Charleston Library Conference

Overcoming Today's Ethical Challenges for Librarians and Vendors (Lively Discussion)

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Abstract

Librarians and information professionals are often faced with situations that require judgment of ethical behavior regarding the library, patrons, and vendor relationships. Librarians encounter conflicts of interest, intellectual freedom issues, privacy concerns, and vendor and publisher relations dilemmas daily. Shrinking and flat budgets and rapidly advancing technology create further challenges to providing high-quality services while practicing ethical behavior. In this session, you will learn some of the ethical challenges that present themselves in librarianship and tactics that can be employed to overcome such challenges. In addition, you will learn how to work and build ethical relationships with vendors, how vendors are held to a high ethical standard, and different ways to evaluate and retain transparency in these relationships.

The session includes a brief presentation followed by breakout groups for a lively discussion on some of the ethical issues we encounter in libraries along with Q&A from the audience.

Introduction

Prior to the "lively" portion of this session, the three facilitators—two acquisitions librarians from academic libraries, and one vendor—delivered an overview of ethics defined both generally and by years of library literature. Following this the audience, in groups of four or five and comprising a mix of librarians, publishers, and vendors, reviewed and discussed an assigned "case study" situation. They afterwards reported back to the entire group, answering a set of questions about the nature of the ethical dilemmas and suggesting solutions.

Ethics Defined

- Area of study that deals with ideas about what is good and bad behavior, what is morally right or wrong

- Professional **ethics** (Knasiak, 2015)

  ◦ Being in accordance with the accepted principles of right and wrong that govern the conduct of a profession

Professional ethics are important in library and information science, as librarians face ethical choices and identify and respond to ethical dilemmas in their daily work. Some examples follow:

A patron wants to check out materials but has forgotten his card. A well-respected member of the community accrues a large fine. How about when a staff member sees a young library user copying and pasting large chunks of text into a school report? Or when a patron asks for help to fax a credit application to a predatory lender? We often know the laws and we hopefully know our policies, but are there times when the rules should be bent and instances when we should speak out? Are there occasions when we should do what we think is right rather than what is prescribed because sometimes it is more ethical to break the rule than to follow it?

Where Can Libraries Turn for Help on Ethics?

- ALA Code of Ethics

- Library Bill of Rights

  ◦ Sets forth the foundational principles of the profession

- IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and Other Information Workers

- National Codes of Ethics for Librarians (by country)

- Locally developed library code of ethics

In 1939, the American Library Association adopted a Code of Ethics to "maintain ethical standards of behavior in relation to the governing authority under which they [the librarians] work, to the library constituency, to the library as an institution and to fellow workers on the staff, to other members of the library profession, and to society in general." Although the code was amended in 1981, 1995, and again in 2008, one thing didn't change—the document remains a framework. ALA's Code of Ethics is the responsibility of the Committee on Professional Ethics. The Code of Ethics is the document that translates the values of intellectual freedom that define the profession of librarianship into broad principles that may be used by individual members of that profession as well as by others employed in a library as a framework for dealing with situations involving ethical conflicts.

Another source is the statement developed by the ALCTS Acquisitions Section Ethics Task Force; endorsed by the ALCTS Acquisitions Section and adopted by the ALCTS Board of Directors at the Midwinter Meeting, February 7, 1994, included below for your convenience (to be updated at ALA Midwinter 2019):

ALCTS Statement on Principles and Standards of Acquisitions Practice

1. gives first consideration to objectives and policies of his or her institution;

2. strives to obtain maximum ultimate value of each dollar of expenditure;

3. grants all competing vendors equal consideration insofar as the established policies library permit, and regards each transaction on its own merits;

4. works for honesty, truth, and fairness in buying and selling, denounces all forms and manifestations of bribery;

5. declines personal gifts and gratuities;

6. uses only by consent original ideas and designs devised by one vendor for competitive purchasing purposes;

7. accords a prompt courteous reception insofar as conditions permit to all who call on legitimate business missions;

8. fosters and promotes fair, ethical, and legal trade practices;

9. avoids sharp practice;

10. strives consistently for knowledge of the publishing and bookselling industry;

11. strives to establish practical and efficient methods for the conduct of his/her office;

12. counsels and assists fellow acquisitions librarians in performance of their duties, whenever occasion permits.

Shachaf Study (2005)

Pnina Shachaf analyzed English versions of 28 codes of ethics of library professional associations and found the most frequently identified principles.

- Most frequently identified principles in codes of ethics:
  - Confidentiality and privacy
  - Integrity
  - Equal access to information
  - Professional development
- Less frequently identified principles:
  - Democracy
  - Copyright and intellectual property
  - Responsibility toward society

Principles Related to Ethics

Principles for Professionals

- Honesty/Truthfulness
- Fairness
- Transparency
- Accountability
- Responsibility

Ethics in Practice

- Good faith business practices
- Direct and honest communication
- Availability of full information
- Willingness to compromise and negotiate
- Assumed good faith

Ethics for Library Vendors

- Respect
  - Privacy

- Integrity
- Customer focus
  - Results, do what they say they will
- Transparency
  - Pricing/Quotes/Service Fees
- Financial viability
- Provide references

Vendors are held to high ethical standards. In the broadest sense, ethics for vendors involves all of the above.

