Ethical Aspects of Library and Information Science

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Abstract
This entry discusses many of the ethical considerations in the library and information science professions: collection development, censorship, privacy, reference services, copyright, administrative concerns, information access, technology-related issues, and problems with conflicting loyalties. It surveys the factors that affect ethical deliberations in the information professions: social utility, survival, social responsibility, and respect for individuality. It also looks at professional factors in ethical deliberations, such as professional codes of ethics, and the values that support ethical principles of professional conduct: truth, tolerance, individual liberty, justice and beauty. In the final section, it indicates the kinds of actions to promote ethical conduct at the organizational, professional and individual levels. As a final caveat, it indicates that ethical decisions require deliberation and reflection. While one can articulate values, factors, codes, and actions, they inform ethical reflection that must often confront and negotiate dilemmas and tensions.

INTRODUCTION

Many of the individuals who occupy our most important professions, such as politicians, lawyers, business executives, and bankers are given low marks for their ethics and honesty.\[1\] A cursory glance at daily newspapers reveals religious leaders who have less than moral lifestyles, politicians who lie and benefit from the public purse, and businessmen who manipulate financial markets and unduly influence public policy.

Despite the general sense of ethical decline, the ethical dimensions of our personal and professional behavior are transparent in day-to-day activities. The actions we take everyday are reflexive in terms of ethical conduct; our days are not replete with ethical reflection. Rather, we operate with a subconscious ethical system, whether poorly or well developed, that emerges into consciousness only when a special event or situation makes us doubt or defend our judgments or actions. At these times individuals try to make explicit the values and beliefs that underlie their actions or judgments.

Consider what situations occur in the library and information workplace that create this type of ethical dissonance:

1. When we are about to lie to someone
   a. Indicating that there is no problem when there is.
   b. Giving someone a good performance review when he or she has performed poorly.
   c. Lying about why a person did not get a job.
   d. Reporting in sick when we are not sick.
   e. Reporting or recording inaccurate data in business reports.

2. When we believe that we are about to do someone harm
   a. Permitting a young person open access to Internet sites we feel could be psychologically harmful.
   b. Disciplining or terminating an employee.
   c. Violating an individual’s privacy or disclosing a confidence.
   d. Unobtrusive monitoring of a patrons Internet use.

3. When we believe we are about to receive something we did not deserve
   a. Receiving too much money in our paycheck and not reporting it.
   b. Receiving credit that someone else should have.
   c. Misrepresenting the quality of our work.

4. When we deprive someone of information or ideas
   a. Censoring or restricting library materials.
   b. Withholding information from a fellow employee to encourage his or her failure.
   c. Withholding information concerning the inadequacies of an information source or database.

5. When we are asked by someone in authority to act in an unlawful or unethical fashion
   a. Falsifying or backdating a record to hide unlawful activity.
   b. Being encouraged to misrepresent oneself to get information from an unknowing source.
   c. Being asked to deceive others for the “best interests” of the organization.

Most individuals feel ethical qualms in these situations, and there is general agreement that there should be standards of conduct to limit unethical actions on the part of...
information workers. Buckley, for example, has proposed that the “Golden Rule” has application in understanding our ethical obligations in reference work. In addition, ethical constraints apply not only to individuals but to organizations. Institutions, including libraries and other information organizations, are not value-neutral; they act, make choices, affect human beings, and receive, allocate, and disseminate resources in ways analogous to individuals. Many corporations and industries have recognized the importance of organizational and employee ethics, which often manifest themselves in ethical codes. Fleisher and Blenkhorn report that over 95% of all major corporations use ethical codes.

Some of the issues and values that underlie ethical action in libraries and other information organizations will be discussed below. Of course, such a brief exposition cannot cover all of the ethical issues and concerns involved in library and information service. This discussion is meant to provide a framework to help structure further ethical analysis. In addition, there are several other limitations:

1. First, there are many different types of library and information services. Not only are there different types of libraries (academic, public, school, and special), but the information services could include database searchers, information consultants, and chief information officers. Trying to find a common ethical basis for these many different types of information providers and administrators may not be possible. Although general ethical principles will be advanced in this discussion, specific types of information workers especially those in for-profit enterprises may not find the discussion completely relevant to their type of information work.

2. Second, the discussion presented is based primarily on Western ethical traditions. The ideas suggested or values advanced may not apply in the same way to other cultural traditions. For work on intercultural information ethics, see Capurro.

3. Third, this essay proposes one view of ethical conduct among information providers. Other views are possible; indeed, alternative perspectives should be encouraged so that diverse ethical dimensions can be exposed and analyzed.

MAJOR AREAS OF CONCERN: AN EXAMINATION OF THE LITERATURE

The library and information professions have recognized the ethical dimension of information work through irregular discussions in professional publications. The focus on ethics in librarianship and information science has become even sharper in the last few years, due to the growth of the Internet, the application of library and information skills to new domains related to the Internet, and the convergence of information-related disciplines. In 1989, the University of Illinois, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, sponsored a conference on ethics. Since then, the body of ethical literature in the library profession has increased and the domain of concern has been enlarged to “information ethics” (see Smith for an overview and Froehlich for a brief history). The literature includes some writers who have attempted to identify specific factors that produce ethical friction, and who have advanced rules of conduct (e.g., Rubin and Baker).

The potential for ethical conflicts in library and information services is considerable. Among the major issues that have appeared in the literature are the following.

