Survival and Service:
The Ethics of Research on the Uses
of Information Provided by Librarians

by Martha M. Smith

Do librarians have the right to know how patrons use information? What sources and services are the most or least utilized? Which resources fit their particular clientele? Indeed, what do we need to know in order to serve users more effectively? What must we know in order to justify budgets, to defend the existence of libraries, to assure the survival of the profession, and to offer access to diverse clients in an increasing pluralistic society?

To Market or Not to Market
Supermarkets do it! Bar-coded product information guarantees that there will be enough hot dog relish and carrots in the stores where those item sell the fastest.

Video stores do it! With the help of technology much like library networks, company executives determine where to build new stores, how big they should be, and what movies and candy to carry.

In some Sunday newspapers, there are lots of inserts. In others, there may be none. Zip codes are used to make marketing decisions. High income neighborhoods receive certain product announcements and coupons. Low income neighborhoods may receive other advertisements or fewer than are found in zipcoded areas deemed as affluent. Is this good business or discrimination? Is it ethical?

Marketing people randomly stop consumers at the local mall to show them toothpaste labels, combinations of frozen vegetables, and movie posters in order to determine buyer preferences. Their companies spend substantial sums of money in order to compete and survive in a constantly changing product environment.

In addition, sophisticated databases track credit card purchases and make that information available to companies so that they can tailor their offerings for the public they seek to serve. Marketing and advertising jobs are on the line constantly.

Should librarians use the methods of business to survey, analyze, and market our products and services to our patrons? Would we be invading patron privacy if we were to track patron borrowing and order accordingly? Would we be betraying professional obligations to educate and inform as well as to lift cultural horizons if we followed what readers were reading rather than providing a wide variety of, for example, current fiction? Would we be betraying professional neutrality if we developed collections according to the dominant viewpoints of patrons on subjects such as abortion, gun control, or politics?

Can research into what users do with the information provided by librarians

Are our motives survival or service?

help our profession better exercise social responsibility in meeting communities' needs? Would we be gaining sufficiently useful data on the impact of libraries in the community, on the school, college, or university campus, and to the public at large to justify the expenditure of funds

for such research? Or, would we be risking the possibility of giving up professional judgment in building collections and managing services in order to satisfy current fads or passing needs?

Are our motives survival or service? They are likely both.

Are these concerns ethical and consistent with our commitments as librarians?

The Ethics of User Studies
Two traditions of thinking guide us when we consider the ethics of studying patrons and their various uses of information. First, are the codes, statements, and other principles which have guided our profession for the last hundred years. The second is a complementary mode of analysis represented by mostly European philosophers. This second tradition will be illustrated by a discussion of the work of Rafael Capurro.

Codes and Rules
Most familiar among the codes are the ALA Code, the Library Bill of Rights, the Intellectual Freedom statement, and the Manual of Intellectual Freedom. In recent years, newer professional groups such as the Information Technology Association of America (Recommended Code of Ethics for Professional Service Firms); the Association of Independent Information Professionals (Code of Ethical Business Practice); the Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals (Code of Ethics) have developed codes. These differ from the codes of librarians in two major ways. First, these groups provide information and services for a fee. Second, several of these codes address disciplinary action.

The ASIS Professional Guidelines of the American Society for Information Sci-

ence are of particular usefulness for librarians. This code is dedicated to the memory of Diana Woodward, who was at the time of her early death from cancer a professor of library science at Drexel, where she taught ethics. Professor Woodward, who received a masters degree in philosophy from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, wrote extensively on ethics and the librarian. As a member of ASIS, she championed the creation and articulation of a code. The professional guidelines it outlines provide a bridge between the librarian and the world of the commercial information provider. The statement broadly addresses users and providers, the profession, and society.[1]

As useful as they may be in providing both inspiring ideals and public declarations of good intentions, codes cannot address all of the issues which must be faced in everyday practice. Like the Ten Commandments, the Hippocratic Oath, or the U.S. Bill of Rights, they state high principles but often do not provide guidelines for action. Thus, for example, if we look only at codes which call for privacy protection and go no further, we may fear to judge when a situation, such as a potential suicide, demands that we deviate from ideal practice.

Similarly, we may feel compelled to give information, such as the address of a battered women's shelter, to an enraged spouse, when such information should remain secret. Codes should not permit us to hide from the serious evaluation and research that needs to be conducted if librarians are to serve the public and to preserve the profession. We may have to risk intrusive behavior and the scrutiny of our efforts by the public and by our employers if we are to understand the impact of information provision on the economic, intellectual, and social lives of those we serve.

Ethics of the Self and the Community

Another approach to ethical dilemmas complements the first. Beginning not with codes or rules, but rather with the individual self and the community of selves, the central question is "What constitutes an action, decision, or environment which most enhances the self and the community?" If our aim is to promote the well-being of individuals and communities through providing information, then it is essential to understand how information

is used without violating the integrity of the users.

