

MODULE 8

Lecture 2 Professional Codes of Ethics

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In this week's first lecture I described some of the basic rules that information professionals follow when answering users' questions. I also suggested that these rules should guide information professionals' responses when faced with an ethical dilemma. These rules weren't based on my personal beliefs (although I do believe in them!), but come directly from the American Library Association's Code of Ethics.

Originally adopted in 1939, the current ALA Code of Ethics was most recently updated in 2008. It's a fairly straightforward document addressing eight key areas of professional practice. The ALA's Code of Ethics begins with a general statement about the significance of ethical behavior within the information profession:

We significantly influence or control the selection, organization, preservation, and dissemination of information. In a political system grounded in an informed citizenry, we are members of a profession explicitly committed to intellectual freedom and the freedom of access to information. We have a special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas to present and future generations.

The code then lists a series of principles that should guide professional behavior:

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 co-workers 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.

The ALA has also developed several important policy documents that further explicate professional values. The document of most relevance when it comes to working with information communities is the Freedom To Read Statement. Originally written in the 1950s in response to attempts to censor “subversive” library materials, this document establishes the profession’s stance on intellectual freedom as a constitutional right:

1. It is in the public interest for publishers and librarians to make available the widest diversity of views and expressions, including those which are unorthodox or unpopular with the majority.

2. Publishers, librarians, and booksellers do not need to endorse every idea or presentation contained in the books they make available. It would conflict with the public interest for them to establish their own political, moral, or aesthetic views as a standard for determining what books should be published or circulated.

3. It is contrary to the public interest for publishers or librarians to determine the acceptability of a book on the basis of the personal history or political affiliations of the author.
4. There is no place in our society for efforts to coerce the taste of others, to confine adults to the reading matter deemed suitable for adolescents, or to inhibit the efforts of writers to achieve artistic expression.
5. It is not in the public interest to force a reader to accept with any book the prejudgment of a label characterizing the book or the author as subversive or dangerous.
6. It is the responsibility of publishers and librarians, as guardians of the people's freedom to read, to contest encroachments upon that freedom by individuals or groups seeking to impose their own standards or tastes upon the community at large.
7. It is the responsibility of publishers and librarians to give full meaning to the freedom to read by providing books that enrich the quality and diversity of thought and expression. By the exercise of this affirmative responsibility, they can demonstrate that the answer to a "bad" book is a good one, the answer to a "bad" idea is a good one.

A final ALA document that informs professional practice is the ALA's Library Bill of Rights which was first issued in 1939 and last updated in 1996. The Library Bill of Rights "affirms that all libraries are forums for information and ideas, and that the following basic policies should guide their services:"

- I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

II. 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.

III. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.

IV. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.

V. A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.

VI. Libraries which make exhibit spaces and meeting rooms available to the public they serve should make such facilities available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use.

Additional Professional Codes

Up to this point I've emphasized the ALA's policy statements because the ALA serves as an umbrella organization for the many specializations that constitute the information professions in the US. As such, the ALA's principles express fundamental values that are accepted by most LIS professional communities, regardless of the community's particular focus or clientele. However, ALA's policy statements do have a library-centric bias. As a result, other LIS professional communities have developed their own ethical standards to better reflect the materials and communities that they serve.

The Association of College and Research Libraries' Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) provides a good example. Although officially part of the ALA, the RBMS felt the need to develop an ethics code for special collections librarians to supplement the code offered by ALA. As the RBMS explains in its code's preamble, "Special collections librarians share fundamental values with the entire library profession. They should be thoroughly familiar with the ALA Code of Ethics and must adhere to the principles of fairness, freedom, professional excellence, and respect for individual rights expressed therein." But

because special collections departments often contain unique and valuable materials, the librarians working there “must exercise extreme caution in situations that have the potential to allow them to profit personally from library-related activities.” The RBMS code thus focuses on the potential for special collections librarians to use their position for personal or monetary gain:

- Special collections librarians must not compete with their library in collecting or in any other activity.
- All outside employment and professional activities must be undertaken within the fundamental premise that the special collections librarian's first responsibility is to the library, that the activity will not interfere with the librarian's ability to discharge this responsibility, and that it will not compromise the library's professional integrity or reputation.
- Special collections librarians must not engage in any dealing or appraisal of special collections materials, and they must not recommend materials for purchase if they have any undisclosed financial interest in them.
- Special collections librarians must decline all gifts, loans, or other dispensations, or things of value that are available to them in connection with their duties for the library.
- Special collections librarians may not withhold information about the library's holdings or sequester collection materials in order to further their own research and publication.
- Special collections librarians are responsible for protecting the confidentiality of researchers and materials as required by legal statutes, donor agreements, or policies of the library.

