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## Working Summary

### **NIST Special Publication 800-88**

Guidelines for Media Sanitization:  
Recommendations of the National  
Institute of Standards and Technology

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## Summary of NIST Special Publication 800-88

### Guidelines for Media Sanitization

*Recommendations of the National Institute of Standards and Technology*

#### Overview of NIST Special Publication 800-88

Special Publication 800-88 recommends a number of methods for sanitizing electronic data on hard drives and other electronic media. Media sanitization is the process of removing data from a hard drive, CD-ROM or other electronic media, generally at the end of the data's life cycle. The life cycle of a physical HDD or other media storage device is a separate topic, but one often directly related to and affected by the data disposal policy.

The data disposal methods cited include *physical destruction*, *degaussing* (magnetic) and *non-destructive (erasing)* solutions (explained below). The NIST document also provides guidance for how to match the destruction technologies with specific security, business and environmental requirements. The key to the guidelines is not that they identify the most secure technologies, but that they offer a range of possibilities that can be matched with such factors as data confidentiality, risk, cost, scale etc. They should be regarded as sound recommendations based on scientific testing and not as rigid industry standards. While a typical audience might be a CIO or privacy officer seeking to establish a data protection program, the material is relatively easy to understand for non-professionals. It can therefore provide guidance to anyone seeking to sanitize electronic data.

Special Publication 800-88 is also an excellent resource for organizations and system owners in the process of developing overall privacy protection programs, as mandated in most recent privacy legislation. It has become the de facto reference for privacy professionals undertaking to comply with federal and state regulations regarding the disposal of end-of-life (non-classified) electronic data. This DestructData summary of the NIST publication report provides a "thumbnail" version of the essential information found in the original 41 page document. Appendix A, *Media Sanitization Decision Matrix*, encapsulates the core concepts of the original NIST publication and is reproduced in part at the end of this document. The matrix provides a useful greater context for the practical product and policy choices a complete program will require.

#### Section 1: Introduction

Sanitization refers to the general process of removing data from hard drives, CD-ROMS or other storage media so that data may not be easily retrieved and reconstructed. When storage media is transferred, becomes obsolete, or is no longer usable or required by an information system, it is important to ensure that residual magnetic, optical, or electrical data is not easily recoverable. The increased use of encryption within IT infrastructures may actually make electronic storage media more attractive to data thieves.

All data disposal practices should first determine that information is captured and maintained as required by business and regulatory needs. Furthermore, this process should be ongoing, as controls need to be adjusted when conditions change.

#### Section 2: Background

Critical factors affecting information disposition and media sanitization should be determined at the start of a system's development. While disposal of data is most likely to occur at the end of the data life cycle, it may be required any time a storage device leaves the control of the organization. This may be for maintenance reasons, system upgrades, or during a tech refresh.

### Sidebar 1: Background

#### What is NIST and the Information Technology Laboratory?

The National Institute for Standards and Technology (NIST) is responsible for developing best practices and guidelines, including minimum requirements, for implementing adequate information security in all federal agency operations and assets. However, these standards do not apply to national security systems. The Information Technology Lab's (ITL) functions include developing technical, physical, administrative, and management standards and guidelines for cost effective security and privacy of sensitive unclassified information in Federal computer systems.



First categorize the information and consider the level of confidentiality, then assess the media on which it is stored. Any security plan for the lifespan of data should be developed in a manner that is appropriate to its security level.

Best practices have changed since 2001 and will continue to change. Increases in track density and the corresponding changes in the storage medium have resulted in a situation where clearing and purging the media have converged. For ATA disk drives manufactured after 2001 (over 15 GB) clearing by overwriting the media once (single pass) is adequate to protect the media from both keyboard and laboratory attack.

**NIST divides sanitization types for each type of media into four categories: *Disposal, Clearing, Purging* and *Destroying*.**

The category descriptions that follow here are summations of those in Table 2.1 and Table 5.1 (which are essentially duplicates of each other) in the NIST original.

