

"Libraries are bastions of freedom," said Shari Steele, executive director of the Tor Project, a nonprofit started in 2004 to promote the use of Tor worldwide. "They are a great natural ally."

There are about 7,200 relays and 1,000 exit relays worldwide, with more being added steadily, Steele said.

The Tor Project is funded largely by the U.S. State Department and other federal agencies, yet the Department of Homeland Security bristles at its use by civilians because it can be used to mask criminal activity.

Local police, at the behest of Homeland Security's Boston bureau, asked the Kilton library last July to stop using Tor. Its use was suspended until the library board voted unanimously at a standing-room-only meeting in September to maintain the Tor relay.

"Kilton's really committed as a library to the values of intellectual privacy," Macrina said. "In New Hampshire, there's a lot of activism fighting surveillance. It's the 'Live Free or Die' place, and they really mean it."



In this Thursday, May 19, 2016 photo, people at right sit at public computers at the Kilton Public Library in Lebanon, N.H. The library was chosen as a test site for the Library Freedom Project to use a software known as Tor, a secrecy

software that largely prevents government surveillance. (AP Photo/Jim Cole)

Homeland Security agent Gregory Squire, who initiated the crackdown at the Kilton library, said he was not able to comment on Tor or last year's investigation.

Since 1938, the American Library Association has had an ethics code about protecting patrons' confidentiality. During the Cold War, librarians fought efforts by federal officials in 1953 to track and regulate patrons' reading habits by drafting the Freedom To Read statement.

They opposed efforts by federal investigators in the 1970s to obtain records of patrons seeking information about explosives, and the ALA was targeted by Attorney General John Ashcroft for its "baseless hysteria" over the Patriot Act.

In 2005, a group of Connecticut librarians successfully fought an FBI demand to know who was using a computer at the Library Connection in Windsor on a particular date and time. A federal judge ruled the librarians' free speech rights were violated, and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg ordered release of all records in the case.

And in the wake of Edward Snowden's revelations about government surveillance, librarians have increasingly spoken out about government incursion and offered themselves as havens.

"I think it's lost on most people how much of their activity online is tracked and cataloged and can be made available on a day-to-day basis," said Mark Rumold, senior staff attorney at the San Francisco-based Electronic Frontier Foundation. "Information disclosed to Google can be as diverse as the thoughts that are in your mind."

At Kilton, Tor is installed on four computers in the center of the library. The computers' home pages feature the Tor icon, and users can opt to engage it or not. The library has run Tor workshops.

Lebanon Police Chief Richard Mello said last month he still has concerns. "Once you institute the Tor network, you essentially take those computers off the radar screen, so to speak," Mello said.

For Kilton library user Robert Olcott, Tor gives him peace of mind that law enforcement and corporations won't track him when he researches topics such as predatory lending or global warming. It's nobody's business why he wants to do perfectly legal reading, he argued.

"If I'm looking at how many drones are currently approved to be flying in public airspace, somebody at Homeland Security might want to know why I want to know that," said Olcott, 65, a laborer by trade. "As a private citizen, I should be entitled to privacy in that inquiry."

As to the number of users of Tor at Kilton, the library doesn't even know—because they are anonymous.

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