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# Ethics in Librarianship: A Management Model

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## ABSTRACT

A MANAGEMENT MODEL of ethical decision making in librarianship is presented. The model combines individual variables with situational variables and shows why policymakers and decision makers must exercise moral judgment in performing their duties. This article also examines the notion of social responsibility as an ethical issue.

## INTRODUCTION

The study of ethics in the information professions is a subset of the study of ethics in general. Thus, a definition of *ethics* may be helpful in clarifying this concept. There is no agreement on the exact definition of the term ethics. Some use it to refer to the art of determining what is right or good. It is also used in three different but related ways signifying: (1) a general pattern or "way of life," (2) a set of rules of conduct or "moral code," and (3) inquiry about ways of life and rules of conduct (Dwivedi, 1987, p. 22). As a concept, the purpose of ethics is to establish principles of behavior that help people make choices among alternative modes of action. Making such choices often involves ethical dilemmas, because these are marked by multiple and noncomparable dimensions. The dimensions are the results—both benefits and harms—that are going to affect the organization, the society, and the individual as a result of a decision or action (Hosmer, 1988, p. 10). In essence, *ethical behavior* is what is accepted as "good" and "right" as opposed to "bad" or "wrong"

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in the context of the governing moral code (Schermerhorn, 1989, p. 604).

The determination of what is right rather than what is wrong has been generally codified in the form of law, although not all situations have been, and can be, covered by any such codification. Laws are rationalized for the welfare of society; thus, any behavior considered ethical should also be legal in a just and fair society. This does *not* mean, however, that simply because an action is not illegal it is necessarily ethical. In other words, just living up to the "letter of the law" is not sufficient to guarantee that one's actions can be or should be considered ethical (Schermerhorn, 1989). The following examples of ethical questions can be considered in this context:

- Is it ethical to take longer than necessary to do a task?
- Is it ethical to do personal business on the employer's time?
- Is it ethical to call in sick to take a day off to catch up on chores at home?
- Is it ethical to fail to report rule violations by a co-worker?

None of these examples is illegal. But many individuals would consider one or more of them to be unethical.

The values held by an individual, group, or society are the basic components of an ethical system. Yet uncertainty is a fact of complex dynamic organizational life. The interests and values of another individual, group, or society and laws regarding both are unclear. Ethical standards, therefore, are not universally accepted, but rather they are the end product of discretionary decision-making behavior affecting the lives and well-being of others (Pearce & Robinson, 1989, pp. 148-49).

Ethics in the information professions is 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.

## EVOLUTION OF ETHICAL CONCERNS IN INFORMATION PROFESSIONS

Tracing the development of ethics as an area of concern for information professionals will help in identifying the factors that are responsible for and that influenced the evolution of ethical behavior. Although ethical issues in librarianship were of some concern prior to the 1960s (see Table 1), it was the rise of the social responsibility debate in the decade of the 1960s that caused ethical

concerns to become of major importance to librarians and other information professionals.

TABLE 1  
STAGES OF ETHICAL ORIENTATION

	<i>Stage 1</i>	<i>Stage 2</i>	<i>Stage 3</i>
Ethical attitudes	Traditional (before 1930s)	Stakeholders (1930 1950s) i.e., staff, patrons	Affirmative action (1960s-present)
Orientation	Institutional self-interest	Institutional interest, stakeholder interest	Enlightened self-interest, stakeholder interest, societal interest
Social values	Personal and user problems must be left at home	Employees have needs beyond economic needs and users have needs beyond information needs	Societal interest and participation is fundamental to our success
Political	No government involvement desired	Government support is a necessary evil	Government and information agencies must cooperate to deal with societal problems

The concept of social responsibility is fundamentally an ethical concept. It involves changing notions of how human needs should be met and emphasizes a concern with the social dimensions of information service that has to do with improving the quality of life. Social responsibility provides a way for the information profession to concern itself with the social dimensions of service and be aware of the social impact of that service.