Selecting Materials and Censorship

Many selectors confront the unpleasant possibility that the selection of certain materials will cause controversy in the local community. Such controversy could generate considerable anger and negative publicity and jeopardize library budgets and the jobs of librarians. Similarly, the librarian may believe that certain materials actually have a harmful effect on patrons, most notably children. This belief might be supported by other members of the community. Ethical tensions are bound to arise in such circumstances. To what extent is refusal to select items justified because of the possibility of controversy in the community and the expectation that some materials may harm others? These problems are some of the many associated with ethical issues in acquisitions and censorship.

Privacy Issues

Privacy issues have grown in importance and have been of increased concerns to librarians and other information professionals especially since September 11th. As the powers of government have expanded in order to catch terrorists, so has the capacity of government to entrap innocents in the Net. With the passage of the USA Patriot Act, the new crime of “domestic terrorism” was created. The law expanded the power of government to issue wiretaps, obtain search warrants, and gather records that at earlier times were unavailable or required a court to determine probable cause. Today, such organizations as the American Library Association (ALA) express a need for constant vigilance to protect the rights of patrons to use new and traditional sources of information without unnecessary surveillance. The ALA has supported a variety of activities including supporting amendments to the USA Patriot Act, most notably the freedom to read
protection act, to exempt libraries and bookstores from some of the more invasive aspects of the law. The ALA has also supported a variety of resolutions exhorting the need to protect citizens from undue intrusions on their privacy. These include the “Resolution Reaffirming the Principles of Intellectual Freedom in the Aftermath of Terrorist Attacks,” and “Resolution on the USA Patriot Act and Related Measures That Infringe on the Rights of Library Users”.[17,18]

Not only are libraries concerned with monitoring of Internet use or use of other electronic databases, but they are also concerned with more traditional records such as circulation records. Even if the Patriot Act did not exist, circulation records have been at the core of privacy issues in libraries for many years. Requests for such records have come from parents of children, police, prosecutors, courts, and the FBI.[19] From the perspective of librarians, revealing such information would create a “chilling effect” on borrowers, who, if they believe their reading habits were made public, would subject them to embarrassment. Consequently, patrons would not take out certain books or have online searches conducted on some controversial topics if they felt they could be subjected to public scrutiny or the scrutiny of unsympathetic individuals.[20] On the other hand, as a public institution, there are those who would argue that such records are public records, and the right of the citizenry to know what is happening in a public institution outweighs the privacy rights of individuals. Similarly, in circumstances in which a crime has been committed and the request for circulation records comes from law enforcement agencies and the courts, librarians also feel a public duty to cooperate with such agencies.

Another typical privacy issue relates to the age of the library user. For example, does a library user under the age of 18 have the right to privacy in terms of materials used, and does that right vary? For example, if a teenager takes a book out of a library, does the parent or guardian have a right to know the titles of those books, especially if there are fines on the material and the parent is responsible for the material? If a teenager has a right to privacy in the use of materials, what about a pre-teen—someone who is six or eight years old? What if the material is secured from a school library? Are there additional legal burdens in that case?[21]

Privacy issues may also involve the monitoring of library users in regard to copyright violations or unlawful use of digital resources. On many occasions one may observe a patron making multiple copies of copyrighted material, or copying an entire book. Similarly, an individual may be observed accessing material that may be a violation of law, i.e., accessing child pornography. To what extent is the librarian ethically obligated to surveil and report such individuals, or, at the least, to warn the individual that such conduct is unlawful and to desist?[22]

Reference Services

The fundamental tenet of reference service is to provide the information requested by the patron or client. Given the importance of this service, a variety of ethical questions arise, including the following:

1. To what extent does ability to pay for an information services raise ethical issues? Is it ethical to charge for certain levels of reference services (e.g., online services) even if charging tends to discriminate against those who cannot afford the service?[23,24]
2. Is it ethical to provide different levels of reference service? For example, is it proper to provide library board members or influential politicians quicker, better, and more comprehensive service than regular patrons?
3. Is it ethical to use support staff to answer reference questions that should be answered by degreed librarians.[25]
4. Is it ethical to provide reduced time in the reference interview to a patron because the librarian is in a hurry to serve other patrons?
5. Is it ethical to limit information if you believe the information may harm the patron?
6. What is the degree to which an information provider should divulge the inadequacies of the information being provided or the information systems providing it?
7. What are the ethical limits for the information provider in obtaining information? For example, to what extent can the information provider deceive others to get information or invade other information systems without permission or without identifying their purpose?
8. To what extent can a librarian provide medical and legal reference services without giving the impression that legal or medical advice is being proffered?[26–28]
9. To what extent is a reference librarian obligated to report school or college plagiarism or other student’s inappropriate use of the Internet to the appropriate educational authorities?
10. What is the obligation of a reference librarians to violate (interpret very liberally) a digital rights management contract that severely restricts use by librarians or patrons?

For additional issues related to reference services see Bunge,[29] Katz and Fraley,[30] and Ulvik and Salvesen.[31]

Copyright Issues

Information activities generally require the use of print, nonprint, and electronic sources. The copying or transferring of such information is often a necessity. While a
primary motivation of publishers and electronic database producers is the profit earned through sale or lease of their product, the motivation of many information providers, most notably librarians, is access to information for the patron at the lowest cost. An ethical tension arises when the information needed is difficult or impossible to obtain efficiently without violating copyright restrictions. One’s ethical feelings regarding obeying the law and respect for the rights of copyright owners conflicts with one’s ethical obligation to provide the information. The issue is further complicated in the digital environment because of the concerns of electronic information providers concerned about excessive copyright abuse of their content. This has led to new treaties and laws including the WIPO treaty, the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, and the Teach Act—each attempting to balance the interests of the user or information intermediary (e.g., the librarian or information specialist) with the interest of the copyright owner. In addition, greater restrictions arise regarding electronic information because the providers of the digital information often require that a license be signed before access is provided. Such licenses may contain no “fair use” provision or right of first sale available under copyright law. This may prevent redistribution of useful content.[22]