Rafael Capurro, a German scholar of information science and ethics, has suggested that new information technologies give human beings a chance to live better lives in a way never before possible.[2] Because information technologies can be customized to fit the user, can be made available to the public, and can save enormous amounts of time and natural resources, he is very optimistic about the future. However, he warns that information technologies must be used to expand rather than to control human potential. Further, he urges information profession-

Codes should not permit us to hide from the serious evaluation and research that needs to be conducted if librarians are to serve the public and to preserve the profession.

als to become involved with the ethical issues which are critical to life-enhancing uses of technology.

Capurro is also optimistic about the potential to use information technologies to bring harmony among three usually competing forces — nature, technology, and humanity. For example, how well does the emergence of virtual libraries (the library without walls) accommodate the constraints of nature, the potential of technology, and the needs of humanity? Is the natural environment protected? Are information technologies used wisely? Are human needs, such as those for safety, comfort, affiliation, achievement, and self-determination met?

Capurro argues against the idea that librarians or computer scientists should be silent or neutral about any aspect of information provision. Rather, information professionals, as moral agents, should speak out and defend human values, the natural world, and the life-enhancing potential of technology.

Capurro also makes a contrast between being fair and being caring when he describes the attitude that information professionals should have toward their work and their clients. Being fair is not enough. Rather, as a member of the community oneself, the information provider

or librarian should care about the whole system of information delivery and use. As an expert, the professional should put that caring into action by taking part in policy making and implementation. Capurro envisions caring infusing the whole system and bringing nature, technology, and human values together in a harmonious whole.

Information Democracy

Another mandate to understand user needs and thereby to be able to defend free, public access to information comes from those who see many threats to the ideals of democracy. If librarians do not make a case for the public, particularly the traditionally underserved or information poor, then commercial interests may take over and deny essential information to many who cannot afford it or do not know how to gain access. If the library is seen as a luxury and not as a necessity, then our profession will not survive to serve those who are in the most need. ASIS meetings in the last few years have provided an excellent forum for information democracy discussions.[3]

Guidelines for Research on User Needs and on the Impact of the Library in the Community

Just as personnel evaluations, accreditation visits, and annual reports tend to raise fears, a certain resistance to and even suspicion about the need for research are only natural. Therefore, in any study, goals should be clear, without hidden agendas. The planning and implementation should include all those whose contributions can strengthen the final product and its usefulness. All research has political aspects, which are best acknowledged from the beginning.[3]

Consent of the Participants

While reviewing anonymous computer counts of the use of an online catalog hardly requires that patrons be informed of the practice, any interviews, surveys, or observations should in almost all cases be conducted with the knowledge and consent of all of those involved. Most importantly, all levels of staff should be informed of their responsibilities for any study and of possible uses of the results that will involve them. Especially in times of declining budgets, evaluation of certain programs or user needs may be perceived as a means to eliminate jobs.

Reliable and Valid Studies

Suppose a public library wanted to evaluate the impact of the library on the business community. Would the best approach be to have a staff member monitor the use

of patrons identified as members of the business community? Would a survey sent to business leaders be more useful? Should interviews be conducted? Would it be revealing to remove certain sources for a certain period of time and see who asks for them? Any and all of these methods might provide interesting results, but are the results reliable indicators of the impact of the library on business in the community?

A reliable study would need to include at least a representative number of business-related users and the appropriate survey or interview tools to measure the impact of the library over a period of time. For example, a survey of those using business reference sources right before Christmas or in late July would not be adequate. Clearly, this would not be an easy process. Calling on someone with experience in such research or perhaps contracting with an outside agency might be advisable.

Imagine that a large library system wanted to improve its service to school children. First, how would such improvement be described and quantified? Inviting several focus groups of teachers might be a start, but seeking the views of only one group of concerned citizens would not be sufficient. Parents, the students themselves, and other interested parties should be in-

volved. When the study is completed, it will need to stand the test of public scrutiny. Thus, the methods used must be clearly understood, carefully employed, and appropriate for the stated intent of the study. If valid data are not obtained, then the results, the process, and the librarians could be discredited and opportunities for further study terminated.

When research is used to influence policy, it should stimulate comment and criticism.

Broad Dissemination and Opportunities for Feedback and Critique

When research is used to influence policy, it should stimulate comment and criticism. Both the methods used and the conclusions reached must be defended before the policy-making bodies. In the best of circumstances, this is a constructive process which leads to positive action.

However, research can also stir up a great deal of controversy, even from unexpected places. Suddenly, the library may have both new friends and new enemies. Planning the dissemination of research results and the marketing of the aims and goals of the research should be an expected part of the process. For example, if a study of a branch shows that it is not being used sufficiently to justify its remaining open, how will those conclusions be used? If research indicated major inefficiencies in reference or cataloging, would that research end up in the trash?

