Codes of Ethics in Library Spaces: In Writing and Practice

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Libraries have changed exponentially since their inception; however, many core principles in library-related spaces have remained the same. The first major attempt at developing a library code of ethics was authored by Mary Plummer in 1909, and the American Library Association's *Code of Ethics* was itself officially adopted in 1939 (Francis 2021). Numerous ethical codes for library-related organizations have been developed following this, many of which address engage with similar principles and ethical norms. The verbiage of library-related codes of ethics provides librarians with a significant frame of reference regarding the priorities of their organizations and offers overarching guidelines for how to navigate the interests of libraries in various professional scenarios.

Many library-associated codes of ethics contain similar fundamental principles, though scholars have noted significant variance across organizations. Koehler and Pemberton (2000) divide ethical codes and standards into two foci: aspirational, which offer moral guidance for professionals, and obligatory, which define specific behaviors for them to implement. While they do distinguish between the two approaches, Koehler and Pemberton acknowledge that both types offer their own manner of protection for information professionals. Similarly, the authors argue that code of ethics provisions can either be considered "high-road" or "low-road" with regard to norms and language, high road provisions being the more abstract and the low more compulsory in nature (Koeher & Pemberton, 2000, p. 35). Low-road provisions are established as more specific, legalistic even, generally offering a list of what not to do for professionals. High-road provisions, conversely, offer principles and practices for information professionals to aspire to. Utilizing these divisions among code of ethics and provisions, it is much easier to dissect the language and values established in library codes of ethic.

Beyond the manner in which ethical codes prescribe practices or ideals for information professionals, their specific verbiage is critically indicative of the overarching values of organizations and the professionals associated with them. For their article, Koehler and Pemberton (2000) deconstructed 37 library codes of ethics, outlining six major elements or basic provisions that generally comprise the fabric of these codes: "(1) concern with the rights and privileges of patrons or clients, (2) selection issues, (3) access issues, (4) professional practices and relationships, (5) responsibilities to employers, and (6) social and legal responsibilities" (p. 33). Koehler and Pemberton (2000) note that these elements closely align with Rubin and Froehlich's (1996) nine "major areas of concern:" privacy, selection and censorship, reference, intellectual property rights, administration, access, technology, loyalties, and social issues. Consequently, these principles can be used as a guiding lens to observe the tableau of ethical priorities held by library-related organizations.

Pnina Shachaf further developed the discussion of ethical codes in their (2005) article: *A Global Perspective on Library Association Codes of Ethics.* Shachaf discussed some of the existing literature surrounding codes of ethics, including both Rubin and Froehlich's (1996) and Koehler and Pemberton's (2000) articles, among a handful of others. Here they argued the need for further research internationally, rather than continuing to prioritize English-speaking countries and "the Judeo-Christian approach to ethics" (p. 5). The study carried out by Shachaf utilized codes of ethics from 28 different countries written or translated into English by IFLA's Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression Committee, as well as the original translations from the sponsoring organizations themselves. 42% of codes observed by Shachaf outlined values in the introductions to their codes, with the four main values expressed being "free and equal access to information (21% of all codes sampled), intellectual freedom (28%),

free and uncensored flow of information to present and future generations (21%), and personal integrity and competence (7%)" (2005, p. 12). They also noted that the longer codes tended to be more restrictive. While Shachaf's research took a more thorough approach to dissecting ethical codes in library spaces and the socio-cultural contexts in which they were developed, they did find that the two most frequently asserted principles were "free and equal access to information and responsibilities toward the profession" (2005, p. 19). This indicates an ethical concern for both librarians themselves as well as the broader profession itself.

A recent example, the *Cataloguing Code of Ethics* (2021) was created in response to continued concerns from cataloguers about the failure of other major ethical codes in the ILS field to address issues that regularly impact their work. Chan et. al. (2022), who were the leads on the committee tasked with authoring the code, cited that "while other library codes of ethics "certainly [do] not [exclude] cataloging… there are ethical issues that catalogers encounter in their work which are not explicitly covered in general codes of ethics and that need to be emphasized and discussed" (pp. 2-3). The code was developed with the aid of 74 volunteers across the field, many of whom originated from countries with significant colonial histories. The committee members did acknowledge calls from members of the community regarding an Anglo-American bias present in the code, citing hopes that wider dissemination of it would result in revisions over time that may reflect a wider international perspective (Chan et. al., 2022). The committee's article also argued for cataloguing professionals to further develop "soft skills" and "advocacy skills" beyond the scope of the code itself in order to challenge established norms and creating future opportunities. While the *Cataloguing Code of Ethics* does address issues unique to its associated profession, it notably cites numerous ethical concerns still in line with the values highlighted by Koehler and Pemberton (2000), Rubin and Froehlich (1996), and Shachaf (2005).

Thus, it affords further strength to assertions regarding the consistency of specific values across the ILS professions, while acknowledging that differing roles in the field have differing needs.

