

The burdens of information gathering

By [Edward J. Blum](#)

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“P.S. please excuse this scribble and burn it as soon as you read it. Good by.”

If you spend days in university archives reading the chicken scratches of everyday folks from the 19th century, then you will run into lines like this. And when you do, your eyes may get big. A request to destroy or keep private a letter oftentimes means there is something juicy.

In this particular case, there wasn't. It was an innocuous missive from the Civil War that discussed religious conversions and closed with a prayer “that we may have peace and happiness instead of sorrow and bloodshed.” Perhaps most interesting was that the recipient did not honor the request: the letter was not burned; it was kept, collected and later archived for me to read.

Historians thrive on privacy made public. We salivate over letters left unburned and private diaries later disclosed. We desire data, especially the most personal and confidential.

So too, it appears, does the federal government. Recent weeks have brought into public discussion how [various arms of the government and its anti-terrorism organizations collect data from websites and phone records](#).

For American Christians and those with religious sensitivities, information archiving, retrieval and disclosure has been and remains tricky business. It has touched on our deepest questions of authenticity, justice, community and theology.

- In the 1820s, an angel disclosed to Joseph Smith the location of ancient plates in upstate New York. He had them for enough time to “translate” them, but then they were gone. Ever since, Mormon apologists and their detractors have debated whether these plates of historical and sacred data ever existed.

- In 1869, [a group of northern Presbyterians](#), committed to diminishing sectional rivalries from the Civil War, proclaimed that they would eliminate any texts in their records that held negative statements about the South or secession. They would do this “in order that no remaining ground of prejudice to the great work of denominational charity may exist.”
- With the invention of the phonograph in the 1870s, one professor at Wake Forest University wrote to a scientist, “If man can bottle up and reproduce all our words at pleasure, is it an incredible thing that Omnipotence should be able to recall our every idle word, and bring us into judgment therefore at the last great day?”
- Because of secret recordings in the White House from the 1970s, [Billy Graham](#) can be heard, in conversation with President Richard Nixon, saying unseemly things about Jews.
- Something that went unrecognized during the recent “Mormon moment”: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has made a concerted effort to make public the documents from its tradition. The church has scanned and uploaded to the web [diaries and scrapbooks from Joseph Smith](#) and his compatriots.

Information gathering means responsibility and accountability. That’s a problem God has dealt with every day for thousands of years. Women and men, from the most erudite of theologians to the most lowly of dependents, have puzzled over theodicy (the problem of evil) and providentialism (the idea that God somehow has it all worked out). God’s knowledge (perhaps foreknowledge) and power (perhaps omnipotence) have led invariably to questions of God’s nature, justness and love.

On the ground, religious organizations have struggled with the burdens of information, too. The Catholic Church, for instance, has dealt with problems of what they knew, when, and what they did with their information.

Whether we like the federal government’s data collecting or not, whether we think it constitutional or not, the federal government now chooses to bear a heavier burden of information. To gather it means greater responsibility not only to capture wrongdoers and bring them to justice, but also to stop tragedies before they start. It is the burden of using power not for self service, but for community caring.

These are burdens that religious communities have dealt with at times poorly, at times justly. To think that those with political and military power will do better seems out of line with the founding philosophy of the nation. But perhaps our government will [recall the words of Jesus](#) that comic book author Stan Lee applied to Spider Man: “For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required; and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.”

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