
Infoethics for Leaders: Models of Moral Agency in the Information Environment

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ABSTRACT

INFOETHICS, THE ETHICS OF information systems, can offer insights and methods to understand the problems which leaders in the information professions face. As moral agents (ethical selves) who assume responsibility in their personal, private, professional, and public lives, information professionals balance conflicting loyalties. In the workplace, they negotiate between the ideals and realities of their institutions and of the profession in making decisions. In the global information environment, leaders will be needed to use the tools of ethical analysis for shaping policy.

INTRODUCTION

In the title story of *The Abilene Paradox*, the author Jerry Harvey (1988), his wife, his mother-in-law, and his father-in-law go to Abilene, Texas, one hot July afternoon "in an unairconditioned 1958 Buick" (p. 13). They discover later that none of them had wanted to go. Why then did they go to Abilene? They went because they misunderstood each other. All had wanted to stay home, but they had not communicated their desires honestly. This story illustrates the problem of managing agreement in organizational life. Harvey says that agreement is much harder to manage than conflict because most people fear revealing their real opinions if they think that their views are contrary to those of the prevailing group. Too often, according to Harvey, members of "organizations fail to accurately communicate their desires and/or beliefs to one another" and thus

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there is a "misperceiving of the collective reality." In private, members may actually agree on the solution to a certain problem, but this is not communicated effectively (p. 16).

Harvey's story provides an appropriate introduction to the present discussion of ethics and leadership. Here it will be suggested that ethics offers traditions of analysis and methods which leaders can use in facing an uncertain future. The need to question assumptions and the shaping of intellectual tools for approaching controversial issues are both part of the rich heritage of ethics. In the past fifty years, for example, ethicists have confronted challenging new issues in medicine. More recently, the environment has become an arena for ethical inquiry. So too will the future of information and those who manage information resources be proper subjects for ethical analysis.

Ethics raises the questions of what is good and what is just. Ethical analysis is designed for weighing competing factors. What is the best of the good? What is the worst of the bad? Ethical inquiry presses to the principles and foundations of both agreement and conflict. What are the goals? How are ends related to means? Applied ethics, such as bioethics or environmental ethics, moves these questions into the private and public arenas. Issues such as the right of an individual to refuse medical treatment or a company's responsibility to clean up an environmental pollutant illustrate the role of applied ethics in society. Similarly, as information has become a recognized commodity and source of power (Toffler, 1990), the need to address information issues, such as access and privacy, in a systematic way has been acknowledged by many. Thus, the following are some of the questions which may be posed:

1. What are the big questions concerning information? What is the relationship between information and the good of society? What is the relationship between information and justice? Who will decide the future of information?
2. What should be the relationship between the many information professions and the public consumers of information? Is a new megaprofessional code needed? Perhaps a new government information agency is needed?
3. How are codes and other statements of purpose and policy to be used in ethical inquiry and to address problems (Lindsey & Prentice 1985; Finks, 1991)?
4. How shall professionals be prepared and sustained to ask the big questions about options for the future (White, 1989)?
5. What sources can be used and what research can be encouraged to offer insights into these matters (Ellul, 1964, 1990; Florman, 1981)?
6. Is it appropriate for information professionals to raise these questions in public forums (Doctor, 1991)?

That leaders in libraries and information services must be participants in planning for the future by asking such hard questions is the burden of this article. It is assumed that a better understanding of the field of ethics can help leaders ask better questions and make the best decisions. Ethics, for the purpose of this discussion, does not refer to codes or to a particular morality but to a discipline of study and a process of reflection which leads to the clarification of assumptions and alternatives. The pursuit of ethical understanding, especially in applied areas, often calls for multidisciplinary approaches. One example of this is found in programs of science, technology, and society (Cutcliffe, 1983; Reynolds, 1987) where engineers, physicists, theologians, and policy analysts work together. Ethical concerns in library and information science (Brown, 1990) have been diverse and include issues of censorship (Demac, 1988), threats to privacy (Gerhardt, 1990), reference service (Hardy, 1990), vendor relations (Sugnet, 1986), questions of equity (Doctor, 1991), and access to government information (Schmidt, 1989). Hard issues, such as defining areas of responsibility for electronic technologies (Jonas, 1984) and defining freedom in a new environment (Pool, 1983), have also been topics for ethical inquiry. All these areas are relevant to current discussions of democracy, literacy, and productivity—the theme areas for the 1991 White House Conference on Information and Library Service.

