



Harm Reduction Guide

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Harmful and Explicit Content

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Introduction

This guide reflects the process we use at the DTA to make careful decisions about how to make information available while reducing potential harm to both creators and readers.

The questions and recommendations in this guide are meant to:

- **identify** potentially sensitive information
- **consider** the implications of making that information public on an open-access digital platform; and
- **select** appropriate actions to mitigate potential harm.

Types of actions may include:

- **harmful content warnings** that inform readers about challenging content in a text. They set up expectations for viewing.
- **explicit content warnings** that inform readers about images of violence, sexuality, or other things that must be viewed with care. These warnings block the reader's view until they opt in by clicking a button.
- **redactions** that remove private information from a DTA item. If we scan the item ourselves, we redact only the file, not the original.
- **exclusion from the archive** in cases where it is impossible to ethically include an item.

We've created these decision-making tools because we value creators' privacy and readers' consent. Our decisions can never be perfect, because the historical record doesn't give us all of the information we'd need to make an ideal choice, and because a trans archive must exist outside of simple, binary thinking. Nonetheless, we have a duty to act, however imperfectly.

Working in these archives is an ongoing education. In conversation with each other, we must develop our own internal sense of how to minimize harm – how we would ourselves wish to be treated. This document is designed to facilitate that conversation.

The guide has two parts. The general considerations section is designed to holistically assess an item and its context. We recommend beginning with these questions and keeping them in mind when thinking through more specific aspects of an item.

In the specific considerations section that follows, the possible actions listed vary based on the context and content of items. Though the questions are presented in a linear, structured format, many of the categories can overlap, not all questions may be relevant,

and it may be helpful to move back and forth between different categories or questions. Again, the purpose of this document is not to generate a single correct answer, but to guide our thoughts as we make ethical choices.

This guide is intended for use in cases when we don't know creators' wishes. In cases where we are in conversation with people represented in our materials, we work with them to determine how materials are presented, which can result in different decisions from the ones recommended below.

Providing access to original historical materials in a digital archive can cause harm to both subjects in the collections and users of the archive. Though we cannot eliminate it entirely, we strive to reduce harm. We welcome feedback, conversation, and collaboration from our colleagues around this guide and our harm-reduction practices.

General Considerations

Self-Representation & Power

- Who is representing the subject and for what purpose?
- Is the subject in a position to control how they are being represented?
- How might factors such as gender identity, sexuality, race, financial security, nationality, immigration status, incarceration status, or age create power differentials and influence how a subject is portrayed?

Content

- Is the subject exoticized or made to be a spectacle?
- Is information about the subject potentially inaccurate or conveyed in a malicious way?
- Who might have been the original audience for this item? What is the subject's relationship to that audience?

Context & Circulation

- Do you know where this item originated and how it circulated?
- Do you know if the subject represented in the item is alive or deceased?
- What do you know about the contemporaneous social, cultural, and political context surrounding the subject or event represented?
- What is the relationship between the item and other materials in the collection/archive? How might this shift in context (i.e., including an item in the DTA) influence how the item or subject is understood?

Genre

- Do you know what the intended audience would expect this item to contain?
- Do you know where the intended audience would encounter this item?
- Do you know whether this kind of item is typically created for a broad or public audience?
- What are the likely expectations of privacy?
 - Personal correspondence is a genre that carries with it a reasonable expectation of privacy. People are more likely to share information that is only meant for the intended recipient. Third parties discussed within letters may not be aware they were ever mentioned.
 - Many genres that may not carry an assumption of privacy often had limited circulation, like community publications before widespread use of the Internet. Even when someone willingly shares their own information, it is important to consider the intended audience and circulation of the original item to determine whether it was meant to be shared with the general public.

Specific Considerations

Names

Introduction

Names can be an important part of a person's identity. Naming can be a powerful tool to recognize people for their ideas, knowledge, experiences, and contributions. Naming people on a public platform can also put them in a very vulnerable position. The considerations in this section are meant to honor the ways in which naming can be empowering while also recognizing that being named incorrectly or in a particular context can cause harm.