**Disposal:** Discarding media without sanitizing the data it contains (throwing it away).

**Clearing:** Protects information against a robust keyboard attack. Deletion does not. Clearing means information can't be retrieved by data, disk or file recovery utilities, and must be resistant to keystroke recovery attempts executed from standard input devices or data scavenging tools. Overwriting is an acceptable clearing method. The goal is to replace written data with random data in logical storage locations and all other addressable locations. Clearing can't be used for media that is damaged or not writable. Media type and size should also be considered. Most modern media can be effectively cleared by one overwrite pass.

**Purging:** Identified as a higher security level than clearing because it protects information against a laboratory attack. A laboratory attack is more sophisticated than a keyboard attack and uses non-standard methods and tools to steal data outside of its operating environment. Although not sufficient for some media, for ATA drives manufactured after 2001, purging and clearing are now regarded as essentially the same.

The two primary examples of purging are 1) executing the firmware Secure Erase command and 2) degaussing. Degaussing exposes a hard drive to a strong magnetic drive, which destroys the firmware that manages the drive. It renders the drive unusable. Degaussers are rated according to the type of media they can sanitize and are especially useful for purging damaged media. They are good for destroying media with exceptionally large storage capacities or for purging diskettes quickly. Not recommended for CD-ROMs and other optical media.

If purging media is not a reasonable sanitization method for organizations, this guide recommends that the media be destroyed.

**Destroying:** The most secure form of sanitization. Once destroyed, however, drives cannot be reused as originally intended. Physical destruction methods include disintegration, incineration, pulverizing, shredding, and melting. If a high security categorization requires destruction, the residual hard drive (or other storage media) component must be able to withstand a laboratory attack.

**Disintegration, Incineration, Pulverization, and Melting:** These sanitization methods are designed to completely destroy the media. They may be outsourced to qualified metal destruction or incineration facilities, or performed on-site by service providers specifically certified for this activity.

## Sidebar 2: Sanitization Decision Making Factors

1. What types of media storage does the organization need to be sanitized?
2. What is the confidentiality level of data stored on the media?
3. Will the media be processed in a controlled area?
4. Should the sanitization process be conducted within the organization or outsourced?
5. What is the anticipated volume of media to be sanitized by type of media?
6. What is the availability of sanitization equipment and tools?
7. What level of personnel training is required for equipment/tools?
8. How long will each sanitization process take?
9. What is the relative cost of any process when tools, training, validation, and reentering media into the supply stream is considered?





Choosing storage media is a key decision when determining sanitization policy. Primarily an IT business decision, sanitization throughout the life cycle should be considered when selecting storage media. Many storage devices contain multiple forms of media that may require different methods of sanitization. For example, a PC may contain a hard drive, RAM, and ROM.

In order to control data and conduct timely sanitization, organizations must know which media are capturing data and when. These decisions can be as simple as ensuring placement of paper shredders in work areas or address destroying electronic equipment at the end of its life cycle.

A key decision on sanitization is whether the media will be reused or recycled. If media are not intended for reuse either within or outside an organization due to damage or other reason, the simplest and most cost-effective method of control may be destruction.

### Control of Media:

A factor influencing an organizational sanitization decision is who has control and access to the media. This aspect must be considered when media leaves organizational control. Media control may be transferred when media are returned from a leasing agreement or are being donated or resold to be reused outside the organization.

Document the decision making process upon completion and ensure that a strategy and proper resources are in place to support these decisions. This process is often the most difficult aspect of media sanitization because it includes validation as an additional component. It requires documenting decisions and actions, identifying resources, and having critical interfaces with key officials.

### Verification:

Verifying sanitization is essential. This phase of sanitization policy includes taking a representative sample of media. All verification must be conducted by personnel with no stake in the process. Tools used in sanitization must be calibrated, tested and maintained. Personnel must be trained and attain the proper level of expertise to perform sanitization tasks.

### Documentation:

Inadequate record keeping can have negative consequences in the real world. Document what, when and how media are sanitized, as well as the final disposition. Appendix F provides a useful sample form (see original document).

## Sidebar 4: Tools and Resources

**NIST APPROVAL:** NIST does not conduct an evaluation of any specific product for the purpose of validating its ability to clear, purge, or destroy information contained on any specific medium. If an organization has validated a product, they are strongly encouraged to share this information through public forums, such as the Federal Agency Security Practices (FASP) website. FASP can be found at <http://csrc.nist.gov/fasp/>.