The field of ethics offers a variety of frameworks for examining information technology in relation to the future of humanity (Iannone, 1987). Diverse philosophical traditions, including the contributions of Bacon, Hume, Marx, Heidegger, Whitehead, and others, have been explored in recent scholarship (Ferr, 1988). The many approaches provide no easy answers. Increasing activity in the philosophy and ethics of technology, however, suggests broad interest in these issues (Kranzberg, 1980; Durbin, 1987; Ihde, 1990).

The term *infoethics* is used here to unite under one term a wide variety of concerns. Like bioethics, which considers ethical issues and living systems, infoethics examines ethical issues and information systems. As, for example, bioethics addresses genetic engineering, infoethics addresses the engineering of information systems as these systems influence individual welfare and the public good. Like bioethics, which moves beyond medical ethics and the professional ethics of doctors and nurses, infoethics includes, but is not confined to, the professional ethics of librarians, information specialists, and those in related fields. Infoethics encompasses computer ethics (Johnson, 1985), media ethics (Christians, 1987), library ethics (Hauptman, 1988), and networking ethics (Gould, 1989). To summarize, infoethics addresses the use of information in relation

to human values. Who should control information? What is information justice? Is there a citizen's right to know? How are conflicting claims of personal privacy and public health to be mediated? Just as health professionals have a responsibility to participate in such debates, information professionals must also become involved.

MODELS OF MORAL AGENCY

The models presented here illustrate one way to understand the various roles which information professionals play. They present the individual and the organization as parts of a larger information environment. The purpose of these models is to show that each individual is a moral agent. The models highlight aspects of loyalty and show that both individuals and groups negotiate among several spheres of experience. A brief overview of the models begins with Model 1-*The Ethical Self* (see Figure 1), which describes the information professional as a moral agent who has a variety of experiences which influence behavior and decision making. Model 2 (see Figure 2) focuses on the loyalties of the information professional on the job. Model 3 (see Figure 3) explores the relationship between ideals and realities in the working world. Finally, Model 4 (see Figure 4) shows the ethical self and the professional within the larger context of the information environment and the place of infoethics within this infosphere.

These models, therefore, demonstrate the complex roles of the professional at various levels, including public policy making (Kelly, 1990). Again, information professionals share with medical and other professionals the potential for conflicting loyalties. For example, in debates over abortion or the right to die, physicians and other medical professionals are also citizens, parents, and mortal human beings. Their expertise is needed, but they cannot be disinterested parties as they contribute to public debates. In addition, experts must be accountable to the public without sacrificing too greatly their responsibilities to their professions (Kultgen, 1988; Bayles, 1989). Information professionals' role in shaping policy may be an even more complex issue. Many more people in society claim expertise about libraries, education, or information. Others have money and power at stake in the controversies about access and control of information.

LIBRARIANS AND INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS AS MORAL AGENTS

As defined here, all information professionals are moral agents who think, make decisions, and act according to their self-understanding, which includes personal, private, professional, and public dimensions. Robert Coles (1986), the Harvard child

psychiatrist, argues for an awareness of the moral life of the professional. To illustrate, he recalls his experience as a medical student in analysis. Regularly, young Coles would go to the plain, sparsely furnished office of his analyst, who believed in a value-free, artifact-free setting, designed not to distract patients from their problems or give them any hints about the personality of the analyst. However, the office was located in the midst of expensive real-estate and was itself in a lavish high-rise apartment complex. Coles uses this example to explain why he disputes “the notion that our personal values, our moral ideals and ethical standards occupy a separate realm” (p. 38). Many others, from Harlan Cleveland (1985, 1986) and Robert K. Greenleaf (1977) to Max Depree (1989) and John Heider (1986), suggest that leaders are those whose own values, beliefs, and loyalties can be effectively translated into institutional form.