As the American political landscape has changed, so has the DTA's position on naming and redaction. Naming is not empowering when it makes people unsafe.

Currently, our practice is to **redact surnames by default**. Exceptions may include:

- the person is a public figure
- the person has made it clear that their name can be used
- we are confident that the person is no longer alive.

The older an item, the safer it is to leave unredacted. **If the material is more than a hundred years old, all names can be left unredacted.**

Definitions

- Deadnames: A name that an individual no longer uses or identifies with
- Deadnaming: The use or revealing of a person's deadname without their consent, often with harmful intentions
- First name: A given or personal name that is less likely to identify a specific person than a surname
- Mononym: A single name that is used in place of a first and surname, which a person would be recognized by
- Performance name: A name used by someone in relation to their role as a performer, e.g., a drag name. Some people may be easily identifiable or locatable by this name.
- Personally identifying information: Details such as physical description, place of birth, occupation, social security number, or other unique information that might identify a person even without a name
- Public figure: Someone about whom information can be found online through a basic search (beyond the DTA).
- Publicly available: Circulating on easily accessible websites
- Surname: Generally a last name or family name that is more likely to identify a specific person than a first name alone

Considerations & Potential Actions

Considerations	Potential Actions
Does the item include a deadname or a name the person did not choose to use?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do not include the first name in metadata, but do not redact from the item unless requested
Is the subject a public figure?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If no, redact surname, partial performance name, or mononym by default If yes, consider whether the material raises privacy issues. Use the “personal information” section of this guide to make redaction decisions around surname, partial performance name, or mononym
Is the subject a child at the time of the item’s creation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Redact the full name except for the first initial, unless we have permission from the subject
Is the subject incarcerated, committed to a hospital, or otherwise not emancipated at the time of the item’s creation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Redact the full name, except for the first initial, unless they are a public figure, we have permission from the subject, or the item was designed to be widely circulated
Are family members or partners affiliated with the subject named in relation to something that might put them in a vulnerable or potentially harmful position?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leave unmarked when clear intentions have been provided by the subject or the sensitive information is already publicly available Do not include name in metadata but do not redact from the item unless requested Redact surname, partial performance name, or mononym
Is the person transgender? Can their identity be placed under the broad trans umbrella?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If yes, hold the item to the highest privacy standards If no, consider the context. The names of cisgender public figures, doctors, therapists, and businesspeople can generally go unredacted. Names in advertisements can generally go unredacted unless context strongly indicates that the person is trans.
Is the archival item public facing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If yes, and if there is no otherwise private

	information, consider removing names in metadata but not in the item itself.
Was the person the primary creator of a publication or similar item?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider leaving unredacted, particularly when there are no other fully named creators, there was an original expectation of publicness, and there seems to be minimal likelihood for harm.

Examples:

- The name of the collection donor appears in items throughout the collection and we have the donor's permission to use their name on all items.
 - We would not redact the donor's name.
- A personal email included in a collection mentions a private conversation with a well-known trans activist about their mental health challenges. Quick research reveals that this is not something they typically share with the public.
 - We would redact their surname.
- A clipping from a local LGBTQ newsletter profiles a trans bartender who works at a gay bar.
 - We would redact their surname.
- There is a letter written by the donor to a friend. In the letter, the donor discusses a sexual encounter with a person and includes their full name.
 - We would redact the surname of the sexual partner.
- The creator of the item is incarcerated.
 - We would redact their full name except for their first initial.

Personal Information

Introduction

Personal details are an important component of archival records, as they help to illustrate people's complexities and the uniqueness of their experiences. We want to make this information available to researchers who celebrate this richness, while also protecting individuals by distancing them from details that might be used to identify and locate them in order to cause harm. We do not often have the ability to confirm whether or not people are out and recognize that for some people, even the fact of being included within the DTA may bring an increased level of visibility that is not comfortable or safe for them.