**Administrative Issues**

There are many opportunities for library managers and administrators to encounter ethical situations in the workplace. Oftentimes certain actions seem necessary in the organizational context, which, in other circumstances, might be problematic. Among the areas of ethical tension are the following:

1. Purposely withholding information.
2. Making deceptive statements, providing distorted or false information, or acting deceptively.
3. Violating the privacy of individuals, e.g., monitoring employee e-mails or use of the Internet.
4. Being motivated by personal likes, dislikes, anger, or desire for retribution when making a decision.
5. Being motivated by personal gain when making a decision.
6. Acting in a discriminatory fashion.

For issues related to library administration and personnel see Heim,[32] Rubin,[33] Baker,[9] and Du Mont.[33]

**Issues of Access**

Of considerable concern to librarians and other information professionals is free access to information. Is information access a privilege or a basic right? If it is a right, is it a right to all sorts of information (e.g., expensive online services) or to information bearing upon the basic needs of life (e.g., health, housing, governmental issues, etc.)?[34] Arguments have been put forth for services for which a library could charge by Williams.[35] Access issues have been aggravated because the costs to acquire, store, catalog, and retrieve materials have escalated, partly because of the rapid growth of information and partly because of the increasing need for and costs of technologies to cope with this growth. Put another way, the new technological means for information storage and transmission exacerbate the differences of information “haves” and “have-nots” in the world. Is there an ethical obligation to equalize the differences? Also in the electronic environment, questions of monitoring access has arisen. This has become particularly sensitive with the passage of the Child Internet Protection Act which requires some type of Internet filtering in schools and public libraries that receive certain types of federal funds. The monitoring of patron use of materials and services generally raises concern over the “chilling effect” this may cause on the use of materials that may be considered useful but controversial. Hence librarians are placed in the position of enforcing a law which may inhibit individuals from finding the information they want and need.[36] Other access issues concern access to data collected by various local, state, and federal agencies, such as through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). In the post-9/11 era, there have been significant restrictions of governmental information that was traditionally available. For example, information on water resources, electrical grids, or locations of power plants, or other aspects of the U.S. infrastructure may now be unavailable to the citizens who financially support them.[15]

Cataloging issues may also be seen as issues of access; materials cataloged in various ways can either facilitate or pose a barrier to access. Ethical issues may arise for example when decisions are made regarding whether simplified or more complex cataloging rules are applied or whether to place materials in particular subject areas (where do creationist texts go—in religion or science?).[37] For ethical issues and suggestions for a code of ethics for catalogers, see Bair.[38]

**Technology-Related Issues**

Many of the problems that have been raised existed prior to the extensive use of information technologies, but these issues are magnified or aggravated through their applications in information environments. For example, circulation records collected in a centralized electronic storage computer provides additional vulnerability to invasions of privacy and confidentiality. Similarly, records of Internet searches may be saved electronically revealing the nature of information being sought and consulted by patrons. In addition, there are issues that have arisen because of the technologies themselves. The technologies are of two types: 1) intellectual technologies; and 2) computer
technologies. Classification, cataloging, and indexing can be seen as intellectual technologies. As such, they provide a mechanism for providing access to the universe of available information; but at the same time, they may distort that universe, for example, classification schemes reflect the biases of the general population and the very act of providing access to information, by applying a limited, inaccurate, obsolete, or faulty set of descriptors to a particular citation, creates impediments to access.

There are also ethical issues associated with computer technologies that in part extend the intellectual technologies and that create their own sets of problems. One set of problems is related to electronic access. For example, incompetent searchers, ones insufficiently trained to deal with commands, syntax, and qualifiers of access and/or who is unfamiliar with the differences in databases, not only prevents access to the information for the patron, but also conceals their incompetence from themselves. Another set of problems concerns the library or information center–vendor relationships, including the use of consultants, fair bidding, licensing, and award practices.

Conflicting Loyalties

There are many varieties of ethical conflicts that emerge in the context of the information professions. There are conflicts between loyalties to oneself, one’s organization, and the profession. For example, very often in information work information professionals demonstrate more loyalty to their organizations than to their professions primarily because of economic motivations. This is unfortunate to the degree that such acquiescence to local authority may result in an endorsement of unjust pay scales or the inappropriate use of nonprofessionals. Martha Montague Smith provides a structure for articulating conflicting loyalties in a professional environment, and suggests that there are five possible levels of orientation in the workplace: 1) ideal ethics, which represents the highest aspirations or goals of an individual or group; 2) practical working ethics, which represents high aspirations, yet conformable to institutional, professional, and personal goals, is enduring but is also flexible and adaptable; 3) pressure ethics, which represents a scenario in which internal and/or external pressures split institutional or professional goals from those of workers; 4) subversive ethics, which represents a situation in which a small or large group of people advance what they perceive to be worthy goals for the profession or organization by working outside the system of articulated or tacit organizational goals; and 5) survival ethics, which represents a situation in which institutional demands threaten employee integrity, safety, or security to such an extent that individuals isolate themselves within the organization. These are various scenarios that information professionals may undertake, given a particular context of institutional life.

