

Information Ethics: Freedom, Democracy, Responsibility

by Martha M. Smith

Video homework ... books on tape ... poetry on CD-ROM ... document delivery ... messages from invisible friends down the street and around the world!

Controversial materials...homeless people...books decaying...staff burnout...old equipment...theft and vandalism!

Infomercials...stock quotes at 3 am...online catalogs...

barcodes...videodiscs...database searching...faxes with funny cartoons!

Invasions of privacy ... soaring costs ... hours cut ... services curtailed ... visits from the FBI ... fees for services long considered free!

Information to save the earth ... cure an itch ... train a dog ... revelations from the Russian archives ... hopeful AIDS drugs ... NREN ... INTERNET!

Will it ever end?

Probably not!

Where do librarians fit in?

On the front lines!

Should we be neutral?

We never were!

The Information Age is invading our world and engaging us as librarians, as end-users ourselves, as citizens in a democratic society, and as human beings trying to cope with daily information overload.

Why Information Ethics?

Information Ethics, similar in its development to medical and environmental ethics, addresses the practical issues we face each day. Information ethics is concerned with (1) information access (including censorship), (2) ownership (including intellectual property rights), and (3) security (including privacy). The scope of Information Ethics includes issues which (1) affect individuals, (2) influence professional practice, and (3) shape public policy. Like health or the environment, information has become a

public, consumer issue. Use of valued information resources are debated in homes, schools, board rooms, and city halls.

While librarians will be competing in the information marketplace, we have a vital role to play. As human beings, citizens, and professionals, librarians are moral agents who influence their world, whether intentionally or by default. Information professionals have a responsibility to use their knowledge and experience to guide information policy, locally, nationally, and globally. While evenhanded treatment of materials and service to patrons will still be appropriate, and professional ideals such as those expressed in the Library Bill of Rights should be upheld, neutrality or rigidity on the issues which will determine the future directions of information use would be unprofessional and irresponsible. Information Ethics provides a framework in which professionals and the public can assess, analyze, and implement information policy.

Freedom, Democracy, And Responsibility

In the face of new dilemmas, librarians have pondered diverse approaches to problems such as database security or limited access to government information.

While the problems described and the approaches and solutions suggested are numerous, thus far, three main themes or principles are defended. They are (1) Freedom, (2) Democracy, and (3) Responsibility. All three can be enhanced or undermined as the Information Age takes hold of the national and global information environment. *Freedom* — intellectual freedom, and the freedom to read — has long been championed by librarians. Computer and information scientists have rallied around the notion of *Information Democracy* as a way of expressing

the need for social equity. This includes the protection of intellectual property rights, the encouragement of democratic processes, and the enhancement of the good life through information technologies. The idea of *Responsibility* recalls the long debate about the role of the scientist, the engineer, and the expert promoting the good of society. James Conant, for example, after working in military research during World War II expressed his doubts about scientists working in the defense establishment in *Science and Common Sense*.¹

Challenges Defined

We are confronted by new products and services which make information more accessible and attractive to our patrons. And client needs, hopes, demands, and knowledge of the potential of electronic services have grown. Like us, they know how much is "out there." Some want the latest and the best for themselves or for their children. Others need services to compete in business. Even the fearful are curious.

At the same time, we must consider the costs in money, time, and training of librarians and clients. Will traditional collections be sacrificed for new products and

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services? Will people still want to come to the library? Will we have to charge for services? What about the schools, the towns, the counties that can't afford new technologies? Who will serve the people who don't have computers and modems at home?

But our problems are not all professional. As citizens, we fear the invasion of our privacy when we hear of massive databases of personal information. We wonder if the Freedom of Information Act benefits us as citizens or erects barriers to government information. We fear that private companies may control needed public information and charge more than we can pay for what we need to prosper and educate our children. We know the value of access for all.

Information Ethics Defined

Information ethics considers issues both at the practical and at the theoretical level. A formal working definition includes the following:

I. Information ethics, as a field of applied ethics, is concerned with (1) the ownership of information, (2) access to information, and (3) the security of information, which includes privacy, confidentiality, and data integrity.

II. Information ethics (1) considers specific issues and cases, (2) uses various tools of analysis to study them, and (3) seeks to describe strategies for decision-making, in both public and private settings, at personal, local, national, and global levels.

III. Information ethics, as a sub-field in the philosophy of information, is concerned (1) to define the nature and function of information in society, (2) to describe its goals and purposes, and (3) to clarify how information is known and understood.

To elaborate further, *Information Ethics is an area of applied ethics, similar to medical ethics, business ethics, or environmental ethics*. As such, it has a practical orientation around cases and issues. It uses tools of analysis from ethics and the social sciences to understand problems and to plan strategies for decision making. Thus, Information Ethics can be a resource for the development of public policy.

Information Ethics considers information, its use, and misuse in the broadest possible manner. Topics of interest include the ownership of information, intellectual property rights, free or restricted access to information, use of gov-

ernment information, assuring privacy and confidentiality to individuals and groups, protection of information from tampering (maintaining data integrity), and international flow of information. These topics primarily may be grouped under the categories of Access, Ownership, and Security.

Information Ethics includes but is not limited to professional ethics. Public, consumer issues such as fair credit reporting, access to health care information (abortion, drugs), and freedom for libraries to collect and for patrons to read on controversial material are included.

Information Ethics is the applied area of the philosophy of information and the philosophy of information technology. It looks to the philosophy of information and information technology as well as to the traditions of ethics for its foundations. While the philosophy of information is also an emerging field, it is concerned (1) to define the nature of information, (2) to describe its goals and purposes, and (3) to clarify how information is known.