In contrast, ARMA International (the professional association for records and information managers) divides its “Code of Professional Responsibility” into two broad areas: social principles and professional principles. The code’s social principles cover the profession’s responsibility to society:

- Support the creation, maintenance, and use of authentic, reliable, usable information and support the development and use of information systems that place a high priority on accuracy and integrity, which requires that records be complete and unaltered (ISO 15489-1 Records Management).
- Affirm the legal, ethical, and moral use of information.
- Affirm that the collection, maintenance, distribution, and use of information about individuals is a privilege in trust: the right to privacy of all individuals must be both promoted and upheld.

- Support the free flow of publicly available information as a necessary condition for an informed and educated society.

ARMA's professional principles deal with the records manager's responsibility to his or her employer, clients, and the profession. Its emphasis is on ethical business practices:

- Strive to serve the client or employer at the highest level of their professional competence.
- Recognize illegal or unethical RIM-related actions and inform the client or employer of possible adverse consequences.
- Avoid conflict of interest or improper gain at the expense of clients, employers, or co-workers.
- Maintain the confidentiality of privileged information.
- Recognize the need for careful action to assure appropriate access to information without violation of the intellectual property rights of the owners of that information.
- Pursue an appropriate program of ongoing education for the professional practice, which may include certification.
- Accurately represent their education, competencies, certifications, and experience to superiors, clients, co-workers and colleagues in the profession.
- Enrich the profession by endorsing the sharing of knowledge, experience, and research; encourage public discussion of the profession's values, services, and competencies.
- Are actively committed to recruiting individuals to the profession on the basis of competence and educational qualifications without discrimination.
- Embrace and practice an attitude of cooperation and mutual respect for the contributions of other RIM professionals and attempt to create an atmosphere in the best interests of clients or employers.

The American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) provides another example of the differences among LIS professional communities. Emphasizing the law librarian's important role in making possible an informed citizenry, the AALL's code separates ethical practice into three distinct areas:

Service

- We promote open and effective access to legal and related information. Further we recognize the need to establish methods of preserving, maintaining and retrieving legal information in many different forms.

- We uphold a duty to our clientele to develop service policies that respect confidentiality and privacy.
- We provide zealous service using the most appropriate resources and implementing programs consistent with our institution's mission and goals.
- We acknowledge the limits on service imposed by our institutions and by the duty to avoid the unauthorized practice of law.

Business Relationships

- We promote fair and ethical trade practices.
- We have a duty to avoid situations in which personal interests might be served or significant benefits gained at the expense of library users, colleagues, or our employing institutions.
- We strive to obtain the maximum value for our institution's fiscal resources, while at the same time making judicious, analytical and rational use of our institution's information resources.

Professional Responsibilities

- We relate to our colleagues with respect and in a spirit of cooperation.
- We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with the service we provide.
- We recognize and respect the rights of the owner and the user of intellectual property.
- We strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing our own knowledge and skills, by encouraging the professional development of co-workers, and by fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession.

As you can see from these examples, there are different information communities within the LIS field, and each community has developed its own set of professional standards to guide its members' work. These standards are usually fairly general in nature and don't provide hard and fast rules. What makes ethical practice even more complicated is the fact in certain situations these standards can conflict with each other. Take, for example, that doctoral student I mentioned in lecture 1 whom I thought might not have written her dissertation. What if she had been doing her research in a records center? Which of these ARMA ethical standards would take priority?

- Maintain the confidentiality of privileged information.
- Affirm the legal, ethical, and moral use of information.
- Recognize illegal or unethical RIM-related actions and inform the client or employer of possible adverse consequences.

It's a hard choice with no easy answer.

A final point I'd like to make in this discussion of information ethics is the fact that although LIS professional communities can differ somewhat in their ethical priorities and applications, they do have certain values in common. If you compare different LIS ethical codes, you can see that these principles are universal:

- Promote open and effective access
- Provide the highest level of service
- Respect privacy and confidentiality
- Recognize intellectual property rights (i.e., copyright)
- Do not use professional position for personal gain
- Observe and maintain professional standards

Conclusion

I've tried in these lectures to explore some of the challenges of working with information communities and the importance of following established ethical principles when helping individuals with their information needs. I've also introduced you some of the major codes of ethics that guide professional practice. However, I haven't spent much time on the other factor that affects information professionals' ability to help people access information—the American legal system. I'll be devoting next week's lectures to the legal foundations of ethical information practice.

Sources

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