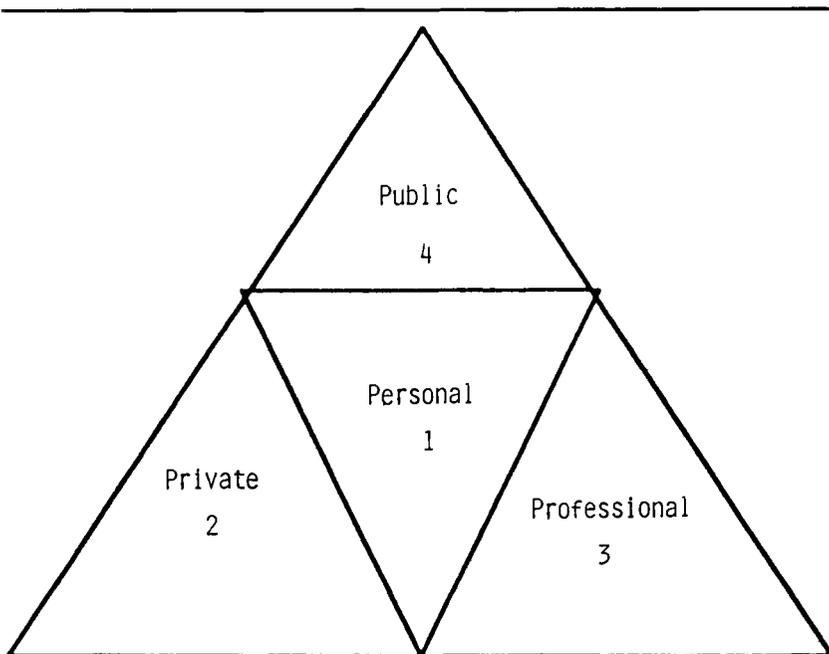


Figure 1. The ethical self

One way to describe these beliefs, values, and loyalties is presented in the model of The Ethical Self (see Figure 1). This model was influenced initially by Ulric Neisser's analysis of the self and more recently by Joseph Margolis's (1989) description of the Technological Self. Neisser (1989) describes “five different kinds of information on

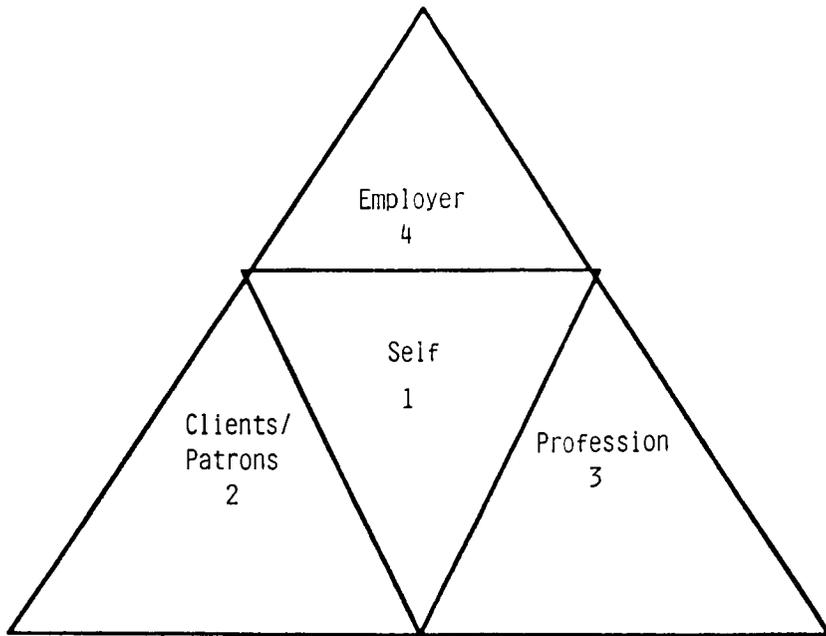


Figure 2. Loyalties of the information professional

which self-knowledge is based." Neisser's view of self-knowledge includes: (1) "the ecological self, which is the self that we know through direct perception"; (2) "the interpersonal self, which we know through the immediate interactions we have with other people"; (3) "the extended self that we know as a result of information stored in memory about what we have done and expect to do"; (4) "the private self, which we know by virtue of internal mental experiences that no one else shares"; and (5) "the conceptual self, which is the self that we have concepts and theories about" (pp. 1-2).

