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## Introduction

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IN ONE OF HIS FASCINATING BOOKS ON EFFECTIVE WAYS to visually present information, Edward R. Tufte (1990) argues that designs that are densely packed with information do not always, as some claim, overwhelm the viewer or reader. This is because, as humans:

We thrive in information-thick worlds because of our marvelous and everyday capacities to select, edit, single out, structure, highlight, group, pair, merge, harmonize, synthesize, focus, organize, condense, reduce, boil down, choose, categorize, catalog, classify, refine, abstract, scan, look into, idealize, isolate, discriminate, distinguish, screen, sort, pick over, group, pigeonhole, integrate, blend, average, filter, lump, skip, smooth, chunk, inspect, approximate, cluster, aggregate, outline, summarize, itemize, review, dip into, flip through, browse, glance into, leaf through, skim, list, glean, synopsise, winnow wheat from chaff, and separate the sheep from the goats. (p. 50)

The list sounds like a day in the life of a librarian. Tufte's exhausting litany reminds us of the rich variety of activities that the public expects library and information professionals to help it with. These are centrally important activities in all human lives, and the fact that library and information professionals are expected to be experts over the entire range of these leads to many of the ethical concerns that the profession is presently facing. This issue of *Library Trends* addresses a few of these concerns.

The first two articles of the issue discuss some of the very real problems—one more general, one more specific—that library and information professionals must face. Randy Diamond and Martha Dragich take a realistic look at the phenomenon of malpractice in librarianship. Their role as law librarians shows in their careful research of legal liability for

librarians. They discuss the theory of legal liability for various professions and point out that the history of case law reveals that there have been no test cases so far charging any librarian with malpractice. But they also indicate that there seem also to be no examples of cases being brought against lawyers for faulty research in developing a case. They suggest that these lax standards may no longer hold as clients become more sophisticated information seekers. They compare reports on "core values" in the library and in the legal profession. This leads to an account of what good librarianship will be in the information age, and they present an example from the corporate world of a traditional library being transformed into a modern information resource.

Nicole Auer and Ellen Krupar face the issues raised by the fact that new technologies make it increasingly easy to copy material, which makes plagiarism very simple and attractive. They point out that the lack of consistency among style guides regarding how to cite online sources, and students' ignorance of what plagiarism is, simply makes matters worse. They discuss the role that Web paper mills play in a modern student's life and worry that institutions, such as universities, may themselves be open to the same charges of providing students, for a fee, with the items that they need—papers, classes—in order to get a degree, whether they learn from these items or not. They discuss various factors that cause faculty to choose not to pursue cases of cheating. They conclude with a number of practical examples of the ways in which librarians could help faculty and students to minimize the practice of plagiarism and cheating.

There often are more general concerns that are expressed concerning the effect that new technologies will have on libraries and their patrons. The next three articles address these concerns in different ways and at varying levels of generality.

Robert Hauptman questions the readiness with which libraries are prepared to spend their meager funds on new technological software and equipment. He worries about the fact that libraries are tending to depend more and more on CD-ROM or Internet databases to provide information to patrons. He cites some of the problems associated with this, in particular that the integrity of information on the Internet is always suspect. In the face of the numerous ways in which new technologies can be misused, he argues that mere ethical strictures are no longer adequate to address the problems and suggests that legal means will be required.

Nicholas C. Burbules considers the ways in which the unique structure of the Web affects its credibility as a reference system. The Web has massive volume, serves as a reference for itself, and is complicated. He introduces a series of paradoxes that result from these features—e.g., often, more sophisticated users are more likely to be duped by items found on the Web. He discusses ways that have been proposed to reduce such deception but argues that these responses themselves ultimately turn out

to be paradoxical and self-defeating. This leads him into a discussion of the various dimensions of the concept of credibility, which continues on to a discussion of the ethical dimensions of credibility. He worries that one great temptation provided by the Web will be that the wealth of varying information on any particular topic that can be found there may tempt us to seek data on the Web that will plausibly confirm our prior beliefs. He concludes that the Web will force us to accept a more communal approach to credibility, challenging the traditional view that the paradigmatic credible judgment is made by the lone searcher after truth.

