

## REDACTION



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▷ In my dictionary, "redact" is defined as a rarely used verb that means to "edit for publication", which while true does not do justice to the richer meaning that it has acquired. Today redaction refers to concealing sensitive information in a document that is to be published. In practice this means hiding text with either a white or black bar. The latter serves two purposes – firstly to hide the sensitive text, and secondly to indicate that text has been redacted.

Occasionally the issue, and the word, is thrust into the public's consciousness. "Is 'redacted' a made up word? I'd never heard it before it began to be used in relation to MP's expenses." This was a blog comment on the furore this year (2009) over the expense claims of MPs, the elected representatives of the UK government. It led to the publication of their expense claims, with sensitive information such as home address redacted with black bars.

In fact the practice has been common in the legal profession for many years, and before electronic documents a thick black marker (or a bottle of white-out liquid) would be used to redact before photocopying. For example, in most jurisdictions the identity of minors is protected under law. So a judgment in a case concerning a minor, which will be a matter of public record, may need to be redacted to hide information that could help identify the child.

One of the drivers for redaction has been the legal right of citizens in countries that have Freedom of Information Acts to request information from public institutions. In the USA the FOIA was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson back in 1966. It allows for the full or partial disclosure of previously unreleased information and documents controlled by the United States Government. In 2000, the UK also passed a Freedom of Information Act that empowers citizens to request information from public bodies, who are required under law to respond. Germany has a similar law – the 2005 Federal Freedom of Information Act (Gesetz zur Regelung des Zugangs zu Informationen des Bundes), and many other EU countries have similar legislation in place.

The role of redaction in Freedom of Information is significant. Redaction makes possible the publication of information while protecting sensitive information, the disclosure of which may compromise national security or place an individual in danger: I suspect that most redactions are made for rather more mundane reasons, but typically those disclosing information have to abide by a code of practice that is intended to prevent over-zealous use of the black marker.

While the information may or may not be made available in an electronic form, it is a natural choice as it reduces the cost of publishing this information.

Thus PDF (Portable Document Format) files are a frequent target of redaction. They are often thought of as the electronic equivalent of paper, and the final form of a document that may have been authored electronically, scanned from an original, possibly assembled from a variety



Redaction is easy in gDoc Fusion.

of sources. Many government and commercial organizations rely on them for publishing documents on the web, effectively putting them in the public domain, or for delivering document-based information to third parties that would have been delivered as paper (or fax) in the pre-Internet era.

In addition, PDFs are preferred, particularly in the legal profession, because metadata (for example, evidence of past edits of the document) are stripped away during the process of conversion from the authoring format (such as a word processor) to PDF. Moreover they can be secured against casual changes while still permitting viewing and printing.

It is vital however that the tool used to redact a PDF not only obscures the text or graphics identified for redaction, but also removes the underlying data as well. There have been examples where redaction has failed, leaving the sensitive information in a form that can be recovered. In one case, a judgment issued by a US court was redacted in the word processor by the simple application of a black text background. As a printed document, it was indeed redacted; the text was entirely obscured. But as an electronic document, all one had to do was swipe the text areas and copy to the clipboard, from where it could be pasted into a word processor:

With the demand for ever greater transparency from our public bodies, the legal obligations of companies and other organizations, the requirement for redaction can only increase. Redaction, when used properly, is an important safeguard that protects the innocent or vulnerable in today's information-driven world. □

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