In Model 1 (see Figure 1), the Ethical Self has four aspects—the personal, the private, the professional, and the public. The four aspects function together. The triangle of the Ethical Self fits into the larger world, represented by the circle (see Figure 4), which for this discussion represents the information environment but also indicates that the self functions within the much larger world. Thus Model 1 illustrates the four major areas of experience from which values arise. Harmony and congruence among the four areas is the ideal. However, in facing most decisions, persons must negotiate among conflicting claims. In a time of rapid change, the individual may have special difficulty maintaining the balance among the four

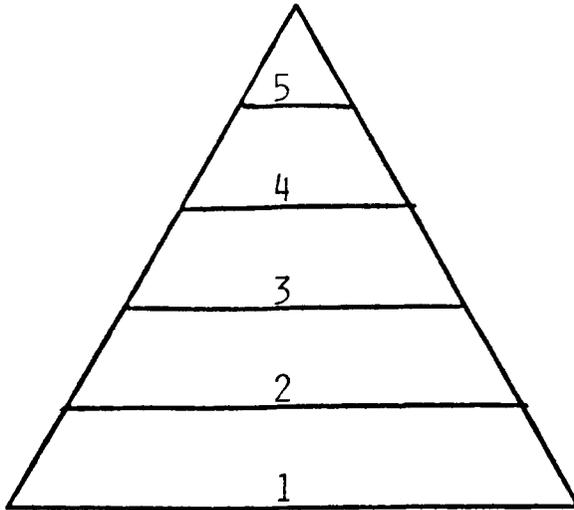


Figure 3. Levels of ethical orientation

parts. The individual must act as a unit, negotiating among the parts. The resulting psychic conflicts and how they are resolved would be a good starting point for further study. The concern here, however, is to provide a model which can be used by information professionals to help them understand why some conflicts arise and to suggest resolutions through discussion and compromise among ethical selves.

As Personal Self, the self experiences the world as a person of a certain age and gender, with certain likes, dislikes, and feelings. As the Private Self, each person knows the world through relationships and affiliations with family, friends, clubs, and support networks. As the Professional Self, a person identifies with the profession, its values and goals, and learns about the self in a professional group from the reactions of others. As the Public Self, each individual is a member of many public communities—the town or city, the state, and nation. Thus the individual occupies a place within the larger community, as, for example, a patron of the arts or sports enthusiast. As an ethical self who exerts moral agency through each of these dimensions of experience, the information professional will inevitably face conflicts. Model 2 (see Figure 2) illustrates in more detail the conflicting allegiances of the Professional Self.

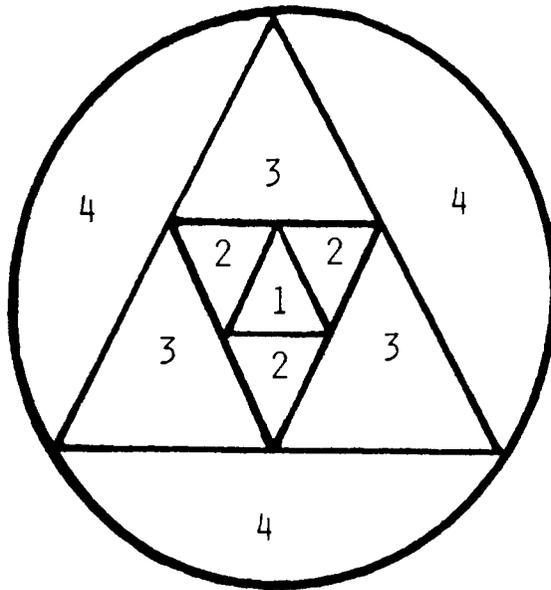


Figure 4. Ethical selves in the global information environment

THE PROFESSIONAL ETHICAL SELF: CONFLICTING LOYALTIES

Model 2 (see Figure 2) illustrates the multiple loyalties of the professional person:

