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Journal of Government Information

Volume 28, Issue 5, September–October 2001, Pages 493-527

The loss of personal privacy and its consequences for social research

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[https://doi.org/10.1016/S1352-0237\(02\)00343-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1352-0237(02)00343-X)

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Abstract

This article chronicles more than 30 years of public opinion, politics, and law and policy on privacy and confidentiality that have had far-reaching consequences for access by the social research community to administrative and statistical records produced by government. A hostile political environment, public controversy over the decennial census long form, media coverage, and public fears about the vast accumulations of personal information by the private sector were catalysts for a recent proposal by the U.S. Bureau of the Census that would have significantly altered the contents of the 2000 census Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS). These events show clearly that science does not operate independently from the political sphere but may be transformed by a political world where powerful interests lead government agencies to assume responsibility for privacy protection that can result in reducing access to statistical data.



Keywords

Personal privacy; Confidentiality; Information privacy; Data access; Data sharing; Decennial census; PUMS, Public use microdata sample

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Alice Robbin is Associate Professor of library and information science in the School of Library and Information Science at Indiana University at Bloomington. Her research interests include information policy, communication and information behavior in complex organizations, and the societal implications of the digital age. In addition to her research on the consequences of privacy law and policy for social research, she is currently examining the political controversy over the federal reclassification of standards for racial and ethnic group data.

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