Historically, librarians saw that their major responsibility was to the collection; caring for the materials within the library building was their primary concern (Du Mont, 1977, p. 24). Many modern information professionals now acknowledge that they are responsible to any individual or group (i.e., stakeholder) with an information need. These stakeholders can be any constituency in the library's environment—users, nonusers, employees, suppliers, government agencies, public interest groups, and host communities.

Table 2 illustrates a four-stage model of a social responsibility continuum. Stage one encompasses responsibility for the library

collection. Stage two adds responsibility for employees. Stage three includes responsibility to library users—those individuals who have made a conscious decision to use the library's information resources. Stage four expands responsibility furthest by proposing that information professionals are responsible to society in general and includes users and nonusers alike.

TABLE 2  
SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY CONTINUUM OF AN INFORMATION PROFESSIONAL

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

What information professionals do in terms of pursuing social goals depends on to what or to whom they believe they are responsible. A stage one information professional promotes collection development and maintenance. At stage two, information professionals accept responsibility for the employees in their organization and focus on human resource concerns. Because they will want to get, keep, and motivate good employees, they are concerned with appropriate education and training, improved working conditions, expanded employee rights, increased job security, and the like. A stage three professional expands goals to include high quality service, an excellent collection, good relations with the public, and the like. A stage four professional aligns with an active interpretation of social responsibility. At this stage, professionals see their responsibility to society as a whole. Their service is defined in terms of advancing the public good. The acceptance of such responsibility means that such information professionals actively promote social justice, support social and cultural goals, and take political positions even if such actions are perceived negatively by some.

Each stage carries with it an increasing level of discretion. As professionals move to the right along the continuum, they have to make more decisions based upon situational variables not of their own making. By the time professionals reach stage four, they are required to think about ethical dilemmas not necessarily solely within the context of their organizations but to decide what is right and what is wrong from a societal perspective. They may follow self-chosen ethical principles, upholding values and rights regardless of majority opinion (Trevino, 1986). Obviously, not all professionals perceive reaching stage four as an appropriate goal. Some stay in stage one, which emphasizes responsibility for collection maintenance

and development, or stage two, which emphasizes appropriate behavior for a librarian as a professional, or stage three, which emphasizes fulfilling the duties and obligations of a professional librarian through high quality service to users.

There never has been established any simple right-wrong dichotomy to help information professionals make decisions regarding their appropriate domain for ethically responsible action. The social responsibility movement of the 1960s did provide fuel for debate. The concept of intellectual freedom, called the profession's "central ethic," was used to frame issues as diverse as civil rights, the war in Vietnam, women's rights, and the war on poverty (Bundy & Stielow, 1987). On one side, there were those who were in stage four on the social responsibility continuum, defining intellectual freedom as a series of value judgments supporting a radically pluralistic egalitarian society. On the other side were those who viewed social responsibility from stages one and two of the continuum, defending intellectual freedom from a position of collective and individual neutrality (Peattie, 1987, pp. 43-57).

As the debate waned in the 1970s, it was obvious to many proponents and opponents of the social responsibility movement that there were several key issues in the debate that had not been, and perhaps cannot yet be, settled. One key issue concerns the operational definition of social responsibility. How shall a library's resources be allocated to help solve social problems? With what specific problems shall a given library concern itself? What priorities shall be established? What goals or standards of performance shall be established? What measures shall be employed to determine if a library is socially responsible or socially irresponsible?

In the past, the traditional library environment provided little or no information to the decision maker that was useful in answering the above questions. The concept of social responsibility itself provided no clear guidelines for ethical behavior. Given this lack of clarity, librarians who wanted to be socially responsible were left to follow their own devices or relied on some rather vague generalizations about social values and public expectations.