What this framework underscores is that not only do ethical conflicts arise throughout the history of one’s work in an organization, but that one’s response to them may vary, depending on factors that affect organization life. While professionals should strive for the level of “practical working ethics,” it is often the case that circumstances, such as declining budgets or forays at censorship of library materials by patrons or groups, predispose professionals to operating at lower levels, such as “survival ethics.” And of course, one may well be operating at different orientations with regard to different problems, one may undertake a stance of “practical working ethics” except for forays of censorship against the library, in which one’s mode may be that of “subversive ethics.”

Societal Issues

It is easy when discussing ethical issues of the information profession to forget that information agencies have a significant impact locally, nationally, and internationally. It is important to consider the ethical ramifications of this impact. Among the issues that foster ethical concern are the following:

1. To what extent does centralization over the control of information create a monopoly over the amount and quality of information being provided, and who receives the information?
2. To what extent do information technologies developed in Western societies, especially English-speaking societies, create a condition of cultural dominance over non-English speaking countries?
3. To what extent does information provided to lesser developed countries adversely affect the stability and health of those societies?

Such is a preliminary look at diverse ethical issues that arise in the information professions. The ALA has endorsed the importance of ethical conduct through the ALA Code of Ethics, a history of which is given in Lindsey and Prentice and through the ALA Committee on Professional Ethics. Similarly, the American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) has issued the ASIS&T Professional Guidelines. But they are not without their problems (see, e.g., Barnes so much so that they are frequently challenged for revision (see, e.g., Finks).

It is impossible in this brief entry to list all the resources available on ethical issues. For a fairly comprehensive bibliography, one can consolidate those provided by Hauptman et al. listed in the “General Introductions and Bibliographies” section of the Bibliography at the end of this entry. In addition to the articles cited here, resources are also provided in the sections: “Journals and Web Sites” and “Bibliography on Specific Topics.”
FACTORs AFFECTING ETHICAL DELIBERATIONS IN THE INFORMATION PROFESSIONS

Libraries and other information organizations are subject to competing demands from a variety of sources, including the public, clients, board members, administrators, and staff. Attempts to satisfy these demands often produce ethical tensions. Some authors have attempted to identify the ethical influences on librarians. McMenemy, Poulter, and Burton, for example, identified five influences: the employers ethical code; the professional association’s ethical code, pressure from the customer to provide service, personal ethical beliefs, and society’s ethical norms (p. 11). We would contend that when decisions are made, there are at least four factors that affect the deliberative process. These factors may not be consciously considered by the individuals making the decision, but are at least conceptually implicit and underlie the decision-making process. Such factors are not in and of themselves ethical principles; they are frequently considerations that come into play when ethical deliberations are attempted. Attempting to balance them often produces ethical frictions. It is therefore important to understand clearly the nature of these factors.

The Factor of Social Utility

All organizations have a purpose or a function. One might say, for example, that a public library’s purpose is to meet the educational, cultural, informational, or recreational needs of its patrons or clients through the provision of materials and services. Insofar as the library performs such a socially valued service, it has a right to act in a way that would maintain and promote such activity.

Information organizations acting in this manner may make decisions that produce ethical qualms. For example, an organization may have to terminate an employee who is performing poorly because such performance interferes with the proper function of the organization. The employee may be a likeable individual whose performance may be the result of illness or personal problems, yet the decision to take action may be rationally based on the responsibility of the organization to execute its proper functions. Furthermore, the Library Bill of Rights of the ALA affirms the “Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves” (p. 14). Such an assertion articulates a concern for the factor of social utility.

The Factor of Survival

One obvious purpose of organizations is to survive. This principle has been recognized in management theory for many years and is a simple recognition that organizations view their perpetuation as a central function. It is also grounded in philosophical traditions in which self-interest is recognized as a fundamental component of moral reasoning [54, Book III, Prop. 55; 55, Chap. XIV].

It is easy to envision an ethical issue in which survival is threatened. For example, if there is considerable public outcry concerning certain “objectionable” materials in a library, the librarian may have to choose between removing library materials or facing a taxpayer’s revolt. One is therefore tempted to censor library materials to ensure the physical survival of the library. This also highlights how the wish to preserve the library as a financially viable institution can come into conflict with a significant goal of the library—freedom of access to a diverse collection of materials. Ethical dissonance is bound to arise when one hopes to preserve the existence of the library by sacrificing in part its social utility (e.g., by reducing the number of hours a library is open so the library can continue to exist despite a constrained budget).

Factor of Social Responsibility

Another consideration involves the broader purpose that institutions—especially public ones—have. That is a purpose to serve the society at large and to promote the altruistic goals of that society. To this end, organizations might purchase and use recyclable materials whenever possible, promote “green libraries” that promote sustainable development in their own actions, in their patrons, or in the community [56,57] prohibit smoking on their premises, or employ only hiring and promotion policies that encourage equal employment opportunity and affirmative action. Of course, determining what “greater good” to satisfy is problematic, and would depend on the institutional values of the organization, the attitudes of those who direct an organization, and the political, economic, and environmental conditions in which the information organization is embedded. One may, for example, believe that the use of recyclable materials increases costs and hence negatively affects the survival and social utility of the organization. One may feel uneasy about affirmative action programs to the extent that they treat people as members of classes rather than as individuals. Nonetheless, when ethical deliberations are being made, organizations, especially those that provide a social service such as libraries, may take into account the need to accomplish and comport with broader social goals. This factor conforms to the second statement of the Library Bill of Rights: “Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.” (p. 14) [53]

There is a tension between this statement and factor and the corresponding statement acknowledging the factor of social utility—one patron’s meat is another patron’s...
poison—but the library must provide a complete selection of coldcuts; that is, in providing information representing all points of view, the library may be acquiring material useful to one patron but offensive to others (e.g., *The Joy of Gay Sex*). The problem is that if some patrons obsess about “the poison,” the survival of the library may also be at stake.

