

ETHICAL CONCERNS AND THEIR PLACE IN THE TRAINING OF INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS

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Abstract:

Ethical aspects of the information profession are analyzed, including those related to information dissemination and use (intellectual property, information access, intellectual freedom, censorship...) as well as standard topics of professional practice (negligence, liability). All these problems are examined in the light of the new possibilities and challenges posed by the development of new information and communication technologies. With this in mind, a proposal is put forward containing the main elements and aspects which should be part of the training of information professionals.

Keywords: Information professionals, education, ethics.

1. Introduction

Libraries and other information centers participate in a certain social mission and act in accordance to a given set of values. In other words, the process of achieving their goals has much to do with following an ethical conduct, which recognizes information professionals as moral agents responsible before themselves, others and society at large. Ethics thus provides us with a framework for us to monitor the essential functions of professionals, establish policies and develop service strategies.

Today, there is a special need to inculcate, develop or increase in librarians and information professionals an awareness of the ethical dimension of their work. There is also the further requirement that the principles governing professional practice be rendered coherent and armonized. As well as the inescapable reference to globalization, Froechlich (1997) indicates the need of these principles in order to face a number of factors, namely:

1) The tendency worldwide of a decrease in the openness of access to information in libraries and information centers.

2) The poor support granted to information use related to education, culture or research.

3) The appearance of economic barriers for information users that may be caused by the increase in PLR (public lending right) regulation.

4) The decrease or lack of application of norms of fair use, private copy or privileges held by libraries and similar institutions.

5) The attack on the collections owned by libraries and information centers by those who wish to censor, control or manipulate the materials that can be accessed.

These factors ultimately boil down to two: a purely economic view of information (information must be paid for), and the threat posed on freedom by control and censorship

There can be no doubt that ethical considerations are extremely complex; ultimately, they deal with what is “good” and what is “bad” and hence have profound philosophical, religious and legal roots. For the same reason, our focus here lies more on identifying some of the principles, obligations and basic cases that are to be found in our professional context than on determining what is right or wrong at each given instance. In this way we will appreciate more clearly the many ethical dilemmas that information professionals must face. In the last analysis, the aim of this paper is to discuss these issues in the light of the new possibilities and challenges that the application of new information technologies sets before us. Using this starting point, it then proposes the elements of this debate that should be included in the formal training of information professionals.

2. Factors Affecting Ethical Debate

Most times, professionals are not fully conscious of the ethical implications of their actions. Their behaviour is often shaped most significantly by customs and habits. Ethical disagreements thus only appear with special circumstances; these are cases where one may have doubts about what to do. Four basic factors play a part in the process of deliberation: social utility, survival, social responsibility and respect for the individual (Rubin, 1991).

2.1. Social Utility

Organizations –especially those of public ownership- strive to attain a variety of social goals. This is the case with the majority of libraries and information centers. For example, public libraries are created in order to respond to the informative, educational and recreational needs of citizens, and so on. An organization’s social utility is defined by the extent to which it achieves its social goals. Therefore it is ethically desirable that decisions and courses of action taken by the organization be in the best of the fulfillment of its social ends.

Having said this, ethical conflicts may arise whenever the attainment of an organization’s goal has negative effects on other institutions. For example, a library may be forced to compete with other equally respectable public institutions for limited funding. If so, public parks, safety, schools or public hygiene may suffer with the library’s success.

2.2. Survival

A crucial condition for any organization is survival. Without it, organizations would not exist to carry out the tasks for which they were created. Hence it is reasonable to assume that, insofar as their ends are of any value, organizations have an ethical duty to survive.

Libraries often have to face problems related to their survival. Perhaps the most evident one arises when members of the community object to one or more items belonging to the library’s holdings. It may even happen that this pressure to censure come from those funding the library. In these circumstances, librarians will have to give in to the pressure if the library’s very survival is endangered, for the library’s existence is much more important than

any particular holding. We witness, in such an event, an instance of conflict between the factors of survival and social utility.

2.3. Social Responsibility

On top of the duty of achieving the goals that justify their existence, organizations are responsible before society at large. This is especially the case with public ones, who receive direct financial support from the same society. There are a number of instances that can serve as an indicator of the organization's social responsibility; a few examples are the choice of a more ecological or less polluting material, or policies that promote employment among underprivileged members of society. As before, the attempt to live up to these responsibilities may lead to a conflict with other factors. Buying a more environmentally-friendly material may be more expensive and so undermine a company's chance of surviving.

2.4. Respect for the Individual

A fundamental ethical concern is the treatment received by individuals. Basically, they must be treated with dignity and respect; moreover, employees and users have the right to act as they please, provided they do not violate other individuals' dignity and the respect due to them.