1. *Loyalty to Self*—to personal integrity, to job security, to personal responsibilities, to social responsibilities defined by the individual.
2. *Loyalty to Clients/Patrons*—to clients' information and general welfare, to freedom of access, to patrons' privacy, to serving patrons' needs.
3. *Loyalty to the Profession*—to maintain professional standards of service, to promote the good of the profession as a whole by working to raise the status within society, to raise the awareness of the public to issues identified by the profession.
4. *Loyalty to the Employing Institution*—to uphold the goals and priorities of the institution, to honor contract obligations, to promote the good of the organization through loyalty to colleagues and administration.

Figure 2 then presents a model of the multiple loyalties of the person as an *Information Professional*. Again the triangle is divided into four parts, each impinging upon the others. This model was developed from reflection on The Potter Box (see Figure 5) presented

by Clifford Christians and others (1987) in *Media Ethics*. Originated by Ralph Potter of the Harvard Divinity School and named by Karen Lebacqz of the Pacific School of Religion, the box was created and has been elaborated to define “four dimensions of moral analysis” and serve as an “aid...in locating those places where most misunderstandings occur” (p. 3). This method of analysis also moves the person through the decision-making process even if the decision must be reassessed and the four steps taken again. The Potter Box includes four steps: (1) defining the problem, (2) identifying the values at stake, (3) considering the ethical principles involved, and (4) defining and prioritizing loyalties and reaching a decision (pp. 3-7).

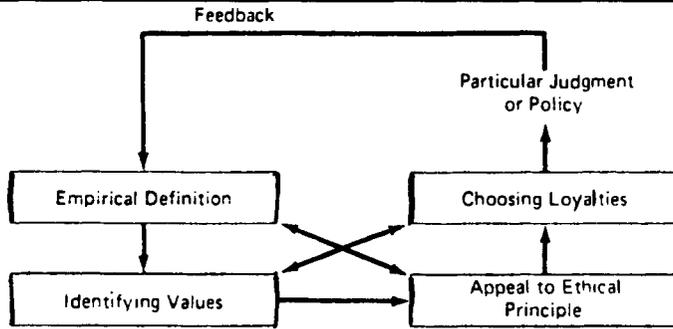


Figure 5. The Potter Box. *Source: Media Ethics: Cases and Moral Reasoning* (3d ed.) by Clifford G. Christians, Kim B. Rotzoll, Mark Fackler. © 1991 by Longman Publishing Group. Reprinted with permission from Longman Publishing Group.

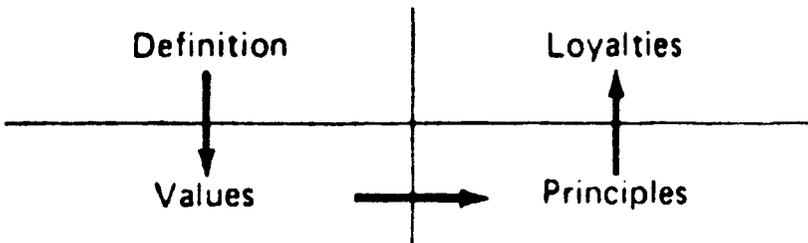


Figure 6. The Potter Box analysis. *Source: Media Ethics: Cases and Moral Reasoning* (3d ed.) by Clifford G. Christians, Kim B. Rotzoll, Mark Fackler. © 1991 by Longman Publishing Group. Reprinted with permission from Longman Publishing Group.

Of particular usefulness in defining Model 2 (see Figure 2) is step 4 of the Potter Box analysis. For example, if a librarian is asked by a city official to monitor circulation records to aid in the investigation of illegal manufacturing of drugs, then steps 1, 2, and 3 of the Potter Box analysis can be quickly covered. The problem, the values, and the principles are quite familiar to most librarians. However, which loyalty will have priority? To the employing institution? Could the librarian lose the job? To the patron? To professional standards which defend the privacy of patron records? To the librarian himself or herself who is a citizen of the community and therefore potentially harmed by drug activity and also by unchallenged police policies? Model 2 and the Potter Box make clear the challenges of analysis and the necessity of discussion and debate (Hauptman, 1988).