**The Factor of Respect for Individuality**

This factor recognizes that all individuals deserve to be treated with dignity and respect because they are people. It is a concept embedded in ethical traditions, most notably through the works of the eighteenth century German transcendental philosopher, Immanuel Kant, whose moral imperative required that we “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.”[58]

Respect for the individual has many implications for information functions. In terms of patrons or clients, it implies an obligation of the organization to collect materials and provide services that reflect diverse individual interests, wants, and needs, not just mass appeal. For public libraries in particular, this obligation has been noted by several writers as fundamental to the library’s collection-building function.[59,60] This factor also implies that the organization provide service to people as individuals and not merely as members of a particular class, age group, race, sex, or ethnic background. In terms of employees, this factor implies that the library must treat its employees fairly, with respect and dignity. The organization must be responsive to individual employees’ feelings, wants, and needs. In addition, it implies that employees should treat each other in the same fashion and that administrators are also entitled to their *individual* opinions on issues, despite the position they may have to take in their managerial roles.

Such a factor may, however, generate ethical concerns. For example, in serving individual needs, should a public library sacrifice “mass appeal”? After all, appealing to the average consumer has the salutary effect of promoting taxpayer support (i.e., of increasing circulation), and reducing the likelihood of complaining patrons who are unhappy when materials representing unorthodox points of view are included in the collection. Ethical qualms might also be generated in terms of staff treatment; for example, when we fail to uniformly apply personnel policies by making exceptions for “individual circumstances.” We might be threatening the survival of the organization by subjecting it to potential legal liabilities and labor unrest. Finally, ethical qualms can be generated when we feel that we are not treating ourselves with respect. For example, we may be asked by others (employers, clients, competitors) to do something we believe is unethical. Acting in this manner diminishes us.

In attempting to make ethical judgments, these factors are constantly present. As ethical concerns arise, one might phrase concern for these factors in four questions:

1. **To what extent is the survival of the organization threatened?**
2. **To what extent will the purpose of the organization be benefited or harmed?**
3. **To what extent is the organization or employee socially responsible or irresponsible when acting in a particular manner?**
4. **To what extent are the actions of the organization (or individuals acting in its behalf) harming or benefiting other individuals, organizations, or the profession?**

The relative importance of these four factors depends on the specific situation and the seriousness of the effects. How should we make ethical judgments when so many competing factors are in operation? Before offering one possible answer it is necessary to examine a second ethical perspective, the professional dimension of ethical behavior.

**PROFESSIONAL FACTORS IN ETHICAL DELIBERATIONS**

The professional aspects of ethical behavior deal with the obligations and duties of information professionals while serving in the capacity of information providers. The Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) has noted that ethical education “should be encouraged as an important aspect of education, research, scholarship, service, and practice in library and information studies and in other related profession.”[61] ALISE encourages “special attention to information ethics…[61]”

As noted previously, most of our work decisions are made and actions taken with little or no ethical reflection. In this sense, we rely on our basic ethical training acquired in childhood and on our formal training regarding information work. This latter point is important, because it suggests that if our actions are often performed by habit rather than deliberation, then to the extent that information professionals are socialized into the ethics of the discipline, the greater the chance that these ethical standards become part of our basic ethical framework and will be consummated in day-to-day work life. It also places in relief the recognition that ethical training cannot be limited to “professionals.” Indeed, calling codes of conduct professional ethics diminishes their scope and underestimates the ethical responsibilities of all library workers. Nor should the concept of professional ethics imply that these ethics are different than those we use in everyday life, or that they should take precedence over those of everyday life. Professional ethics should be viewed as ordinary ethical standards applied in a particular environment.
The ALA has attempted through its code of ethics to provide ethical guidance, and it serves as a touchstone for the ethical socialization of librarians. This code states the following:

I. We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests.

II. We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources.

III. We protect each library user’s right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired, or transmitted.

IV. We respect intellectual property rights and advocate balance between the interests of information users and rights holders.

V. We treat coworkers and other colleagues with respect, fairness, and good faith, and advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institutions.

VI. We do not advance private interests at the expense of library users, colleagues, or our employing institutions.

VII. We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources.

VIII. We strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing our own knowledge and skills, by encouraging the professional development of coworkers, and by fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession.\[47\]


Published professional codes serve useful purposes. They provide support and guidance when ethical concerns arise and serve as a tool for the inculcation of values in library employees that are ideally assimilated into daily behavior. But articulation of such a code is frequently misleading; one must understand the values inherent in it. This points up the central defect of such a code. The “thinking” behind the code is obscure, because only a very few were present at the deliberations that created it or because the formalized, collective product reflects a compromise among divergent viewpoints. Understanding the thinking behind code is critical in understanding its meaning. But the thinking behind ethical codes is often dialectical and didactic, representing an articulation of perspectives, competing views, and the tensions among them. When one fails to recognize this evolution or rationale for codes, the codes are seen as finished and foster dogmatic beliefs. One merely invokes a provision of a code instead of offering cogent reasons that would justify the conduct prescribed by the code.