Definitions

- Business address: An address for a location is only used for professional purposes and does not serve as a residence
- Personal information: Any details that are unique to a person and could be used to identify or locate them even if their surname does not appear

Considerations & Potential Actions

Considerations	Potential Actions
Does the item contain a business or organizational address or a P.O. Box?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leave unmarked • If it is unclear whether a business or organization is being run out of a home, redact number and street name; leave city, state, and zip code
Does the item contain a residential address?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redact number and street name; leave city, state, and zip code
Does the item contain a phone number?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redact phone number, but leave area code
Does the item contain an email address?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full redaction
Does the item consist of or contain sensitive personally identifiable information (e.g., SSN, ID number, account number, government-issued document number)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redact personally identifying information and/or account numbers

Examples

- "To join the support group, contact Mike at (617) xxx-xxxx" in a community newsletter.

- We would redact this phone number because it may be Mike’s personal number and could still be in use. Mike could have been a volunteer who was willing to share a personal number with a small network of people.
- “Velma’s Wigs welcomes the transgender community! Call (415) xxx-xxxx to make an appointment for a fitting” in an advertisement.
 - We would redact this phone number because we don’t know who currently uses it, it may have been a business run out of a home, and the process of determining whether a number is exclusively used for business is time-consuming and has little benefit for the researcher.
- “Please visit Dr. Smith’s office at 123 Main Street” in a flyer advertising trans-affirming medical care.
 - We would not redact this address because the address is clearly associated with a business.

Medical Information

Introduction

Though archives are not subject to the same laws as medical professionals and institutions, we take seriously that medical information can be highly personal and is often considered private. The DTA does not condone the stigma that is sometimes associated with certain medical conditions, but we are aware that these associations have a real impact on people's lives.

Considerations & Potential Actions

Considerations	Potential Actions
<p>What type of medical information (including mental health) is being shared and how sensitive is it? For example, consider (listed least to most sensitive):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General discussion of health or symptoms • References to official diagnosis or treatment for severe, chronic, and/or stigmatized illness • Official documentation 	<p>Choose actions according to the degree of sensitivity (listed least to most sensitive):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leave unmarked • Redact references to health or symptoms • Crop or redact visual images • Exclude item

Examples

- A person mentions that they have just recovered from a mild cold in a newsletter.
 - We would leave this unmarked.
- A letter mentions a recent psychiatric hospitalization. Surnames have been redacted according to general policy, but the person would be identifiable to people who knew them because they live in a small town and have an unusual job.
 - We would consider redacting either the discussion or some of the information that makes the person identifiable.
- A medical article includes recognizable nude images of people with intersex conditions.
 - We would redact the images or exclude the item, depending on the importance of the material.
- A collection includes official medical records detailing a surgical procedure.
 - We would exclude this item.

Legal

Introduction

The DTA contains documentation of many encounters between trans people and legal and carceral systems. These encounters and the ways in which they are documented often put trans people in especially vulnerable positions where they do not have control over their circumstances or how they are represented. Additionally, a record of incarceration or involvement with activity that is/was considered criminal can have long-lasting material effects on people's lives. Researchers may also find depictions of some crimes disturbing, especially if the victim of the crime is transgender. For all of these reasons and more, we tread very carefully when information of this nature enters the DTA, especially if it would not be available to the public otherwise.

Always ask yourself: does the potential harm that the item could cause outweigh other considerations? What purpose does the discussion/depiction of the activity serve? Who is describing or otherwise representing the illegal activity?