Ethical Issues Libraries Encounter

- Copyright issues (Luo, 2016)
- Confidentiality and privacy issues (Luo, 2016)
- Personal beliefs/bias centering around:
  - intellectual freedom
  - censorship
- Equitable access to information (Luo, 2016)
- Bibliocentrism (Smiraglia, 2009)
- Double duty—collection managers as selectors as potential conflict of interest (Morrissey, 2008)

How does this manifest itself in our everyday work life? The list includes some examples. The first two are most common (for reference librarians) working with ILL/CIRC stats. The reference desk was reported to be the most typical venue—more than 80 percent of the respondents indicated that they have encountered ethical dilemmas at the reference desk.

A variety of issues emerge when intellectual freedom and censorship are concerned. Two main sources of censorship are institutional ideology and library staff's personal beliefs, biases, and prejudices.

Two issues regarding equitable access to information and service are prevalent—special user populations' access to library resources and services and the public's access to resources and services at public university libraries. Special populations refer to library users with special needs, such as those with disabilities, who are minors, or who are economically disadvantaged. In his article "Bibliocentrism, Cultural Warrant, and the Ethics of Resource Description: A

Case Study" (2009), Richard Smiraglia researched schemas for resource description and restricting access by constraining objectivity. There are ethical implications for all information organizations because it leads to poorly served users of catalogs.

Ethical Issues Libraries Encounter, Cont'd.

- Obligations to be ethical in the acquisitions and maintenance of journal collections
  - Avoid biases and conflicts of interest (Luo, 2016)
- Gifts and legacies (Cassell, Johnson, Mansfield, & Zhang, 2008)
- Is the information you have yours to share (Morrissey, 2008)?
- Special librarians have a dual identity arising from their work in libraries—do they support the goals of the profession or the organization (Preer, 2008)?
- Hiring of relatives—preference to an employee's child (Cihak & Howland, 2012)
- Stealing from unique works in rare book collections (Mervosh, 2018)

Ethical issues related to conflict of interest can be categorized into those between library personnel, those between library users, and those between library staff and library users. Sometimes we encounter conflicts in libraries that cross over into legal issues. In some situations, acting ethically may require you to go beyond what is required by law.

Howard and Korver in their book *Ethics for the Real World* (2005) discussed how ethical compromises both big and small hurt us, and how we underestimate how much harm is done. One compromise can lead to another as we let our standards slip. Once we cross one line, we may find it hard to resist crossing the next. We begin to slide downhill on the proverbial slippery slope, where each compromise becomes easier, and overlook their consequences. As we develop bad habits, no matter our accomplishments and virtues, we may find ourselves in similar situations.

Other Ethical Issues That Touch Our Lives as Librarians

- Peer review—double-blind review
- Published research articles—ethical standards in research

- Plagiarism and academic dishonesty

- Electronic waste and the environment—ethical concern of the information age

- Writing employee reviews and referrals

Peer review done in an ethical manner involves blind reviews where author and reviewer remain unknown to one another. Ideally, published works generated by scholars are unbiased, objective reports of original research. Be aware of trustworthiness of content of serials and the impacts on the reputation of serials titles. A competent serials librarian will be alert to unprofessional practices and take them into account during renewal season.

Group Activity—Situations We Encounter as Librarians

General Questions to Consider

- Is this an ethical dilemma?

- Why is this a dilemma?

- State the ethical dilemma, if any.

- What can the library do about it?

- Who are the stakeholders?

- Is anyone at risk?

- Where can the library seek assistance?

Situations 1–5 (see Appendix A).

Best Practices

- Establish ethical standards.

  ◦ Develop your own statement or code of ethics relating to some of the above issues.

- Educate staff.

- Take transgressions seriously—enforce frontline behavior.

- Engage in conversations both inside and outside of the library to build relationships *before* issues arise.

- Have a clear understanding of ethical expectations as we move into the future (Wagner, 2015).

- Set the tone from the top.

- Measure effectiveness.

To work through the inevitable balancing act that is a part of addressing almost every ethical situation, many management ethicists advocate the following five-step process:

1. Consider the boundaries of the action.

2. Separate the important ethical issues from the trivial.

3. Evaluate alternatives and their repercussions.

4. Determine a course of action that conforms with ethical standards.

5. Recognize the effect that a decision will have on future choices.

Takeaways

- Thoughts and communication around ethical issues

- Hallmarks of potential ethical violations

- Best practices for when potential ethical violations are involved

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