



Ethical Values for Library Professionals

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ABSTRACT

Ethics has been gaining attention of academicians and researchers around the globe. Ethics has its application in all fields and library and information professionals are required to abide by ethics as well. These professions are required to perform their duties in an ethical manner for the well being of all those who are directly and indirectly associated with them. In fact, many organisations of Library and Information professionals have adopted codes of professional ethics. Such codes of professional ethics provide library and information professionals with guiding principles and norms to face ethical dilemmas or obtaining solutions to various problems. Ethics of library professionals includes: fairness, truthfulness, transparency, accountability and responsibility of these professions towards themselves, users, organisation/institution, peers and society as well. Ethical behaviour increases the images of these professionals along with the organisation/institution. Various codes have been formulated in different countries and their successful implementation is the need of the hour. The aim of this paper is to explore the various ethical values to be followed by the library and information professionals.

KEYWORDS : Ethics, Library Professionals, Code of Ethics, Responsibilities

INTRODUCTION

The word 'ethics' is derived from the Greek word, 'ethikos' meaning custom or character. The Webster dictionary defines ethics as, 'the discipline dealing with what is good and bad or right and wrong or with moral duty and obligation'. Different authors and researchers have defined the term ethics differently. Marnburg, 2000, defines ethics as 'theories about what is right and wrong'. Other researchers however defined it as 'critical examination of the standards of good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice' (Banerjee, 2005); 'field of moral philosophy (Boatright, 2009) and 'conception of right and wrong behaviour and defining when actions are moral and when they are immoral' (Fernando, 2009).

Ethics has been gaining attention of academicians and researchers around the globe. Since ethics has application in all fields and thus, library professionals are also required to abide by ethics as well. The library professions are required to perform their duties in an ethical manner. For this, even many organisations of Library and Information professionals have adopted codes of professional ethics. Such codes of professional ethics provide library and information professionals with guiding principles and norms to face ethical dilemmas or obtaining solutions to various problems.

Ethical and professional codes are not meant to replace law or morality but to serve as guidelines for professional conduct. According to Finks (1991), professional ethical codes should define the limits of acceptable conduct and give guidance to what kind of actions are regarded as right or wrong in the occupation. The American Library Association Code of Ethics provides broad statements that guide ethical decision making and serve as framework for the profession.

The extant literature on ethics in library and information science focused primarily on its history and evolution (Carbo and Almagno, 2001), reviews of codes and procedures (Koebler, 2003; Iacovino, 2002; Finks, 1991), or its interpretation and implementation (ALA, 2001; Weingand, 2001; Wengert, 2001). The target audience was librarians and information specialists who had entered the profession. The purpose of this study was to examine the ethical perspectives of library and information science professionals prior to their entry into the profession. Of particular interest was to ascertain differences in responses to an ethical scenario prior to and after reading a professional code of ethics.

According to Carbo and Almagno (2001), librarians, archivists, and other information professionals must learn to understand the possible and real consequences of their actions, reflect on the alternative choices they may make, and determine how best to use their power and act responsibly. It is evident that the professional ethics and principles of an organization may often conflict with societal and personal ethics. In fact, professional ethics and principles often have internal conflicts. These conflicts are interwoven into the professional responsibilities of information science professionals. However, when librari-

ans, archivists, and other information professionals decide to become members of the information science profession, they agree to follow its ethical codes and principles.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To highlight the need and significance of ethics among library professionals.
- To explore the ethical values for library professionals.
- To discuss the ethical responsibilities of library professionals.
- To provide insights for the empirical research for examining the extent of ethical values are being followed by library professionals.

ETHICAL VALUES

Regardless of societal or individual ethics, professional environments dictate adherence to professional codes of ethics. Some of the ethical values under ALA code are as under:-

- **Highest level of service to all users:** The Library and information professions should provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organised resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests.
- **Privacy and confidentiality:** They should protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted.
- **Respecting fellow library workers:** They should 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 their institutions.
- **Non-advancement of private interests:** They should not advance private interests at the expense of library users, colleagues, or our employing institutions.
- **Distinguishing between personal convictions and professional duties:** They should distinguish between their personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow their personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of their institutions or the provision of access to their information resources.
- **Excellence in the profession:** They should strive for excellence in their profession by maintaining and enhancing their own knowledge and skills, by encouraging the professional development of co-workers, and by fostering the aspirations of potential members of their profession.

