

ETHICS OF LIBRARIANSHIP: AN INTROSPECTIVE REVIEW

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Abstract

Librarians and information professionals have been troubled by the question of ethics since long. With over abundance of information and easy access to a wide spectrum of information sources, the issue of moral and ethical use of information is becoming more and more relevant. This paper attempts to explore the issue of ethics in librarianship through an insightful review of relevant literature. Key issues relating to information ethics including equality and equity, censorship, intellectual freedom, fair use, etc. have been explored with an aim to encourage further discussions and introspection among the library professionals on ethics and morality – which appear to take a center stage in the discourse of librarianship in the 21st century.

Keywords

Information ethics, Librarianship, Code of conduct

Introduction

Lionel Casson, in his seminal book “Libraries in the Ancient World” narrated how the Ptolemys – the chief patrons of the ancient Library of Alexandria - collected books for the library. The Ptolemys ordered that every ship entering the port of Alexandria should be inspected. If books were found on board they were confiscated and taken to the library where copies were made. The originals were stored there and the copies were returned to the ships (Casson, 2002). Cartwright (2019) adds, ‘The librarians, operating under a director, were ruthless and absolutely determined to build the world’s greatest store of knowledge by leaving no source and no subject uncovered.’ Admittedly, this cannot be termed as an “ethical” way of building a library collection. However, history testifies that the Ptolemys were not the only people who followed unfair means for building and expanding a library. The powerful people, who acted as the main patrons of libraries throughout the millennia, took resort to unethical and unfair techniques to control the mindset of the people they ruled. The librarians could not select any manuscript for the library which contained even a hint of criticism of the king or went against the interest of the royal family. However, with the spread of literacy and increasing empowerment of common people, the issue of ethics began to be taken much more seriously in the

realm of librarianship. Consequently, codes of ethics were passed by professional library associations to guide the library professionals for discharging their duties morally and ethically. In the late 20th and early 21st century, with the advent of a whole range of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and an increasing awareness about the question of ethics, the issue of ethics is taking a centre stage in the discourse of librarianship.

Ethics of librarianship: an ongoing debate

The advent of new techniques and technologies for disseminating information to a global audience has brought about a sea change in the world of librarianship. The ease with which Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) could make information spread in every part of the globe made a tremendous impact on the collection, organization, processing and sharing of library resources. The open source software movement and initiatives like Google Books (that aims to digitize a major portion of world’s scholarly outputs) also had a bearing on the question of ethics of information because of the likelihood of copyright violation through these efforts (Herwig, 2019).’As a result, librarians and information professionals have found themselves engulfed in a dilemma in determining the right courses of action while dealing with ethical and moral issues.

Ethics in the information professions is generally concerned with the application of moral standards to the conduct of librarians and other individuals involved in information dissemination. It is a type of applied ethics concerned with clarifying the obligations and dilemmas of librarians and other information professionals who make decisions regarding the acquisition, processing, and dissemination of information to individuals, groups, and society at large (Du Mont 1991). Mukherji (1996) asserts, ‘librarianship as a vocation has evolved through the ages, allowing values to accrue to the principles observed in the long sojourn of human civilization. It has undergone certain metamorphism. The modern professional librarian displays in his principles of acquisition, organization, utilization and ultimate dissemination of knowledge.” The ethical concern of librarianship, as Du Mont explains, is rooted in the movement of social responsibility which started in the 1960s. She illustrates the following four-stage model of social responsibility continuum of the library and information professionals.

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Collection development and maintenance	+ Employees only	+ Information users	+ Society as a whole

Figure 1: Social responsibility continuum of information professionals

She contends that, the first stage encompasses responsibility for the library collection while the second stage adds responsibility for the employees. The third stage includes responsibility to library users who have made a conscious decision to use the library's information resources. The fourth stage expands responsibility furthest to the society in general and includes users and non-users alike. In order to discharge their professional responsibilities, which are closely intertwined with social responsibilities, librarians are driven by a whole range of compulsions and obligations. Singh and Mishra (2017) argue that, librarians have manifold ethical responsibilities towards a variety of stakeholders including themselves. In their view, librarians have the following responsibilities:

- Responsibility to the Readers
- Responsibility to the soul of book
- Responsibility to the Profession
- Responsibility to the Staff, and
- Responsibility to Him/herself

According to Fallis (2007), four different considerations motivate the librarians in deciding what course of action they should take when an ethical dilemma arises. They are either driven by a sense of duty, a sense of consequence (the action that is likely to have better consequence is preferred), respect for the rights of the users (such as the Library Bill of Rights of the American Library Association) or the question of virtue (e.g. the right thing to do is what a virtuous person would do in the same circumstances). Admittedly, whatever courses of action is taken, it may create new dilemmas since the question of right and wrong is not an easy one. One cannot solely rely on the legal aspects to resolve the dilemmas of 'proper' and 'improper' use of library materials. Undoubtedly, law governs the actions of individuals and organizations in most cases, but there are certain grey areas where one must turn to his/her conscience for guidance. In the course of discharging the duties of a librarian, one sometimes faces certain circumstances where moral questions take precedence over legal questions. Buchannan and Henderson (2008) contend, 'ethics and law are not always in sync: law provides a structured context to which individuals look for a reasonable solution. Law does not prescribe behavior for the purpose of morality, *per se*, but for the purpose of fulfilling a societal requirement... ethics and ethical decision-making is grounded in morality and law and ethics must find a comfortable and balanced-place (p. 74).' The issue of ethics of librarianship is further confounded by the ongoing debate on copyright violation and censorship. Recently, the question of "fair use" has started another debate in the library arena, especially in the West. Association of Research Libraries (ARL) defines 'fair use' as the right to use copyrighted material without permission or payment under some circumstances,

especially when the cultural or social benefits of the use are predominant (2012, p. 1).’ However, sometimes it becomes difficult to determine what kind of use of information can be considered ‘fair’, because most of the times it requires a court of law to evaluate the facts, law, social norms as well as the circumstances under which the use was made. It is often contended that academic and research use of information is done with no profit in mind, therefore, it can be termed as ‘fair use’. This notion, seemingly quite logical, is not legally tenable because ‘no group of institutions, no matter how important their cultural function, is immune from the operation of copyright law (ARL 2012).’ Then how can we ascertain fair use of information? Usually, four separate factors are considered before determining whether the use of a particular item could be regarded as “fair”, which are:

- the purpose and character of the use (preferring non-commercial use over commercial use and uses which “transform” or add value to copyrighted work over uses that simply replicate the copyrighted works);
- the content of the copyrighted works (protecting work that contains creative expressions over works that contain facts and ideas);
- the amount of the proposed use (preferring less use over more use); and
- the effect of the use on the market value for the work (preferring uses which do not substitute for buying the copyrighted work in today’s market but is also sometimes applied in tomorrow’s market (Pressman, 2009, p. 90).”

The development of institutional repositories (IRs) in universities and research organizations has added a new dimension to the ethics debate as, while unfolding new opportunities for sharing one’s intellectual outputs with the wider cross-sections of scholarly communities, it also creates some concerns regarding copyright violation. Senapati and Singh (2012) explain, ‘if the published papers are downloaded from the journal site in PDF format and the same are uploaded to IR then it will be infringement of the copyright law. To avoid this legal matter, authors are uploading their papers in IRs in the form of the copy of pre-print and name them as the author’s version (p. 67).’ It remains to be seen whether this technique followed by the authors for bypassing copyright law will also be claimed by the publishers as infringement of intellectual property rights (IPR).