Ordinary ethical principles provide the framework for, and are not inconsistent with, the professional values of the information profession. Within that ordinary ethical framework, the information professional includes the values inherent in the information profession. Such values should personally guide the information professional when acting in this capacity. It is therefore ironic that the ALA code specifically mandates that individuals separate their personal philosophy and attitude from those of their institutions or professional bodies (provision VII). What is actually desirable is that the individuals come to realize that there are important values of library and information service that should be a part of our own values when we serve in the capacity of information provider. This does not mean that individuals must give up other values to subscribe to those of the profession; rather, it is a recognition that the values of library and information service are worthy of admission to our individual value structure when we become information professionals. This sense of professional ethics becomes most important when individuals experience internal value conflicts while serving as information professionals, for example, when an individual who opposes abortion is asked to provide information on the topic. Although one may be personally opposed to abortion, one can also personally subscribe to the professional responsibility to be objective and to provide different points of view.

THE VALUES OF INFORMATION PROFESSIONS

It is fruitful to explore what values support the ethical principles of individual professional conduct. Understanding these values improves our ability to recognize ethical situations and to make ethical decisions and balance the competing organizational factors.

There are at least five values of the information professions that can serve as values of the individual as well as the organization (for a discussion of different values that are associated with the profession see Fink\[62\]). These values can be characterized in the following manner.

The Value of Truth

Information professionals have as one of their important ends the advancement of truth and the search for knowledge. Certainly promoting truth fulfills a fundamental mission of the library (social utility) and meets a broader social end of improving the society as a whole (social responsibility).

The commitment to truth does not imply that information professionals, most notably library workers, should attempt to suppress materials they believe are untrue
or to promote materials they believe to be true, for that matter). To the contrary, as John Swan has aptly noted, untruths are essential to stimulate our thinking and reveal pathways in the search for truth (p. 49). The search for truth requires that the library provide an array of knowledge and information and access to expertise, so that individuals can apply their efforts in this search. Information professionals must act so that patrons and clients have the greatest opportunity to search for knowledge and truth.

This concept of truth as a value also pertains to the internal activities of the organization. Relations among employees and administrators and between workers must have truthfulness as a value. Such actions as deception, withholding of information that is essential to the performance of others, and falsification of records abrogate this value. This does not mean that administrators or managers are ethically obligated to answer any question put to them. There may be occasions in which the appropriate response is to refuse to answer. Examples include answers that would violate confidentiality. Rather, the value of truth implies that when answers are given they are truthful. Information professionals must act so that employees treat each other truthfully in their actions and communications.

The Value of Tolerance

The value of tolerance is closely aligned with that of truth and its search. Many people seem to hold the belief that there is one truth, but libraries function on the assumption that many people believe many truths. A belief in the value of the pursuit of truth does not imply that “the Truth” is in fact achievable in all areas of life (science, ethics, religion, politics). One must tolerate diverse truths, and even if there were one truth, different people may use different avenues to attain it or to attain different aspects of it at a time.

It has been said many times in the writings of the library profession that the free exchange of ideas forms the basis of democracy and library services. A similar case can be made for most forms of information dissemination within and outside libraries. It is an ethical obligation of information professionals to promote exposure to different ideas, even those that are unorthodox. Decisions concerning library and information service that affect the free flow of such ideas ipso facto generate ethical concern. This does not require that information professional accept or be tolerant in all aspects of their life. One may, for example, not subscribe to the value of tolerance within the home. It requires only that one’s set of values reflects tolerance of ideas in the information workplace; that is, when one is performing library or information work, one must accept as a value that people have a right to information that one might find offensive. Parenthetically, the value of tolerance may not be as strongly held within the workplace. An employee, for example, whose remarks to other staff consistently cause demoralization and lower productivity might be disciplined or removed. But from the perspective of information service, it is essential that library professionals act so that library and information services increase the flow of ideas.

The Value of Individual Liberty

Library and information service is meant to assist individuals in their individual pursuit to have a better life. This does not mean that each time an information worker answers a question it profoundly alters a patron’s life, but it does imply that every time questions are answered correctly the patron is able to accomplish a task, resolve a problem, or plan their future just a little better. In this way, the profession assumes that not only individuals, but organizations and society as a whole are changed, and, in the long run, improved by ideas. Improvement may mean many different things: providing information to a scientist to discover a new drug; stimulating the imagination of a child by providing reading or viewing material; providing training information to adults; or providing programming for mothers or the elderly. Actions that would impair this important function interfere with the basic liberties of people to make their lives better and generate ethical friction. Information professionals should therefore act so that library and information services respond to the information wants and needs of users.

The Value of Justice

This value pertains both to information users and to fellow information professionals within a given organization. From the public perspective, it implies that all citizens have equal access to library services. But even in nonpublic settings, it implies that all individuals should receive the best quality service. Similarly, for both private and public information organizations, it implies that the delivery of inferior information service on the basis of race, sex, religion, origin, disability, sexual orientation, or age is a violation of such a value.

But the concept of justice is complex, and a distinction noted by the philosopher John Rawls is especially appropriate in the information context. Rawls realized that justice cannot be understood merely as equality, but as “fairness” (p. 168–169). One may, for example, accept as just the fact that the library director and maintenance worker are paid unequally. This is an important distinction because it implies that ethical action requires fair rather than equal service or treatment. Unequal service might, in fact, be an ethical obligation if the needs of individuals differ. This recognizes, for example, that children may receive unequal service because their needs are different from those of adults, or that less knowledgeable
adults may require different levels of service. The value of justice implies that we do not necessarily provide equal service, but that we provide service that recognizes individual circumstances. This does not imply that equality is absent in the concept of justice or library ethics. Equality of access to information services is certainly inherent in the concept of public library and information service, and fairness in access is inherent in any information service. The information professional must act so that library services are provided fairly to all users.

The value of justice also applies to the internal workings of library and information services. Employees should be treated fairly and consistently by managers and administrators, and equal access to opportunities within information organizations must be provided. In addition, this value implies that employees should treat each other fairly. To this end, the library professional must act so that employees are treated and treat each other fairly.