Krystyna Górniak-Kocikowska considers the effects of new technologies by pursuing the analogous revolution that occurred with the introduction of the printing press. Libraries came less to be seen as treasure houses than as resources, and one could read a text free of the interpretive overlay of the teaching master. Effects were felt in the development of vernacular languages, in the topics allowed in universities, and in the very notion of research and education. Gorniak-Kocikowska sees the computer revolution to be as potent as the printing press revolution. Just as printing presses made books available, such as Luther's translation of the Bible, which authorities at the time sought to suppress, so computers make it easy to avoid the literary "canon" promoted by academics. She examines the typical steps followed in dealing with any revolutionary change and applies these to phenomena that have already been observed with the computer revolution. She points out what a difficult abstract skill writing, and its concomitant skill reading, is and worries that these central human skills will become devalued as we attend more to newer peripheral technologies.

The problems that library and information professionals face raise interesting vexing ethical and philosophical issues. The next two contributions discuss some specific problems, but both also ask whether the public stance on ethical matters that the library profession typically takes is the appropriate one. Both of these articles suggest that stressing its teaching role over its role as a gatekeeper is the better way to think of a library and its professionals. Further, such a change in perspective would enrich the public ethical discussions within the profession.

Mark Alfino and Linda Pierce isolate the source of the profession's present commitment to neutrality in the "fiction problem." As libraries carried more fiction, they perforce had to become more neutral concerning what fiction to include and what to exclude; this attitude of neutrality affected collection development generally. Now with the "Internet problem," libraries need to investigate the nature of information and its moral value. They propose that seeing the librarian as a teacher aiding in a patron's inquiry reveals the moral importance of information in the life of the individual and of the community. They detail some practical consequences that their view would have for those in the library profession; all of these considerations stress the social value of information.

My own contribution seeks to use a particular definition of "information" to investigate how one might understand the rights that are often claimed to belong to any patron of the library, in particular, the right to be free of any censorship. This leads to a discussion of some of the philosophical problems of rights and "rights-talk" and suggests that rights-talk seems to predominate in public ethical statements within the library and information profession. It is argued that the daily practice of those in the profession reveal less an interest in rights and more an interest in seeking the best ways to help patrons achieve their goals. As in the preceding paper, the conclusion is that if the teaching role of the library and its professionals were stressed, ethical discussions about the profession would be richer and more realistic.

The final two contributions examine institutions with which the library and information professions interact and the responsibilities that arise because of those interactions. The first discusses how education contributes to the profession, the second addresses the ways in which the profession affects the world.

Toni Carbo and Stephen Almagno describe the history and development of the program in information ethics that they have developed in the School of Informational Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh. They describe the issues that led to considering such a program, the practical problems in its creation and development, and the consequences that the program has had in the courses developed, the students taught, and the Web site that has been developed. They relate the interest in the program expressed by organizations outside the university, and they conclude with a description of plans for the program's future, stressing the numerous ethical concerns that any future program will have to face.

Martha Smith focuses on the global effect that the Internet has on questions of information ethics. She highlights the issues of preserving humanity and conserving the natural world as central to global concerns. At issue is the balance of humanity, nature, and technology. Success, she argues, will require more than moral codes; it will require a recognition of mutual responsibility and caring concern for one another. She considers some exemplar cases and discusses five central themes—access, ownership, privacy, security, and community—that appear in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. She notes that UNESCO also puts mutual responsibility and caring concern at the center of its projects. She provides a description of the recent Infoethics Congresses and mentions the rapid growth of another area of applied ethics, bioinformation ethics or bioinfoethics. She concludes by describing a number of topics that need study.

## REFERENCE

Tufte, E. R. (1990). *Envisioning information*. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press.