Considerations & Potential Actions

Considerations	Potential Actions
<p>Does the item contain a written description or visual depiction of illegal activity? Consider the severity of the crime/activity, including the legal and social dimensions, AND the degree to which the item may incriminate the subject.</p> <p>Follow up Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the crime discussed/depicted a felony? • Is it a violent crime? • Is its content disturbing? <p>AND</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the item contain explicit detail of a crime that could be used as evidence or considered a confession? • Is the person engaged in illegal activity clearly identifiable? • Could the activity be used against a person (e.g., child custody hearings, immigration hearings)? 	<p>Choose actions according to the nature and severity (listed least to most severe):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leave unmarked aside from redaction of surname, partial performance name, or mononym. • Include a harmful content warning in description. • Include an explicit content warning that prompts the viewer to consent and opt in before viewing an image. • Crop images to protect subject's identity. • Exclude item.
<p>Is a subject's incarceration or undocumented immigration status discussed?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be especially vigilant in redacting surname, partial performance name, or mononym of anyone who might be incriminated or who might be subjected to material harm due

	<p>to status/stigma</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the subject is incarcerated or otherwise not emancipated at the time of creation, redact the full name except for the first initial
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Examples

- A news article about a transphobic hate crime describes the crime in graphic detail and misgenders the victim.
 - We would add a harmful content warning.
- In an unguarded moment in an oral history, a narrator uses the present tense to discuss selling drugs.
 - We would redact their name or exclude the item.
- A document includes details regarding someone's employment history and references to the fact that they were undocumented at the time of employment.
 - We would leave the document unmarked beyond the usual surname redaction.
- A news article about an activist contains quotes in which they mention that they used to be a sex worker.
 - We would leave this item unmarked.

Language & Imagery

Introduction

This project's aim is to bridge trans-related experiences of the past with the present, which requires us to navigate shifting landscapes of cultures, languages, and understandings of identity. Harmful content in our collections includes references to or depictions of self harm, hate crimes, violence (sexual, physical, and systemic), and discriminatory or dehumanizing language and images, as well as material produced or circulated in exploitative contexts. We mark instances of nudity as explicit to ensure, in a trans-affirming way, that DTA materials will not be restricted or removed by online content filters. For more details, see our [policies page](#).

Definitions

- **Slur:** A word or phrase that is intended to disparage or insult a person
 - Note that language evolves quickly. Some slurs originate in community, or as neutral words, but later become negatively charged. Others begin as insults but are later reclaimed by the community. Still others have been largely forgotten and have lost their insulting charge. If you have any doubt about the context of an apparently abusive word, please talk to a supervisor.

Considerations & Potential Actions

Considerations	Potential Actions
Does the item contain any slurs used against a person?	Options: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include a harmful content warning in description, following the DTA's slur policy • If the slur appears in the title, abbreviate the title and mark with an ellipsis inside of a bracket or retitl
Is a slur being reclaimed by a member of the group against which it is or was generally used?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leave unmarked, but do not repeat in the metadata.
Is a word being used in community at a historical point before it became a slur?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leave unmarked, but do not repeat in the metadata.
Is a word being used in community in a way that is now considered dated or impolite, but not a slur?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leave unmarked. If the historical person uses it to describe themselves, you may include it in subject terms, along with modern synonyms if applicable.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dated racial terms are an exception. These should be unmarked but left out of metadata. Use modern synonyms instead.
<p>Does the item depict any of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Animal abuse • Child abuse • Hate crimes • Homophobic language • Homophobic violence • Medical abuse • Racist imagery (e.g. caricatures, blackface)? • Racist language • Self-harm • Sexual assault • Suicide • Transphobic imagery • Transphobic violence 	<p>Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the material contains descriptions only, include a harmful content warning in description. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Template: “This item contains potentially sensitive content related to [...].” • If the material includes images, add an explicit content warning that prompts the viewer to consent and opt in before viewing image • Potentially exclude the item. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider whether the potential harm that the item could cause to a subject and/or viewer/reader outweighs other considerations
<p>Does the item show a person of any gender exhibiting below-the-waist nudity, front or back?</p>	<p>Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include an explicit content warning that prompts the viewer to consent and opt in before viewing image • Artistic works are treated on a case-by-case basis
<p>Does the item show a feminine- or female-presenting person exhibiting above-the-waist frontal nudity?</p>	<p>Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include an explicit content warning that prompts the viewer to consent and opt in before viewing image • Artistic works are treated on a case-by-case basis
<p>Does the item show an underage person exhibiting nudity?</p>	<p>Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exclude • Crop image if part of a larger document

Examples

- A diary contains a detailed discussion of suicidal feelings.
 - We would add the content warning: “This item contains potentially sensitive content related to suicide.”