Ethical dilemma and librarians: a need for new interpretations

The 21st century has brought about a plethora of changes in the social and cultural fabric of the societies. The traditional values and beliefs have been shaken to their core by ideas and notions emanating from other cultures and societies. What was considered ‘unfair’ or ‘unjust’ only a few decades ago, is viewed not only as ‘fair’, but has become the norm in some cases. The mindsets of people have been impacted

by the effects of globalization, aided by the spread of literacy, improvement of economic status and other societal changes. The librarians, as custodians of intellectual and cultural artifacts as well as mentors of intellectual activities, play an instrumental role in shaping people's attitudes towards how they view and use information. Librarians act as intermediaries between authors, publishers, aggregators, distributors, vendors and users and they constantly need strike a balance between the demands of the information seekers and the legal use of information materials within the purview of law (Reddy and Aswath, 2016). An overwhelmingly large portion of library users, especially in developing countries like Bangladesh, tend to have a rather relaxed attitude towards the issue of intellectual property rights. Many of them feel that they have an unalienable right to use information in whatever way they deem appropriate. The passing of Right to Information (RTI) Act across the globe (presently, over 100 countries have RTI acts (Mendel 2014)) has raised critical consciousness among the common people about the necessity of information. Energized by a new-found awareness on the importance of information and equipped with the RTI Act, people are striving to get access to information from a variety of sources – both public and private. Flagrant violation of IPR in many developing countries and the lax implementation of laws have made it difficult for librarians to guide the users in proper and lawful use of information. Consequently, upholding of ethical practices is becoming more and more challenging. In 1997, American Library Association adopted a code of ethics for the librarians, which was amended in 2008. The essence of the codes are:

- i. provision of highest level of service to all library users;
- ii. upholding the principles of intellectual freedom;
- iii. protection of library users' right to privacy and confidentiality;
- iv. respect for IPR and maintaining a balance between the interests of information users and rights holders;
- v. treating co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness and good faith;
- vi. not advancing private interests at the expense of library users, colleagues or the employing institutions;
- vii. distinguishing between personal convictions and professional duties; and
- viii. striving for excellence in the profession (American Library Association, 2008).

Today, many other library associations have drafted ethical codes of librarianship. A majority of the codes are formulated on a national level. Some codes are aimed at particular types of libraries while some are more general in nature. Besides, there are documents that are not explicitly defined as 'ethical codes', but resembles such codes both in structure and content (Hansson, 2016). Unfortunately, library associations of Bangladesh are yet to ratify any such codes, which would have given the library

professionals some guiding principles for discharging their duties. A close review of the ALA codes reveals that, they are universal in nature and can be applied in any country irrespective of its economic condition or library and information infrastructure. Promotion of intellectual freedom and IPR, provision of highest level of services to all users irrespective of caste, creed or gender, putting public interest ahead of private interest are ethical principles that emanate from our fundamental understandings of moral behaviour. Therefore, these codes could act as a common ground on which more elaborate and specific ethical principles could be drawn.

The 21st century is characterized not only by unprecedented proliferation of technologies, but also by a sense of uncertainty regarding various moral issues. The use of information for meeting one's personal and professional needs seems to be a straight-forward affair on the surface, but if we look closely, we will find that this, also, may create some ethical dilemma, for instance -

- Receiving information should be considered an unalienable right for human beings, but is every citizen entitled to all information?
- Receiving information free of cost is a democratic right but what about compensating the people who create information?
- People should be able to make independent decisions regarding what information they will use, but does every person have that ability? And, if a knowledgeable person (such as a librarian) helps them make such decisions, will it be treated as undue influence?
- We should be governed by ethical and moral considerations at all times but when 'ethics' and 'law' appear to be in conflict, what courses of action should be taken?

These are some of the questions which need to be resolved in order to guide the librarians and information professionals on various moral issues.

Ethics of librarianship: emerging issues

Gamble (2003), Shachaf (2005), Yaya and Adeeko (2015) and Munigal (2018) have explored the question of ethics in librarianship extensively. They have addressed wide ranging issues from censorship to intellectual freedom, privacy to right to information; the issues that challenge our perceptions of 'right' and 'wrong', 'fair' and 'unfair'. Many of these are subjective in nature, i.e. what counts as 'confidential' to someone may be viewed by someone else as 'open' or 'not confidential'. The question of censorship also has many connotations. As a result, these issues defy generalization and may need to be examined on a case-by-case basis. A few dilemmas regarding these issues can be summarized as follows:

- *The true meaning of censorship:* Censorship does not only mean suppression of free thinking enforced or imposed by the state. Librarians frequently practice self-censorship in order to protect their users from the harmful effects of misinformation and disinformation. Therefore, what might be called censorship at times is nothing more than the considered judgment of an expert that the person in question does not have the background knowledge required to interpret the raw data as information (Wengert, 2001).
- *The applicability of equality and equity:* The question of equality is a contentious one and many prefer equity over equality. Equity is giving everyone what they need to be successful while equality is treating everyone the same. Equality aims to promote fairness, but it can only work if everyone starts from the same place and needs the same help. Equity appears unfair, but it actively moves everyone closer to success by “leveling the playing field (Tochluk, 2018). However, in the perspective of a public library, equality is the more preferred term since it offers the same services to people irrespective of their gender, religion, caste or creed, although people with disability definitely require individualized and special services.
- *A middle ground on the question of privacy and confidentiality:* Democratic and undemocratic alike, governments all around the world have an increasing propensity to monitor the activities of the citizens and consequently, privacy and confidentiality have become a hotly debated issue. How much privacy an individual should enjoy so that it does not pose any threat to the greater good of the society? An answer to this question may be found in a document published by the Council of America Library Association which, while recognizing that library policies must not violate federal, state and local laws, also stated that librarians should oppose the adoption of laws that abridge the privacy right of any library user (cited in Gamble, 2003).
- *Effective use of RTI for assisting information seekers:* Bangladesh is one of more than 100 countries who have passed the RTI Act. Since most of these countries ratified the Act in the latter half of the 20th century, librarians and information professionals as well as the people who seek information are not fully aware of the boundaries and implications of these Acts. Therefore, librarians are compelled to engage in more active dialogue and introspection regarding the effective use of RTI Act for helping people realize their right to information.
- *Librarians as mentors in the digital world:* With the spread of technology, when answer to every question seemed to be a just a mouse-click away, people started asking whether libraries and librarians are any longer pertinent to the society. However, as time passed, the inherent problems of digital information

system, e.g. disorientation, navigation inefficiency and cognitive overload (Danner, 1998) were surfaced and the role of librarians as stewards and educators in the digital world is now firmly recognized. The librarians are teaching end-users the techniques of effective database selection and searching and the verification of online sources (Diamond and Dragich, 2001). However, with the unprecedented explosion of information on the web, it has become challenging even for highly skilled and experienced librarians to effectively guide the users in information retrieval and evaluation.

- *Intellectual freedom vs. intellectual property rights*: Intellectual freedom is “the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. It provides for free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, cause or movement may be explored (ALA 2014).” Examining the ethical basis of intellectual freedom has become a useful and practical endeavour for the librarians (Oltman, 2016). One of the core values of librarianship is to ensure the right of the users to seek information, but stringent copyright laws and commercialization of information are creating an ‘information gap’ between the privileged and less privileged.

As a catalyst of the information age, librarians cannot ignore the question of ethics and morality. They must be engaged in debates and discussions to resolve the issues of ethical dilemma. In this complex world where massive proliferation of digital information has left common people confused and clueless as to what information to use for what purposes, librarians need to play the role of mentors and educators. In this fast-paced world, the question of morality and ethics has become more important than ever and librarians need to exercise introspection in order to make sure that they do what is just and ethical. Du Mont maintains, ‘ethical behavior in librarianship does not mean that one should take no action, that is, avoid certain actions or books or ideas in an effort to keep out of trouble. On the contrary, the notion of ethics suggests that librarians take actions that are socially just. Only by actively pursuing social aims can librarians be ethically responsive (1991, p. 214).’

Concluding remarks

Librarians, like other professionals, continue to grapple with questions of ethics and morality in a world characterized by technological advancement, rise of individualism and reshaping of traditional values. In the face of over abundance of and easy access to information, they have re-aligned their roles and responsibilities from that of custodians to educators. Now, they are compelled to deal with the issues of ethics which, once again, promises to bring fundamental changes to the profession. Their readiness and commitment to effectively address these issues will not only help them face the challenges of the 21st century, but will also play an

instrumental role in consolidating their place in the society as stewards and mentors of an increasingly digital world.

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