

Privacy concerns: A conversation with BCCLA's Micheal Vonn

By Allison Trumble.

Micheal Vonn — Policy Director of the B.C. Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA) — is a busy person these days. She arrived for her session at the BC Library Conference with luggage in tow, bound for another speaking engagement in Toronto. In her other hand she carried a thick stack of unbound paper: the recently released report of the citizen panel assessing the BC services card, which she assured the audience was hot off the press, she'd only had a chance to read in the cab on the way over.

This was not always the case for privacy and civil liberties advocates. Vonn recounted a time not so long ago when it was hard to drum up public interest in privacy-related issues, and those issues rarely made headlines. Now, privacy concerns are in the news on a regular basis, and most of the time Vonn attends a speaking engagement, she said, there is some new development that's happened within the past 48 hours.

Newfound focus on privacy issues can largely be attributed to technological changes, but Vonn explained that part of the problem is that our laws have failed to keep pace; they are still based on a spatial understanding of privacy, which is no longer valid. She also emphasized that privacy is not about isolation, it is fundamentally about communication, and the freedom to choose the audience with which we share our communications.

This was a relatively informal session, with discussion guided by audience questions and comments. Vonn argued that there is a role for librarians to play in discussing privacy issues with the public, and that explaining the complexities is challenging and takes practice. One audience member suggested that libraries could partner with advocacy organizations such as BCCLA to provide programming around privacy education.

Much of the discussion, however, focused on privacy issues of personal concern to participants in the session. Vonn's work has largely been engaged with privacy issues related to health care, so there was considerable time given to the problems with BC's new electronic health record program. The electronic health record system does not provide patients with control over how their records are shared, which according to Vonn would be the gold standard of privacy protection. Vonn also informed the audience of the little-known option to password-protect pharmacy records. Most audience members did not know that this option was available to them and only one person in attendance had actually done so, coincidentally just earlier that week.

Another topic of conversation was the conflation of criminal records checks with police records checks: police records contain every instance of contact an individual has had with police, even if they have been a victim of a crime or called in a noise complaint. Police records often contain officers' observations about the person in question, including their opinions on the mental health status of the individual.

When performing criminal records checks on potential employees, many employers also receive a police record, which Vonn described as essentially a character assessment by police officers.

As librarians, privacy is often an abstract concept enshrined in a code of conduct. Even as privacy-related issues arise in the news, they often do not affect us directly on a personal level. Micheal Vonn has an uncanny ability to make privacy issues concrete and personal, to help us all understand exactly how and why privacy is important. This session was a wonderful opportunity to engage in an intimate discussion with a genuine expert in this field.

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