The Value of Beauty

The value of beauty suggests that librarians have a deep and abiding respect for those works that please and educate. This includes works that occupy a notable position in literature and the arts. Such works are valued because they broaden and deepen human understanding. It also includes works that provide pleasure and recreation to all individuals. Such a value implies that librarians make such collections available. Similarly, it is common that such collections come under attack by censors who feel that even classics (e.g., *Huckleberry Finn*), should be restricted or removed. Librarians must act so that works that provide aesthetic experiences be maintained, preserved, and available to users. Such a consideration may also imply an obligation that materials of high literary quality not be sacrificed with excessive attention to mass appeal (e.g., excessive quantities of gothic romances).

ACTIONS THAT PROMOTE ETHICAL CONDUCT

If one assumes that these values play an important role in ethical actions for information professionals, then it is important to determine what actions information organizations and librarians can take to promote ethical actions. These actions can be seen from three perspectives: organizational, individual, and professional.

Organizational Actions

When attempting to balance the factors that generate ethical tensions in organizations, the values of library and information service are pivotal concerns. For example, when library staff, supervisors, administrators, or board members make decisions or take actions that could affect the organization’s utility or survival, one must also reflect on the central values that make the library what it is. To the extent that one sacrifices these values to other ends, one must accept the diminution of ethical standards. Few complex decisions in the workplace produce wholly satisfactory resolutions, even when the decision maker believes that no better decision could be reached. There is often a residue of uneasiness, sometimes because one suspects that an ethical dimension has been abandoned for the sake of utility or self-interest. It is every information professional’s responsibility to maintain an ethical environment, but this is also a special responsibility of the management because of the increased ethical burden. Below are a variety of actions that the leadership of information organizations might take to meet this burden:

1. **Have a board and administration committed to leading by example.** Each individual is responsible for his or her own ethical actions. But these actions are also, in part, modeled by the behavior of those in authority. Rules and regulations are important and influence employee actions, but the ethical environment is a culture that is shaped as much or more by example than by rule. For this reason, the actions of board members, administrators, and supervisors must be ethically exemplary.

2. **Establish a written ethics policy.** The library’s commitment to ethical behavior should be formally stated along with the rationale for that behavior. A professional code may be part of this commitment, but it is not in and of itself sufficient. The policy should include a clear statement on the part of the board and administration regarding their commitment to ethical conduct in relation to the patrons, the profession, and the organization. For example, it should be an ethical responsibility of staff
   a. To promote a sense of confidence about the organization and its purpose with the public or appropriate clientele.
   b. To make the organization as effective and efficient as possible both internally and with its relations with the public or clientele.
   c. To strive for personal and professional growth.

Such a written policy should also include what will happen to employees who violate these ethical obligations, and how such violations can be reported. Although it is hoped that employees, once they understand the rationale for ethical behavior, will comport with that behavior, the organization should have some means to sanction those who violate ethical conduct. Otherwise, some employees may interpret the organization’s position as “lip service.” However, unusually severe punishments, especially for first infractions, are undesirable, because it would tend to inhibit reporting of such infractions if observed by others (p. 76). Penalties for ethical violations should be progressive, with early violations being
deal with through discussion. Whenever violations occur, action should be taken swiftly, and continued violations should be dealt with harshly.

3. **Conduct orientations that include discussions of ethics.** When new employees are hired, it is important not only to provide them with general information concerning the mechanics of the organization, but also to begin the process of socialization, inculcating the values of public service. In such a discussion, the new employee should receive a clear understanding of what constitutes ethical and unethical conduct. Emphasis should be placed on the important role that the organization plays and the organization’s commitment to the values noted above.

4. **Conduct staff development and training programs.** It is not enough to mention ethical concerns at the time of hire. Employees must experience ongoing reinforcement. This will increase the chance that ethical actions will become habitual. Emphasis should not be placed on the rules themselves, but on the values and deliberations that underlie such rules. It should be assumed that individuals want to behave ethically, especially when they understand how important such conduct is, and how destructive unethical conduct can be in terms of loss of trust and confidence of the public or of other staff. Programs and meetings on ethical issues should therefore be a regular part of staff development and training for all staff and might include case studies in which staff actually go through ethical deliberations that reveal the conflicting tensions within information organizations.

5. **Hire and promote individuals with ethical awareness.** There are many aspects that must be considered when hiring and promoting individuals. One area to explore is how they deal with job-related ethical issues. It should be kept in mind that organizational environments are very powerful. A newly hired employee may possess considerable scruples, but if the prevailing ethics of the organization tolerates unethical conduct, then new hires, in order to fit in, may well adapt rather than attempt to change the environment.

**Professional Actions**

Ethical conduct should also be promoted by the information profession itself to ensure that the standards of conduct are consistent with the highest levels of professional service.

1. **Create a code of conduct.** A professional association can be seen as the voice of a profession. The most obvious channel used by a profession is to establish a written code of ethics and create sanctions for those who violate it. These sanctions, found in such professions as law and medicine, include temporary or permanent suspension of a professional’s ability to practice. Codes, however, may not have sanctions and it may be undesirable for all professions to have them. The ALA has no sanctions for its code of ethics, nor does ASIS&T for its professional guidelines, and hence, comportment with these codes is strictly voluntary. Although sanctions can promote certain types of behavior, they may do so for the wrong reason—fear of punishment. The purpose of an ethical code is first and foremost to promote ethical understanding. Focusing on penalties diverts attention from understanding the values that should determine our conduct.