Another problem with the concept of social responsibility is that it has not always taken into account the environment in which the library functions. In the past, many advocates of social responsibility treated the library as an isolated entity that had the ability to engage in unilateral social action. Eventually, it came to be recognized that libraries are severely limited in their ability to respond adequately to social problems. There are physical, organizational, and attitudinal barriers that have to be overcome (Martin, 1989).

The last issue that remains unresolved in the debate about social

responsibility concerns the moral basis of the notion. The term *responsibility* is fundamentally a moral one that implies an obligation to someone or something. It is clear to most people that librarians have professional responsibilities to acquire, process, and disseminate information products and services efficiently to users of libraries. These responsibilities constitute the reason for the existence of libraries. But why do librarians have social responsibilities and to whom? What are the moral foundations for a concern with the social impact of information services?

The proponents of social responsibility, though well intentioned, have produced no clear and generally accepted moral principle that would impose on the information professions an obligation to work for social change. Various arguments have been made to try to link moral behavior of the profession to the performance of libraries. Little has been accomplished, however, by way of developing a solid and acceptable moral argument for the notion of social responsibility. Thus, although those promoting social responsibility are very moralistic in many of their statements, in debate with others, they do not articulate a philosophical basis for the social responsibilities discussed (Bundy, 1980).

The emotionally laden nature of the discussion on social responsibility presents the possibility that debate on the subject will continue indefinitely with little prospect of agreement being reached on the scope of the issues involved or their solution. Beginning in the late 1970s and continuing through the 1980s, a theoretical and conceptual reorientation has begun to take place regarding the information profession's obligations to its various constituencies. The new approach can be labeled "social responsiveness" (Pearce & Robinson, 1989, pp. 147-48) and it has become clear that the shift from responsibility to responsiveness reflects a significant change of focus. This new focus has shifted the discussion from moral imperatives related to social responsibility to a more technical and neutral approach that includes social responsiveness.

The Public Library Association's guidelines for identifying roles for public libraries reflects this shift (McClure et al., 1987). The process described in the guidelines includes identification of both internal and external mechanisms, procedures, arrangements, and behavioral patterns of the library's constituent groups taken collectively. It establishes mechanisms to judge the capability of libraries to fulfill certain roles. Attempts are made to identify key variables within the library that relate to its responsiveness and discover structural changes that will enable the library to respond adequately to social demands. The important questions are not moral, related to whether a library should respond to a social problem out of a sense of social

responsibility, but more pragmatic and action oriented, dealing with the library's ability to respond and the changes necessary to enable it to respond more effectively.

One of the advantages of this approach is its managerial orientation. The concept ignores the philosophical debate about responsibility and obligation and focuses on the problems and prospects of making libraries more socially responsive. The process lends itself to analytical techniques in utilizing specific methods, such as data collection and analysis and numerical interpretation of results. The utilization of data through this process can help decision makers determine how best to institutionalize social policy throughout the library. Organizational structures can be evaluated; the roles of information professionals can be delineated; personnel policies can be structured to reward appropriate "socially responsive" behavior; and goal statements can be formulated that reflect the roles identified.

Even though this approach seems to answer many of the questions faced by those concerned with the social responsibility debate, social responsiveness does not offer answers to all questions. The concept of social responsiveness does not provide guidance on how resources should be allocated to fulfill the various library roles. Libraries respond to the same problems in different ways and to varying degrees. And there is no clear data as to what pattern of responsiveness will be the most successful. The philosophy of responsiveness does not help a library to decide what roles it should have or what priorities should be established. In the final analysis, social responsiveness provides no better guidance to management than does social responsibility on the best strategies or policies to be adopted for library service. It appears that library personnel, by determining the degree of social responsiveness and the pressures to which they will respond, decide the meaning of the concept and what services will be developed as a result.

There is still a lack of moral principles or theory on which to base decisions. Societal pressures are assumed to exist, and libraries must respond to these in some manner. Social responsiveness assumes a passive attitude to such pressures. The concept of responsiveness provides no moral basis for information professionals to respond to social problems. There is no explicit moral or ethical theory and no specific values for personnel to follow in making responses to societal demands.