Libraries and other information centers try to accommodate to this factor in a variety of ways. They are open to all kinds of people; they develop their collections responding to the needs of individuals as well as masses; they protect user privacy; their employees are treated fairly, and so on. Of course, conflicts are not foreign in keeping this concern. For example, a library collection may be expanded or developed by catering to a great mass of users (survival factor) or to a specialized group (respect for the individual).

To summarize, it is clear that these four factors are important and hence it is often hard to find an adequate balance between them. Although experience as well as professional codes and directives can be of help, each situation nonetheless entails its own specific circumstances (Rubin and Froehlich, 1996).

3. Principal Areas with Ethical Implications

A great deal of the difficulty of discussing ethical issues in our field is that the focus must be (at least) twofold. On the one hand, we have what could be labeled as "information ethics", which concerns itself with the use and misuse of information (intellectual property, open or restricted access to information, censorship, use of government data, privacy and confidentiality, data integrity, international information flow). On the other hand we have what relates specifically to professional conduct, namely, professional ethics or how ethical principles are applied to the actions and decisions taken by information professionals (Smith, 1997). Our view is that these two aspects must be dealt with in an integral fashion, due to their close relationship. This focus leads us to the following five themes:

3.1. Choice of Materials and Censorship

Selection decisions are of great importance, since they determine the nature of the library or information center collection. At the most basic level, there exists an ethical duty to

use the appropriate selection criteria. Given the fact that the library's mission is defined by serving users' needs, selection decisions must follow this same predicament. All this may seem obvious, but related problems do arise at times; for example, when those selecting follow their own interest or that of a small but powerful group of users. This tension leads us to the classical and ever present issue of the relationship between selection and censorship.

In principle there is a clear distinction between censorship and selection. The former can be understood as the active suppression of materials considered dangerous on the basis of religious, moral, political and other reasons. The latter is the activity whereby professionals choose materials sensibly and judiciously, following criteria that are in accordance with the goals of their library or information center.

Censorship is pressed by forces both external (parents, religious groups, political groups, minorities, patriotic groups, emotionally unstable individuals) and internal (administrators, government bodies, personnel, selection or circulation policies). These sources of censorship vary with the type of library or information center. Public or school libraries are especially vulnerable to the intromission of parents or religious groups who wish to protect children from materials they deem inappropriate. Of course, the suppression of such materials may be offensive to other parents and students.

If in theory the line between censorship and selection is a clear one, in practise it can become much blurred. This is because selection decisions are influenced by the cultural norms of the community in which the information center is found. Clearly, this would hardly pose a problem if there was a perfect social consensus as to which are these norms; however, in the majority of instances such a uniformity is found wanting. A very relevant example of this problematic is the manifold attempts to censor the Internet.

Libraries and information centers best defend themselves against any form of censorship pressure by establishing an acquisition policy which is well defined, detailed and explicit. Moreover, such a policy should be elaborated together with those responsible for the institution, in an integrated way. In addition, the support of national and international professional associations is important, as voiced in their official declarations. An example of the latter is the recent IFLA declaration regarding libraries and intellectual property (IFLA, 1999).

3.2. Access to Information

There also exist ethical issues concerning free and public access to information. These are much more relevant to public libraries, academic libraries and public information services than to specialized or corporate libraries and information centers.

There are many public and professional declarations that refer unequivocally to free and public access to information. To cite but one example, the British LA code of conduct states that any individual should be granted free and public access to information (Library Association, 1983). However, free access must not be understood in absolute terms; some qualifications are necessary. For instance, there is the risk that too great an emphasis on providing a service free of charge may result in funding problems that could endanger the survival of the information center. On the other hand, providing a service at zero cost oftentimes results in its devaluation, which also has as a consequence the undermining of the prestige and feasibility of the profession.

We thus find that this problem has a twofold dimension. The principle of social responsibility suggests that the access to information must be free and open to the public so

long as it be “relevant to the legitimate goals of the citizen’s life”. Yet, there is also the view that a distinction should be made between that information which should be free of charge and that which should be paid for. This distinction is required by the feasibility of the organization, the necessity of collecting additional funds, the avoidance of the frivolous use of collections and the need to maintain the respect due to the library and its professionals.

All this said, the problem of access to information can be viewed from yet another perspective, namely, that specifically related to public information or information belonging to the public administration. As a fundamental part of their information policies, most democratic countries have passed laws regulating the right of access to this kind of information.

The existence of this right is based on the idea that a democracy will only function adequately if citizens are kept informed about the doings of government and administration – of how they act and why they do so. The better informed citizens are about political issues, the more healthy a democracy will be.

3.3. Reference Services and Information Brokerage

A basic principle in our profession is that information must be supplied to the user regardless of the information professional’s stance toward its content or finality of its use. This is true in general terms; however, specific instances may present us with ethical dilemmas. A telling example is the case of the seemingly depressed student who requests a book on suicide. Should the professional deny him or her access to this information, or even break the professional duty of confidentiality by contacting family and friends regarding the situation?