**FIRMWARE PURGING:** For hard drive devices or devices where firmware purge commands (Secure Erase) can be accessed and utilized, this option may be the best solution. *Firmware purge commands can provide strong assurance of data protection while allowing the device to be reused.*



## Minimum Sanitization Recommendations for Media Containing Data

### Appendix A: Media Sanitization Decision Matrix.

Media types are listed in the left column. The “decision” columns correspond to the destruction methods described on page 2.

This matrix closely follows a fundamental principle expressed throughout the NIST 800-88 document: sanitization methods should be based on confidentiality or security levels first. While this chart primarily covers hard drives and optical media, the matrix in the original document covers a wider range of hard copy, data storage and telecommunication devices.

**Appendix A. Media Sanitization Decision Matrix**  
(Abridged - Original on page 17 NIST Special Publication 800-88)

Media Type	Clear	Purge	Physical Destruction
ATA Hard Drives	Overwrite media by using agency-approved and validated overwriting technologies/methods/tools.	<p>1. Purge using Secure Erase. The Secure Erase software can be downloaded from the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) CMRR site.</p> <p>2. Purge hard disk drives by either purging the hard disk drive in an NSA/CSS-approved automatic degausser or by disassembling the hard disk drive and purging the enclosed platters with an NSA/CSS-approved degaussing wand**.</p> <p>3. Purge media by using agency-approved and validated purge technologies/tools.</p> <p><i>**Degaussing any current generation hard disk will render the drive permanently unusable.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disintegrate.</li> <li>• Shred.</li> <li>• Pulverize.</li> <li>• Incinerate. Incinerate hard disk drives by burning the hard disk drives in a licensed incinerator.</li> </ul>

### Sidebar 4: Tools and Resources (Continued)

**DONATIONS AND DISPOSAL:** Organizations and individuals wishing to donate used electronic equipment or seeking guidance on disposal of residual materials after sanitization should consult the Environmental Protection Agencies (EPA) electronic recycling and electronic waste information website at <http://www.epa.gov/e-Cycling/>. This site offers advice, regulations, and standard publications related to sanitization, disposal, and donations. It also provides external links to other sanitization tool resources.



**Appendix A. Media Sanitization Decision Matrix (Continued)**

(Abridged - Original on page 17 NIST Special Publication 800-88)

Media Type	Clear	Purge	Physical Destruction
SCSI Drives	Overwrite media by using agency-approved and validated overwriting technologies/methods/tools.	Purge hard disk drives by either purging the hard disk drive in an NSA/CSS approved automatic degausser or by disassembling the hard disk drive and purging the enclosed platters with an NSA/CSS-approved degaussing wand.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disintegrate.</li> <li>• Shred.</li> <li>• Pulverize.</li> <li>• Incinerate. Incinerate hard disk drives by burning the hard disk drives in a licensed incinerator.</li> </ul>
CDs / DVDs	See Physical Destruction	See Physical Destruction	<p>Destroy in order of recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Removing the Information bearing layers of optical media using a commercial optical disk grinding device.</li> <li>• Incinerate optical disk media (reduce to ash) using a licensed facility.</li> <li>• Use optical disk media shredders or disintegrator devices to reduce to particles that have a nominal edge dimension of five millimeters (5 mm) and surface area of twenty-five square millimeters (25 mm<sup>2</sup>)**.</li> </ul> <p><i>**This is a current acceptable particle size. Any future disk media shredders obtained should reduce DVD to surface area of .25mm.</i></p>

**Sidebar 4: Tools and Resources (Continued)**

**OUTSOURCING:** Organizations can outsource media sanitization and destruction if business and security management decide that this option will maintain confidentiality while optimizing available resources. When exercising this option, organizations must exercise “due diligence” when entering into a contract with another party engaged in media sanitization.

Due diligence for this case is accepted as outlined in the FTC’s Disposal of Consumer Report Information and Records Document 16 CFR Part 682. This document states *due diligence could include reviewing an independent audit of the disposal company’s operations and/or its compliance with this rule, obtaining information about the disposal company from several references or other reliable sources, requiring that the disposal company be certified by a recognized trade association or similar third party, reviewing and evaluating the disposal company’s information security policies or procedures, or taking other appropriate measures to determine the competency and integrity of the potential disposal company.*