This position becomes quite evident when examining the statement of professional ethics developed by the American Library Association (ALA) in 1981 (ALA. Committee on Professional Ethics, 1981, p. 335). The 1981 statement makes no mention of the Library

Bill of Rights nor any other philosophical statement as a source of the foundational ethics of library service. Although a 1980 draft spoke of the need for "participation in professional associations [and] community activity in support of library programs and legislation" (ALA. Committee on Professional Ethics, 1980), this point was left out of the adopted version.

Criticism of the draft document includes the assertion that, "it does not deal adequately with the ends and means of the library profession. Rather it is primarily a guide to attitudes toward work, without examining the mission of that work" (Du Mont, 1980, n.p.). While the presence of an ethical code can stimulate debate and strengthen professional autonomy, these results can only take place if the effect of the code is one of clarification of the practice of librarianship rather than a clarification of the appropriate demeanor of the professional (Kuhn, 1989, p. 25).

In responding to such criticism, the question of managerial guidelines and principles becomes relevant. What criteria, other than self-interest, are relevant to guide information professionals in the development of socially responsible strategies? Shall these strategies be judged solely on their short term effectiveness—i.e., in helping a library respond to a patron who wishes to remove a certain book from the shelves? Can libraries retain their neutral posture and still support those government leaders who support the interests of libraries and share traditional values of intellectual freedom and access? The nagging question of defining the social good or, in a public policy context, of defining the public interest, appears. And finally, the absence of a clear moral underpinning for whatever strategies are determined continues to present a problem. If information professionals become proactive, does such behavior mean that they are attempting to minimize the impact of social change? Do not information professionals have a moral obligation that goes beyond their identified mandate to acquire and disseminate information? If information professionals do have social and political responsibilities as well as professional responsibilities, what is the moral basis for these responsibilities today?

### ETHICAL DIMENSION OF DECISION MAKING

In answering the preceding questions, the major premise is that management is basically an ethical task, and that many management decisions have an ethical dimension. In general, an ethical decision is one that affects human welfare or human fulfillment in some significant manner (Bucholz, 1989):

An ethical decision can be further defined as a decision where questions of justice and rights are serious and relevant moral considerations. These concepts are central ethical considerations in human affairs, and an

ethical decision is one where a consideration of them is an important dimension of the decision. Can the decision be defended on grounds of justice? Is it fair and equitable in some sense to all the parties affected? Does the decision violate some basic human rights, such that it could be labeled an immoral decision? These are the kinds of questions that must be asked. (p. 31)

Bucholz (1989) has identified three levels of ethical issues which vary in scope and breadth—the individual level, the organization level, and the system level (pp. 30-47). At the individual level, one makes day-to-day decisions that mostly involve the application of institutional policy to specific situations. When dilemmas arise, judgments must be made, some of which have ethical dimensions. At the organizational level, decisions are made for the organization that will guide the behavior of employees. These decisions may be broad in scope and involve consideration of social responsibility. At the system level, broad questions can be raised about the ethical foundations of information service; such questions are not tied to a particular organization.

The specific nature of the decisions involved at each of these levels can be seen if a concrete example is used. Information access issues are fraught with ethical dimensions and provide a useful vehicle to illustrate ethical dilemmas at each of these levels. Let us assume that the basic organizational policy in regard to access is one of “free access to all library materials for all individuals.” Ethics enters into access decisions at the individual level in borderline or exceptional cases that policy does not seem to cover. For example, does free access really mean that a ten year old can take out an “R” rated video?

At the organizational level, the ethical dimensions of decision making come into play when selection decisions are made. Decision makers must make certain that the criteria and procedures that are established to make selection choices do not discriminate against certain writers nor points of view nor on the basis of irrelevant factors such as race, sex, or religious preference of either the author or selector. Self censorship of controversial materials is a constant problem that must be addressed.