Ethical Values in Other Codes

- Library professional should establish right concept of the occupation and carry out social responsibilities.

- They should meet the needs of the time and have the sense of innovation.
- They should provide the best services to readers with enthusiasm.
- They should protect the readers' rights and respect their individual privacy.
- They should respect the intellectual property and promote the access to information.
- They should take care of the library collections and follow the working standards.
- They should work hard and improve the professional skills.
- They should carry forward the team spirit and show the professional image.
- They should enhance the inter-library cooperation and resources sharing.
- They should promote the social collaborations and build the civilization of the society.

ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Librarians all over the world are well aware of their profession's ethical implications. In more than 60 countries library associations have developed and approved a national code of ethics for librarians and information professionals. They have various responsibilities which are explained as under:

- **Personal responsibilities:** People who work in the library and information profession have personal responsibilities which go beyond those immediately implied by their contract with their employers or clients. Members should strive to attain and continue to develop the highest personal standard of professional knowledge and competence as well keeping abreast of developments in their areas of expertise. Moreover, they should refrain from any behaviour in the course of their work which might bring the information profession into disrepute.
- **Responsibilities to information and its users:** The behaviour of professionals who work with information should be guided by a regard for the interests and needs of information users. People working in the information profession also need to be conscious that they have responsibility for a growing heritage of information and data, irrespective of format. They should ensure that information users are aware of the scope and remit of the service being provided along with making the process of providing information as clear and open as possible. Moreover, they should avoid inappropriate bias or value judgments in the provision of services and protect the confidentiality of all matters relating to information users, including their enquiries. They should deal fairly with the competing needs of information users or any complaints from information users, and keep them informed about progress in the handling of their complaints. They should ensure that the materials to which they provide access are those which are most appropriate to the needs of legitimate users of the service and respect the integrity of information sources, and cite sources used, as appropriate.
- **Responsibilities to colleagues and the information community:** The personal conduct of information professionals at work should promote the profession in the best possible manner at all times. Members should act in ways that promote the profession positively, both to their colleagues and to the public at large. They

should afford respect and understanding to other colleagues, including those in other professions and acknowledge their ideas, contributions and work, wherever and whenever appropriate. In addition, they should refer to colleagues in a professional manner and should not criticise their work unreasonably or inappropriately. They should encourage colleagues to maintain and enhance their professional knowledge and competence.

- **Responsibilities to society:** One of the distinguishing features of professions is that their knowledge and skills are at the service of society at large, and do not simply serve the interests of the immediate customer. Members should consider the public good, both in general and as it refers to particular vulnerable groups, as well as the immediate claims arising from their employment and their professional duties. They should promote equitable access for all members of society to public domain information of all kinds and in all formats. Further they should strive to achieve an appropriate balance within the law between demands from information users, the need to respect confidentiality, the terms of their employment and the public good.

- **Responsibilities as employees:** Members who are employed have duties that go beyond the immediate terms of their employment contract. On occasion these may conflict with the immediate demands of their employer but be in the broader interest of the public and possibly the employer themselves. They should develop a knowledge and understanding of the organisation in which they work and use their skills and expertise to promote the legitimate aims and objectives of their employer. Further to avoid engaging in unethical practices during their work and bring to the attention of their employer any concerns they may have concerning the ethics or legality of specific decisions, actions or behaviour at work.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Ethics of library and information professionals includes: fairness, truthfulness, transparency, accountability and responsibility of these professions towards themselves, users, organisation/institution, peers and society as well. Ethical behaviour increases the images of these professionals along with the organisation/institution. Various codes have been formulated in different countries and their successful implementation is the need of the hour. The present paper is however, conceptual but shall be highly beneficial to researchers for new insights for research in Library and Information Sciences. An empirical study can be conducted in future to find out the extent to which these ethical virtues are being followed by these professionals.

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