- A collection contains material related to a complex story involving multiple vectors of trauma.
 - We would add a detailed content warning. Example: “This item relates to the death of Brandon Teena, who was murdered and sexually assaulted as the target of gruesome anti-LGBT hate crimes. Brandon's death became a major news item, and the language used to describe his identity and depict the violence he suffered by contemporary press coverage ranges from insensitive to outright cruel.”

Appendix: Digital Transgender Archive Harmful and Explicit Content Policy

Harmful and Explicit Content

The DTA includes materials that are harmful (in that they are racist, transphobic, or otherwise demeaning, or that they include discussions of sexual assault, child abuse, medical abuse, homicide, suicide, or self harm) and materials that are explicit (in that they contain nudity and graphic content). This is unsurprising, given that the majority of trans-related historical documentations were not authored by the people or groups being documented. As we determine which materials to make available on the DTA, we consider the ethics of publishing and preserving harmful materials and the impact those materials may have on visitors. At the same time, we are committed to providing unsanitized access to trans history that critically frames or contextualizes materials when possible.

For harmful content

This project's aim is to bridge trans-related experiences of the past with the present, which requires us to navigate shifting landscapes of cultures, languages, and understandings of identity. We strive to be considerate of the potential harm that may be caused to site visitors by encountering certain content, yet we are also committed to providing access to historical materials in their original form. Trans-related history is rarely authored by the people who are being documented, which often leads to the use of discriminatory language and inaccurate or unethical representations. Harmful content in our collections includes references to or depictions of self harm, hate crimes, violence (sexual, physical, and systemic), and discriminatory or dehumanizing language and images, as well as material produced or circulated in exploitative contexts. We add descriptive content warnings to certain items that seem particularly likely to harm visitors, such as documentations of some forms of violence (e.g., suicide, homicide, rape), racist imagery (e.g., blackface, redface), and items that use especially harmful slurs against others. Though we recognize that it can be difficult for contemporary audiences to encounter these items, we strive to balance the particular historical and cultural contexts in which the items were created as we evaluate whether to add content warnings. Since one of our key values is respecting the chosen identities of individuals, we generally do not apply content warnings to items with slurs when they are used by individuals to describe themselves. In cases where titles include slurs, titles may be abbreviated and marked by an ellipsis inside of a bracket. Even when we do not add a content warning, there may be harmful content in an item, which we often try to signal in the description field. We recognize that we will not be perfect in deciding which items warrant content warnings and we invite your [feedback and suggestions!](#)

For explicit content

To determine whether objects qualify as explicit we use the following three criteria:

- object shows extremely violent, graphic, or racist content.
- object shows a person of any gender exhibiting below-the-waist nudity, front or back.
- object shows a feminine- or female-presenting person exhibiting above-the-waist frontal nudity.

These criteria are designed to respect people's presentations, but they do not and cannot capture the full complexity of gender expression, particularly in the context of U.S. state laws that impose a male/female binary in order to censor "female" nudity. Although we disagree with this practice, we observe the criteria above to ensure, in a trans-affirming way, that DTA materials will not be restricted or removed by online content filters.

Objects are not flagged for images of obvious prosthetics (such as detached packers or breast forms) or for language or text that is considered vulgar, objectionable, or sexually explicit. Objects that are hosted in other digital repositories are also not flagged unless there is explicit content in a thumbnail. Artistic works are treated on a case-by-case basis.

Before viewing any explicit materials, visitors are prompted for their consent in order to confirm that they are not a minor and that they wish to see the materials. This practice follows a feminist model of consent and supports uses of the DTA in educational contexts.

If you believe that we have mistakenly marked an object as explicit or that we should consider adding an explicit content warning to an object, please feel free to [contact us](#).

Credits

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