At the system level, ethical questions relate to information dissemination. Who has access to information and at what cost? How does information format affect access? Who is responsible for providing information for those who have limited skills to acquire it? These kinds of questions are settled through the public policy process and the eventual outcome is reflected in laws and regulations related to information access at local, state, and federal levels.

Figure 1 shows these various levels of decision making and the ethical issues relevant to each level. Potential clashes exist at all levels. Institutional policy may require that a decision maker go against

his or her own ethical standards, producing significant internal conflict for one so involved. Institutional policy may not always reflect the ethical standards of the society at large, which may force society to develop laws and regulations to bring about change in institutional behavior.

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<i>Decision Rule:</i>	Select the best materials for the most people at the least cost.
<i>Individual level:</i>	Borderline and extraordinary cases.
<i>Organization level:</i>	Are selection criteria discriminatory?
<i>System level:</i>	Is information access just and equitable?

Figure 1. Information access decisions

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Another example can be taken from the hiring process for librarians (see Figure 2). Many libraries make an ALA-accredited degree an entry-level qualification for a professional librarian. Applicants for professional positions lacking this qualification are rejected. The ALA-accredited degree thus becomes a standard by which libraries hope to assure the recruitment of a high quality staff.

Ethics enters into a decision to hire at the individual level in borderline or exceptional cases where applying the policy in a mechanical fashion does not seem just or equitable. For example, if an applicant does not have an ALA-accredited degree, should he or she be automatically rejected without looking at other information such as previous work experience or other academic credentials? Such a decision may not seem fair given the subjective nature of the hiring process in general. Suppose a candidate with previous work experience, but without an ALA degree, is narrowly rejected for an academic library position and another candidate with an ALA-accredited degree, but no work experience, is accepted for a position. Is that fair considering that the work experience and academic credentials are not really comparable. And what about exceptional cases in which applicants may have other credentials, including doctorates? Should they be mechanically rejected without some special consideration?

At the organizational level, ethical considerations come into play when one considers justice and rights in relation to the hiring policy itself. Does a hiring policy discriminate unjustly on the basis of race or sex, or can it be defended as fair and equitable? Are written employment tests biased in favor of white middle class applicants

due to the concepts and language used in examinations: Is an applicant's right to equal treatment violated by the use of such examinations? And, given the fact that grades mean different things depending on the school one attended, is it fair that grades are used as a factor in making employment decisions?

At the system level, questions can be asked about the justice of public service institutions such as libraries hiring only those who are citizens or legal residents of a given community. Do not all individuals have a right to apply for employment for which they feel qualified, regardless of their legal status or place of residence? These are serious ethical questions worthy of debate.

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<i>Decision Rule:</i>	Reject applicants who do not meet the standards.
<i>Individual level:</i>	Borderline and extraordinary situations.
<i>Organization level:</i>	Is the required ALA-accredited degree fair and equitable to all groups, including all races and both sexes?
<i>System level:</i>	Is it fair and just for public service institutions to have legal qualifications for employment unrelated to individual expertise?

Figure 2. Hiring decisions

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These examples serve to illustrate where ethical questions arise at different levels of decision making in libraries. The decisions made at all these levels benefit and burden individuals and groups differentially. Some individuals gain and others are affected adversely. Questions of justice and individual rights become relevant (MacCann, 1989, pp. 1-11). The question for the manager to answer is, Whose rights should be respected and what concept of justice is appropriate? (Bucholz, 1989, pp. 35-47).

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR MANAGERS IN LIBRARIANSHIP

Librarians as managers are constantly making ethical decisions whether they know it or not. They are constantly directing people toward or away from information resources that may directly impact their ability to enhance their lives or the life of their community. They are creating the future for their organizations, for their employees, for their users, for those who fund the service, and for society as a whole.