In recent years, new information technologies and rapid social change have reshaped some of the ethical dilemmas of librarians and have brought forth a new set of questions. For example, when a depressed patron asks for a suicide manual or can find *Final Exit* by remote access and request mail delivery, librarians face new challenges. When a library may spend a million dollars or more to install an automated library system, then library directors cannot afford to be naive about contracts and business negotiations. When networking and telecommunications offer faculty members a taste of resources the library cannot easily supply, then choices must be made between access and ownership of materials. When the same funds needed to serve poor communities are sought after by companies wanting online access to purchasing and bidding information, it is clear that there are dilemmas which professional codes can only begin to address.

Medical, Business, Environmental, And Sexual Ethics

The growth of many areas in applied ethics illustrates the need to address practical dilemmas in society with tools of philosophy and the traditions of ethics. All of these areas depend on the flow of information. Issues in biomedical ethics/bioethics, business ethics, engineering ethics, sexual ethics, and environmental ethics involve the use and misuse of information. For example, early in the growth of medical ethics, the right of the patient to know of a terminal illness and to exercise informed consent were key issues. In business, intellectual property rights and own-

ership are major issues. In sexual ethics, what is the obligation of the person with a history of high risk behavior to a new sexual partner? What information should be shared? Engineering ethics has long acknowledged the potential dangers of not informing clients of the weaknesses in building projects. In environmental ethics, one of the key issues is access to good research which will be used by the government officials in public policy. If there are disputes, whose research will be used and whose will be filed away or destroyed? Also, can the government suppress information on environmental hazards which is important to the public or deny access to information about certain governmental officials who engage in practices such as fraud, theft, or sexual harassment?

Ethics in Information and Library Science

From the very beginnings of librarianship and library science, ethical issues have been discussed. In the first years of *Library Journal*, particular concern was given to the challenges at the reference desk such how to answer legal questions and whether to help with crossword puzzles. In World War I, a critical issue was whether the public should have access to information about the enemy. Censorship, intellectual freedom, and personnel issues have been continuing concerns. A new phase began in the mid-1970s with Robert Hauptman's experiment in asking reference librarians about building a car bomb. In 1989, Robert Dowd tried a similar experiment asking reference librarians about freebasing cocaine.²

Since the mid-1970s, interest in ethics has grown considerably. The experiments at the reference desk by Robert Hauptman (bomb) and Robert Dowd (cocaine), continuing censorship attempts, the FBI attempts to use patron records, and the challenges of automation and networking have brought the issues to the table. In the academic community, more scholars are reflecting upon information and information technology. Symposia, special issues of journals, and the new *Journal of Information Ethics*³ indicate that this field will grow. Will there be a Joseph Fletcher (medical) or an Aldo Leopold (environment) in Information Ethics? Will the stakes change as librarians and the public realize the power of information to change the world and shape the individual? Will information ethics take its place in the textbooks in applied ethics along with sexual ethics, business ethics, medical ethics, and environmental ethics?

From Codes To Global Information Justice

In the last several decades, ethical issues have made news. Assassinations, the Viet-

nam War, Watergate and the resignation of President Nixon, and more recently business scandals such as the S&L crisis, and the Iran-Contra controversy have challenged the public trust. Problems such as illegal drugs, homelessness, alternative lifestyles, poverty, AIDS, racial tensions, and unemployment have found their ways into the libraries and into the literature of librarianship.

In response to the many crises and challenges both within and outside of the profession, librarians have begun to rethink their professional responsibilities and the codes of their organizations. Both Gene Lanier and Lee Finks have been involved with debates about the ALA Code. Also, the FBI's Library Awareness Program frightened and angered many librarians into action to defend patron privacy and patron records.

Fearing that access to government information has decreased in the last decade with increasing privatization, librarians have expressed concern. For example, will price and availability hinder access to information paid for by tax dollars? In addition, while the intent of the Freedom of Information Act was to assure that the public could use government information, some have suggested that the Act has never achieved its purpose. And although the

United States has not affirmed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19 remains a focal point for reflection on information rights and the goal of Global Information Justice.

Article 19: Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression: this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to *seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.*⁴ (Emphasis added.)

Librarians as Moral Agents

Information ethics offers librarians an avenue of entry into discussions and debates about the future of information use in our society. As physicians, attorneys, and other professionals have stepped beyond their professional roles to provide leadership, so too must librarians come forward to offer advice, expertise, and the wisdom of experience. Although most of us hardly expected to be the possessors of knowledge of such value, we have been given an opportunity to shape a major transition in the history of the world. We will need to exercise our judgment as professionals, as citizens, and as members of the human community. Our voices will be few among many, we will not likely agree all the time,

but we are needed; service has been our proud tradition and the most enduring part of our heritage. Our watchwords will likely include:

Freedom Of Access
Data Security
Integrity Of Intellectual Property
Privacy Protection
Information Democracy
Global Information Justice!

References

¹James Conant. *Science and Common Sense*. F. Watts, 1951.

²Robert Hauptman, "Professionalism or Culpability? An Experiment in Ethics," *Wilson Library Bulletin*, 50, 8 (1976):626-627. Robert Dowd, "I Want to Find Out How to Freebase Cocaine; or Yet Another Unobtrusive Test of Reference Performance," *The Reference Librarian*, 25-26 (1989):483-493.

³Robert Hauptman, ed. *Journal of Information Ethics*, 1 (Fall, 1992). McFarland & Company, Box 611, Jefferson, NC, 28640. The first issue is offered free on request. A subscription beginning with Spring, 1993 (2 issues a year) is \$38.

⁴Milton Meltzer, *The Human Rights Book*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Girous, 1976, p. 176.

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