As some of the primary issues addressed across library codes of ethics, intellectual freedom and access to information have been contentious topics within existing library ethics research. Notably, many of the scholars concerned with privacy as it relates to library ethics refer back to the very ethical codes they deconstruct within their research to support their assertions. Amanda Echterling's (2019) article, *Ethical Dilemmas in Collection Development of Open Access Electronic Resources*, discusses the development of funds to support publication across open access journals that feature significant fees and unclear requirements, as well as the presence of xenophobic materials across some of these open access collections. Echterling (2019) makes numerous reference to ALA's *Code of Ethics* and the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services' *Statements on Principles and Standards of Acquisition Practice* in order to navigate ethical concerns regarding the paradoxical exclusivity of certain open access initiatives.

Privacy is also among the most consistently cited values among library-related codes of ethics and is a constant point of contention across literature pertinent to library ethics. In a study conducted by Mary Francis (2021), 68 of the 70 codes of ethics observed mentioned privacy, specifically with regard to library users, patrons, or clientele, but there is no defined consensus asserting the scope or implications of what constitutes "privacy" across them. Francis cites the ALA's statement *Privacy: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights* (2019), supplementing ALA's *Library Bill of Rights* (2019) and *Library Code of Ethics* (2021), in support of their assertion that adopting a shared understanding of "privacy" in library spaces will better safeguard the rights of library users. Zoë Abbie Teel (2023) makes similar assertions regarding

the responsibility of librarians to defend user privacy and fight censorship, specifically with regard to collections development: "This idea of privacy is applicable to collection development because privacy is closely linked to intellectual freedom and the freedom to access information without fear of surveillance or judgment" (p. 12). Teel, like Francis, also acknowledged the subjectivity of privacy's current definition, using ALA resources to develop and further strengthen their argument. Both authors utilize the frameworks established across ethical codes and statements to reconcile the perceived need for standardization.

Various idealized responses to privacy concerns in library spaces have been argued. One such response, which again refers to ALA's statement on privacy, is David Irvin's (2021) "black box library:" an "intellectual autonomous zone" where individuals can perform research "where no intrusion is reasonably possible," user information is safeguarded by security standards comparable to classified documents, and minimal "digital exhaust" in the form of commercial commodity escapes (p. 36). Irvin discusses the issue of privacy in depth, including various resources that have been developed to aid digital users with protecting their data such as Ex Libris, while arguing that the presumption of privacy is vital to intellectual and academic progress.

There is also significant concern at present regarding the ethics of implementing artificial intelligence systems into library-related spaces, which has resulted in calls for direct ethical framework. Mannheimer et. al. (2024) surveyed the various perspectives present among the literature in order to assess areas where discussion of AI systems was most prevalent and discussed ways to responsibly implement AI practices into archival spaces. They found an overwhelming majority (67 of 89) of the discussion on AI implementation occurred in academic libraries over any other iteration of library space they observed, covering everything from the

ethics of implementation to methods of training systems on certain types of datasets and so on (Mannheimer et. al. 2024, p.8). The authors' discussion of implementing AI systems into archival spaces specifically centers heavily on the necessity of human intervention to mediate access to and use of collections by AI systems, citing the inability of systems to exercise moral judgement in particular, and the implications of using AI systems to generate metadata. Mannheimer et. al. (2024) also note the complete absence of "concrete policies or guidelines that were consistently followed in the literature" (p. 21). The incredibly sudden and exponential growth of AI implementation across society has certainly left many ILS professionals questioning the ethical implications of it and will likely result in continued debate long after standardized ethical practices are established.

The interdisciplinary implementation of ethical codes between libraries and other fields also offers ample room for exploring values traditionally expressed in library codes of ethics in different ways and for considering values beyond convention. Byrd & Winkelstein (2014) discuss prevalent principles and norms in the codes of ethics for health sciences librarianship, medical informatics, and other health professions, citing the significant influence of Beauchamp and Childress' *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (2013) on the codes they analyzed. Among the 8 codes discussed by Byrd & Winkelstein (2014), almost every (88) statement across the codes specify at least one of the four moral principles outlined by Beauchamp and Childress' "Principlism" framework.

> "Autonomy: the norms of respecting and supporting individual autonomous decisions… Beneficence: the norms that prioritize relieving, lessening, or preventing harm… Non-Maleficence: the norms of avoiding actions that would cause harm to others… Justice: the norms that support the fair distribution of benefits" (p. 248).

The conversation of biomedical ethics and library ethics developed across Byrd and Winkelstein's study shows crucial similarities in the motivation behind various ethical statements, while also affording perspective largely absent from the typical narrative of library ethics. The ALA *Code of Ethics*' presence is instrumental in firmly grounding the study in the realm of library ethics, while simultaneously being reframed for readers by Beauchamp and Childress' framework. This challenges the perspective of the ethical norms established by ALA's code, offering a fresh view of how librarians could engage with their patrons and profession.

Codes of ethics in library spaces offer significant frameworks for librarians to engage with both users and the profession itself. By deconstructing the values and intentions discussed across various library-related codes of ethics, one is able to better conceptualize the stance of organizations across the ILS field. Further deconstructing various dilemmas using these codes and putting them into conversation with that of other associated fields offers critical insight and a renewed understanding of what it means for librarianship to be ethical.

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