Decisions about information access can affect human well being

and social welfare, having ethical impacts that are significant for all those touched by the decisions. A recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* discussed "a revolution in the nature of resources that provide [political] power" (Coughlin, 1990, pp. 10-11). The suggestion is made that access to information resources must now be counted as a source of world power. As the ability to access information across the globe becomes possible through the use of technology, librarians will have more and more opportunity to influence decision making on a worldwide scale through appropriate information provision. This is an awesome responsibility and one that calls for ethical reflection of the highest order.

Librarians must be encouraged to think more broadly and highly of their task. They must recognize that libraries are multiple purpose institutions that have many impacts besides cultural enrichment or recreation. Moral leadership of such institutions means recognizing information agencies as part of an ethical system having various values that are important to human welfare. The challenge to librarians is to incorporate these values into routine decision making and develop methods of analysis that are applicable to identifying appropriate goals for themselves and their organizations.

### AN ACTION PLAN

The implementation of an ethical vision in librarianship requires action in several areas. An ethical perspective must be incorporated into the workplace as well as into the curriculum through which future librarians are being educated. The following areas constitute what could be called an ethical agenda for librarians in both of these settings.

1. In the educational setting, such a plan calls for a thorough integration of moral and ethical concerns into the library/information science curriculum. Although separate courses in ethics may also be offered, integration of ethical concerns into basic courses such as Management or Reference is essential to make ethics more directly related to the roles and responsibilities of information professionals.
2. Continuing education programs need to develop parallel efforts to maintain the work begun in the academic setting. Questions about ethics and moral aspects of librarianship must continue to be addressed as professionals move through their careers.
3. Library boards of trustees and/or advisory boards must demonstrate a concern about ethics by raising ethical questions when appropriate. The moral implications of decisions and actions must

- Boards can acknowledge the significance of ethical issues by raising them in relation to goal setting and long-range planning.
4. Information professionals at all levels must recognize the important role they play in institutionalizing ethical responsibility throughout their organizations. Professional librarians have many channels open to them to shape the library/information center, including the setting of objectives for units and individuals, developing and implementing the reward structure of staff, modifying organizational structure to accomplish goals, and developing and utilizing appropriate measures of performance. Professional staff not only have responsibility for efficient and effective use of material and human resources but also must be willing to create a responsible institution that cares about and responds to the ethical and moral imperatives of its policies and actions.
  5. Information policy-making by various government bodies must be considered from an ethical point of view. Librarians have a role to play in the debate; they can make contributions to the discussion and provide insight into the formation of regulations regarding the dissemination of information. Librarians must be given the freedom to respond to information policy issues out of a sense of ethical responsibility; rules and regulations for the control of information flow must be evaluated as well as the inherent limitations of information dissemination systems.
  6. More research must be considered by both library school faculty and professional librarians into the ethical aspects of decision making by librarians. One of the themes of this article is that many in the profession of librarianship are ignorant of ethical issues, not having a good understanding of how such matters should be analyzed and discussed. Research into ethical and moral issues can help overcome this ignorance. Scholars in the field need to apply their expertise to ethical questions and combine this with the work of those from other professional disciplines who have similar concerns.

This action plan suggests that a consideration of ethical issues must become a familiar comfortable part of librarians' thought processes. Ethical ambiguities are always present because no one can formulate policies that are going to be morally justified in all circumstances and in all places and times. It is important that those responsible for formulating, implementing, and evaluating policies should be made aware of these ambiguities and be ethically aware so as to act in a responsible and moral manner. Ambiguity, it should be noted, does not diminish the significance of ethical issues, which this discussion implies are pervasive in librarianship. In point of

fact, the ethical dimension of librarianship represents a generalized concern for the improvement of quality of library service and professional conduct of librarians.

A final caveat is in order. 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. There is evidence to suggest that librarians choose not to choose, to "play it safe" with services and collections. Instead, librarians ought to exercise ethical judgment in their duties. Only by demonstrating the highest standards of ethical decision making will librarians inspire confidence and respect in the information arena.

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