2. **Offer training and advice in ethical conduct.** Professional associations are also obligated to reinforce their codes of conduct by providing programming and information on ethical issues. Associations such as the ALA and ASIS&T provide such programs, usually at their conference sites. In addition, the ALA has divisions that deal with ethical concerns, including the Committee on Ethics, which considers ethical issues and infrequently provides materials that promote discussion of ethical concerns (e.g., the Ethics Sin List[^65^] and the Intellectual Freedom Committee which deals with ethical issues when they coincide with intellectual freedom issues). It is notable, however, that the Committee on Ethics does not operate like the Intellectual Freedom Committee in that it does not promulgate official interpretations of the code of ethics or intervene in ethical matters outside the association. Similarly, the Professional Committee of ASIS&T issued the ASIS&T Professional Guidelines, but does not promulgate its interpretations or intervene in ethical matters outside the association.

**Individual Actions**

Ethical actions are associated most often with the conduct of individuals, and there is a clear obligation for information professionals to act ethically in regard to the provision of library and information services.

Information professionals are obligated to act ethically on at least three different levels: they have a responsibility to their profession, to their employer–clients–system users, and to the society as a whole. The ASIS&T Professional Guidelines has set forth the following provisions (abridged):

1. **Responsibilities to employers/clients/system users**
   - To act faithfully for their employers or clients in professional matters;
   - To uphold each user’s, provider’s, or employer’s right to privacy and confidentiality and to respect whatever proprietary rights belong to them by limiting access to, providing proper security for and ensuring proper disposal of data about clients, patrons, or users;
   - To treat all persons fairly.

[^65^]: Ethics Sin List
2. Responsibility to the profession
To truthfully represent themselves and the information systems which they utilize or which they represent...

3. Responsibility to society
To improve the information systems which they work or which they represent to the best of their means and abilities...
To promote open and equal access to information, within the scope permitted by their organization, and to resist procedures that promote unlawful discriminatory practices in access to and provision of information...[49, adopted May 30, 1992].
These principles can easily be applied to librarians as well as information scientists and other kinds of information professionals.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Even with these responsibilities clearly delineated, there are times when the values of information provision appear to conflict with other personal or social or cultural values. This conflict is most conspicuous when the values of information professionals appear to conflict with commonly accepted notions of moral or right conduct. A common example, involving a public library, highlights this type of situation:

An adolescent child comes to the librarian in a public library and asks for a book on how to commit suicide. The child looks very depressed and upset. The librarian is aware of a book that would provide substantial amount of accurate and up-to-date information on committing suicide. The librarian is also aware that the material would really be understandable to the patron. What should the librarian do?

Admittedly, this situation is contrived and its occurrence would be very rare. Nonetheless, it places into relief a situation in which the information provider’s general concept of right conduct (the belief that one should not intentionally harm another person) seems to conflict with one’s obligation to respect individuals and their right to information. Of course, implicit in this situation is the belief that the individual will in fact commit suicide. If this was actually known, then providing the information could hardly be defended by invoking provisions of the ALA code of ethics or any other professional code. Nor could one sensibly say that one is obligated to find this information for the patron because of a person’s “right to information.” Such a rationalization is contrary to our everyday ethical notions of right conduct.

But the situation described above is extraordinary and presupposes knowledge seldom, if ever, available to the information professional. In almost every case, the knowledge of the librarian regarding the patron is imperfect and very limited. This is due to the fact that most patron contacts are very brief. Librarians seldom have substantial information about the personal lives of their patrons or their psychological condition, nor are they qualified to evaluate this information. Consequently, the librarian has little or no ability to predict what a patron will do with the information and the consequences of the patron’s actions. In the vast portion of circumstances, acting consistently with the values of the information profession does not require that one give up one’s ordinary concept of moral action; rather it is to accept the ethical obligation to recognize the individual’s right to information. Such an obligation could only be violated with clear knowledge that significant harm to others will result. It is also to recognize that the information provider’s predictive ability regarding the consequences of the information provided is minimal at best. The duty of the librarian is to accept the right of individuals to receive information and to use that information. Although librarians may be concerned as to how certain information may be used, without sure knowledge of such misuse and the substantial harmful consequences of the use, it becomes too easy for the information professional to project those consequences inaccurately, with harmful ethical consequences of their own.

The dilemma posed by the suicide example brings out another point about the purpose of information giving. One can view information provision simply as an obligation to answer a specific question, but this is an inappropriate and impoverished model for the information professional. The purpose of information giving should be seen in the broader context of resolving an information need of problem. This is consistent with the notion that the purpose of information giving is to assist the patrons in living their lives in the manner they see fit. It is the “problem context” or “problem environment” of the patron[66] that is the focus of the information provider. In this context, information providers need to know the context in which information is requested. If, in the unlikely ethical situation posed, a librarian actually had a strong suspicion that a patron was going to use the information to commit suicide, the information provider would in fact be obligated to locate additional information (perhaps the name and telephone numbers of suicide counseling agencies or community mental health agencies) that might resolve the problem in a manner that would promote the health of the individual. In other words, the information question involved how to commit suicide, the information problem was actually unstated: “How can I deal with a life so difficult that I wish to end it?”

There is no simple way to resolve the myriad of ethical problems that confront information professionals, but the fact that ethical issues are complex does not relieve us of the burden to act ethically.[67] On the contrary, the absence of ethical concerns would make the information profession very dangerous. As the information professions mature, expand, and grow in importance, information...
professionals need to redouble their efforts to define their ethical responsibilities and find the means to ensure that all professionals are aware of and accept their ethical obligations.

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