Research and Dissemination: A Professional Commitment

Increasingly, librarians work in competitive situations where funds are diminishing and needs are growing. Justification for programs and accountability for decisions made are standard practice. No longer can we assume that people recognize the value of libraries and librarians. We must be prepared to uphold the value of our programs and services and to demonstrate the impact that the provision of information has for our constituents. Service and survival are both noble goals.
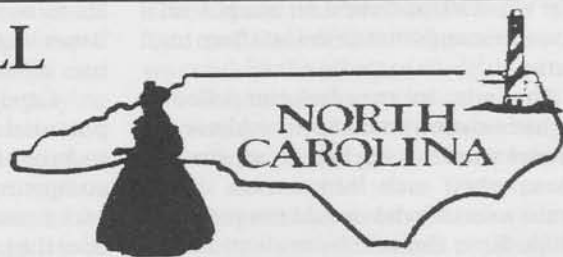
The tensions that arise in living in this new fish bowl are many. Patron privacy

must be weighed against the value of use studies. Raising expectations through initiating research into user needs brings with it the potential for patron demands which cannot reasonably be met. Yet to shrink back from these challenges would be to abandon the ideals which librarians have promoted. Freedom of access, respect for each patron, service to diverse clients, and meeting the needs of communities as they and we change — all are worth the risks.

References

1 Ann P. Mintz, ed. *Information Ethics: Concerns for Librarianship and the Information Industry*; Proceedings of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Symposium of the Graduate Alumni and Faculty of the Rutgers School of Communication, Information, and Library Studies, 14, April 1989. ; Jana Varlejs, Series Editor. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1990. Includes Association Ethics Statements- American Library Association: On Professional Ethics; American Society for Information Science: Code of Ethics for Information Professionals (draft); Canadian Library Association: Code of Ethics, and many others. Also a brief bibliography on "Information Ethics."

2 Rafael Capurro, "Information Technology and Technologies of the Self," Paper delivered at the ASIS Conference, 1992. Tapes available. Abstract in the proceedings. To be published. See also Capurro, Rafael. "Moral Issues in Information Science," *Journal of Information Science* 11(3),113-123. On information science ethics.

3 Ronald Doctor, University of Alabama, was the convener of the Information Democracy sessions at the 1992 ASIS conference. See also Doctor, Ronald D. "Information Technologies and Social Equity: Confronting the Revolution," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 42,3 (1991):216-228 and Doctor, Ronald D. "Social Equity and Information Technologies: Moving Toward Information Democracy," *ARIST* 27. Edited by Martha E. Williams. Learned Information for the American Society for Information Science. 1992. Doctor is editing a book on the subject, which will contain some of the papers from ASIS 1992.

4 A very useful classic is *The Practice of Social Research* by Earl Babbie. Sixth Edition. Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1992. Look for latest edition.

ASIS Professional Guidelines
Dedicated to the Memory of Diana Woodward

ASIS recognizes the plurality of uses and users of information technologies, services, systems and products as well as the diversity of goals or objectives, sometimes conflicting, among producers, vendors, mediators, and users of information systems.

ASIS urges its members to be ever aware of the social, economic, cultural, and political impacts of their actions or inaction.

ASIS members have obligations to employers, clients, and system users, to the profession, and to society, to use judgement and discretion in making choices, providing equitable service, and in defending the rights of open inquiry.

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.**

Responsibility to the Profession

- **To truthfully represent themselves and the information systems which they utilize or which they represent, by**
  - not knowingly making false statements or providing erroneous or misleading information
  - informing their employers, clients or sponsors of any circumstances that create a conflict of interest
  - not using their position beyond their authorized limits or by not using their credentials to misrepresent themselves
  - following and promoting standards of conduct in accord with the best current practices
  - undertaking their research conscientiously, in gathering, tabulating or interpreting data; in following proper approval procedures for subjects; and in producing or disseminating their research results
  - pursuing ongoing professional development and encouraging and assisting colleagues and others to do the same
  - adhering to principles of due process and equality of opportunity.

Responsibility to Society

- **To improve the information systems with which they work or which they represent, to the best of their means and abilities by**
  - providing the most reliable and accurate information and acknowledging the credibility of the sources as known or unknown
  - resisting all forms of censorship, inappropriate selection and acquisitions policies, and biases in information selection, provision and dissemination
  - making known any biases, errors and inaccuracies found to exist and striving to correct those which can be remedied.
- **To promote open and equal access to information, within the scope permitted by their organizations or work, and to resist procedures that promote unlawful discriminatory practices in access to and provision of information, by**
  - seeking to extend public awareness and appreciation of information availability and provision as well as the role of information professionals in providing such information
  - freely reporting, publishing or disseminating information subject to legal and proprietary restraints of producers, vendors and employers, and the best interests of their employers or clients.

Information professionals shall engage in principled conduct whether on their own behalf or at the request of employers, colleagues, clients, agencies or the profession.