On the other hand, we should also inquire about the quality level of the service offered to the user or client. Inherent to any professional group is the ethical obligation to provide a service that will meet the required quality standards. This responsibility involves a wide range of elements, such as accepting only those tasks that are within one’s reach, providing the customer with a realistic forecast of what can be obtained, searching the best sources, maintaining the confidentiality of the material obtained and personal information, and so on. All this leads to the additional duty of keeping one’s knowledge and professional skills up-to-date.

The flipside of the notion of service quality is the possibility of professional negligence and derived liabilities. Although in our field the possibility of legal liability due to a deficient service provided is rare (although there are such cases) it is clear that the pervasive effect of market laws in the information world has begun to change this (Fernández-Molina, 1995). Whatever the case and, despite the difficulty of incurring in legal liabilities, there is little doubt that working with the maximum professional competence is an ethical duty.

3.4. Privacy, Confidentiality and Protection of Personal Data

These are three issues that, while different, are closely related to each other. Privacy is the right an individual has of impeding that other people will have access to his or her personal data. The *raison d’être* for this right is simple enough. Our personal data in the hands of other people gives them power over us, as they learn about our beliefs, tastes, hobbies, political views and so on. Libraries and information centers must keep in mind this right from the moment they begin handling data of such sort.

In turn, confidentiality consists in not revealing the relationship between the user and the professional. It also carries with it the duty to declare any conflict of interest that could undermine confidentiality, as well as the need to keep any names of prior clients secret should the same information be used more than once. The duty to respect confidentiality obeys both reasons of privacy protection and that the safeguard of commercial interests.

We encounter, finally, the problem of personal data protection. This issue has emerged recently, because of two main factors: a) the increasing amount of personal information required by private and public institutions for their functioning; and b) the impressive development of information and communication technology, that now facilitates the treatment and transmission worldwide of large amounts of personal data. In this way, information that before could only be accessed by those it referred to or institutions within a contained domain is now available to third parties, with no control. This flux of personal information is in turn employed in a variety of activities such as decision-making as to credit granting, property renting, insurance, advertising and so on. A person can thus be subject to nuisances and inconveniences deriving from a utilization of personal information that escapes his or her knowledge.

The present-day automation of the majority of the managerial tasks in libraries has resulted in an increase in use of a number of databases and automated directories. These include, among others, on-line databases and CD-ROM, databases keeping track of personnel, OPAC and other automated catalogues, circulation and readers' records as well as those registering services offered (DSI, reports, searches, etc.) As a result, libraries and professionals working in them are fully subject to data protection laws (Fernández-Molina, 1994).

3.5. Authorship Rights

While this issue is fundamentally a legal one, it nonetheless has significant ethical implications. The practise of information professionals usually involves the use of sources that appear in a variety of formats. Indeed, copying or transferring such information often arises as a necessity. On the other hand, there is the legitimate interest on the side of authors, editors, producers and distributors of databases to benefit financially of the professionals' acquisition or use of their products. We thus encounter a tension between the desire of information professionals to obtain information at the lowest cost possible and the interest of the owners of this information. This is a problem of ethical nature, the more so the greater the difficulty of obtaining the required material without infringing on authorship rights.

To attain a balance between the interest of citizens at large and that of those who hold authorship rights, legislation points out a number of limits. For example, some privileges are granted to libraries and similar institutions: under certain circumstances, they are allowed to make copies without permission from the authors, or rewarding them for it. Albeit, the reform of authorship legislation forced by the development of digital information and of information networks is undermining these limits, by discriminating against citizens lacking the resources to pay for the license that will allow them to use the information. To face this problem, it is crucial that librarians as well as professional associations adopt an active stance in defense of the rights of their users (Fernández-Molina, 1999).

4. Conclusion

Information professionals carry out their task in specific social and political contexts. This means that their activity is shaped by a range of norms, including ethical and legal ones. Knowledge of such norms hence becomes a necessity if the information professional wants to provide an adequate service.

Further, the ever changing quality that the new technologies have impressed upon our society demands that this knowledge be constantly kept up-to-date. For the same reason, not just students (future professionals) but active professionals too should be trained in these ethical issues, thus revising periodically their knowledge thereof. The responsibility for such training should therefore depend as much on educational centres as on professional associations.

In our days, active and future information professionals should be inculcated two basic ideas. The first one is that information should not be regarded exclusively as a market good. Rather than understanding it in purely economic terms, they should strive to defend the interest of citizens of achieving the information they require openly and free of charge. Secondly, they must never forget their mission of enabling the access to any type of information, without imposing any control or censorship related to beliefs, political, social or religious ideas.

As a concluding note on methodology, we follow Diana Woodward's advice (1989). In her view, the best teaching format is a brief introduction by the instructor, followed by the reading of a related text by the students, who then write a paper presenting their views on it; finally, the views put forward in their written work are presented and discussed in class.

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