In summary, the models in figures 1 and 2 suggest that the processes of decision making are complex, involving the whole person, and resulting from combining the wisdom of the past, knowledge about the present, and a realistic assessment of the self and others with balancing of loyalties. With the notion of the Ethical Self as Professional, the role of professional ethics and of statements which have long defined the commitments of the field are placed in the larger context of the total environment of decisions and meaning. If indeed ethical selves are guided by personal, private, or public experiences and by loyalties to self, clients, and the employing institution, the role of professional ethics may appear to be smaller than when it is considered the main guiding force of the profession. However, as has been argued here, the best leaders may be those who act out of the totality of their experience and also encourage others to do so. Thus, the challenge for the future would be to help potential leaders integrate professional ethics into their ethical self-concepts. This means that the profession should welcome persons with diverse backgrounds and strengths and should encourage efforts to present the claims of professional ethics in a way that encourages involvement with the issues and an openness to debate and even disagreements. The aim, then, is not to create clones but to nurture thinking, judgment, and integrity (Daniel, 1986). These leaders of the future would have knowledge and skill to enter persuasively into dialogues both within institutions and in the public arena.

LEVELS OF ETHICAL ORIENTATION IN THE WORKPLACE

Model 3 (see Figure 3) describes possible relationships among various ethical selves in the workplace by defining five levels of ethical orientation. These levels of orientation focus on the interplay between the goals of the organization, such as those found in mission

statements or codes of ethics, and the realities of working life. Figure 3 is intended to be a very practical model which shows how vision statements and codes may become inoperative especially in uncertain times. It also shows how the value systems of individuals interact within the organization or profession. Like the models in figures 1 and 2, Model 3 (see Figure 3) offers a framework to consider how and why decisions are made and why there may be tensions within an organization or a profession. It also explains why there are so many different interpretations of goals and why mission statements or codes of conduct may need to be rethought and rearticulated as institutional life changes. The description of all five levels of Ethical Orientation follows.

Level 5—Ideal Ethics. Highest goals and aspirations of a group or of an individual—e.g., codes, mission statements, company goals and purpose statements; harmony at all levels; values affirmed by larger society. For example, many official statements and community policies address censorship issues. Librarians are expected to oppose censorship and most often receive professional support and general societal affirmation for doing so.

Level 4—Practical Working Ethics. Not as grand as ideal ethics but consistent with high aspirations; institutional objectives and personal/professional goals are mutually supportive; practical orientation—can withstand the stresses of the workplace and the complexities of a changing environment; flexibility and adaptability. For example, although librarians fight censorship and defend the patron's right to read, a librarian uses judgment both in selection and in promotion of materials. Influenced by community standards and personal beliefs, librarians can exert much influence in the selection and promotion process and may not balance collections appropriately. If personal factors impinge too greatly, it could be called "self-censorship" and be seen as contrary to professional ethics.

Level 3—Pressure Ethics. Internal or external pressure begins to separate the institutional or professional purposes from the goals of the people on the job; loyalty to institution/profession remains but is strained—e.g., potential layoffs, changes in ownership or management, introduction of new technologies. Temporary conflict between personal and professional or institutional values, such as a personal crisis like a divorce or family illness with which the organization is unable to cope. For example, if severe budget pressure brought unusual scrutiny to each item purchased, then librarians might be much more reluctant to purchase controversial materials even if they were personally and professionally certain of its appropriateness for their patrons.

Level 2—Subversive Ethics. A large or small group of people uphold what they perceive to be worthy goals for the profession or

institution by working outside the system of stated or perceived goals. For example, librarians in charge of collection development order gay and Lesbian materials suggested by patrons but against an unwritten but clear system policy against ordering materials for controversial groups. Or, for example, circulation librarians erase disks "by mistake" after they hear informally that the FBI will order their records to be surrendered.

Level 1—Survival Ethics. In situations when institutional demands conflict with the basic requirements for employee safety and security or even integrity, individuals may isolate themselves from others in the institution or profession. If the situation worsens, employees will begin to leave or to become detached from the work, from clients, and from colleagues. For example, if librarians were asked to staff a branch library in a dangerous location and they believed that their requests for security personnel were not answered, they might look for other employment. In the meantime, they might come to work armed or keep the doors locked to the building rather than offering service to clients. Or librarians might organize themselves to protest long hours sitting in front of computer terminals because they fear the health risks.

In each of these cases, there are important values at stake and complex ethical issues to discuss. Each level upholds justifiable values. The tensions between level 5 and the others arise out of real situations in the workplace and can be the source of productive negotiation.

Model 3 follows the structure of Abraham Maslow's (1954) well-known hierarchy of needs and also reflects the influence of Michael Maccoby's value drives. Maslow's hierarchy includes: (5) self-actualization needs; (4) esteem needs; (3) social needs; (2) safety needs; and (1) physiological needs. These are all important needs, and to Maslow, fulfillment of the higher needs usually depends upon the satisfaction of the lower needs.

Maccoby (1988) lists these eight value drives—meaning, dignity, play, mastery, information, pleasure, relatedness, and survival. Like Maslow, Maccoby holds that all the needs are important. Model 3 suggests that, in order to assure that codes and other statements of purpose are effective in institutions or professions, a variety of needs must be considered. Maccoby's list, Maslow's hierarchy, and Model 3 are not intended to oversimplify the behavior of the individual or the group. Rather they are designed to promote reflection on the relationships among the values and motivations which influence the achievement of the highest goals for all—i.e., institutions, professions, and individuals. In particular, Model 3 suggests that codes and similar documents are important but must continually be articulated and interpreted in light of changing conditions and experiences.

ETHICAL SELVES IN THE GLOBAL INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Finally, as librarians and other information professionals understand themselves as moral agents—as ethical selves—working in complex environments, they can indeed expect to influence policy making both within and outside their organizations. As they perceive themselves as members of the larger information environment or infosphere, they will need to negotiate among competing interests and to assert their professional expertise in a constructive and forceful manner.

In the future, will these professionals be regulated from the top by a megaprofessional organization such as a combination of ALA, ASIS, and others? Probably not. The diversity of the issues suggests a much more fluid model, with competing and cooperating groups seeking to build consensus among diverse interest groups. With rigorous education in the traditions of librarianship and in the complexities of the information environment, ethical selves as information professionals should be well prepared to examine conflicting claims and balance complex objectives. Knowing that the good and the beautiful may appear in many forms to many people and that justice is an elusive goal, the professional of the future may need imagination as well as analysis. Already rich resources are appearing to stimulate debate and to encourage librarians (Lancaster, 1991), computer specialists (Forester, 1990), and other information professionals (Mintz, 1990) to join in the discussions.

In closing, the work of Robert Coles (1989) again provides insight. This time Coles makes the case for using fiction in teaching ethics in professional education. For example, Coles uses the novels of Charles Dickens with law students, the poetry of William Carlos Williams with physicians, and writers like Walker Percy and Flannery O'Connor with others. Fiction, for Coles, frees the mind and the heart so that students can identify with others and with their own inner selves. In this way, they learn to raise unanswerable questions and to struggle with meaning beyond the bottom line. Coles's work suggests that those who aspire to be leaders or to prepare leaders for libraries and the information field might do well to sink deeply into poetry, novels, and short stories and to ponder quietly before moving on to action. Just as the ethical heritage can contribute to current understanding, so too can the literary heritage (Booth, 1988; Gardner, 1978). These ideas were embodied not long ago in a speech by a young professor from Africa who came to this country to prepare himself to be an international spokesperson for librarianship. His father, a tribal storyteller who could not read, kept books in many languages in his home for the children (Abdullahi, 1989). In this

setting, linking past and present, a future leader was nurtured. The books in many languages pointed this young man toward a future which continues to unfold. They are treasures and so, too, is he.

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