Some Ethical Aspects of Being
an Information Professional

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ABSTRACT
DISCUSSIONS OF ETHICS AND LIBRARIES FREQUENTLY focus on rights, espe-
cially the right of privacy and its role in supporting resistance to censor-
ship. This article, using issues of censorship as particular examples, ques-
tions whether a focus on rights leads to a narrow idea of the library profes-
sion and its clients. It suggests that stressing the role of library profession-
als as teachers, as experts who instruct others on how to better achieve the
projects that they have in mind, will lead to a richer and more realistic
ethical conversation.

INTRODUCTION
People of a certain age remember when it was expected that a librar-
ian might very well tell one that certain material was inappropriate for
children of a certain age. One hoped, of course, that what was inappropri-
ate about it was that it was naughty, and one therefore wanted more than
ever to read what one was told was inappropriate. The librarian was seen
as "one who exercises official or officious supervision over morals and
conduct," which is just the Oxford English dictionary's definition of a cen-
sor. There was information there that was wanted, and someone was mak-
ing it difficult to attain.
In reality, the librarian was probably more concerned with the fact
that one was so ignorant that one could not possibly understand the mate-
rial being requested. The librarian recognized that exposing someone to
data might not provide that person with information. Modern technology

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has merely accentuated this contrast between data and information, pro-viding a perfect arena for professionals with a librarian's skills. It has also made their role in forming, disseminating and, sometimes, restricting that information more central than ever.

The Internet drives home the need for someone knowledgeable who can locate, review, and organize all the material that is constantly engulf-ing users in ever accelerating waves. There is so much material, much of it garbage, and few have either the competence or the time to carefully review the accuracy or quality of what can be found by clicking a few times in a browser or typing in a few related words prefaced by mystical "+" signs in one's favorite search engine. It is always a relief to find a coherently organized page that enables one to quickly focus on just the answer to the question that one had. That sort of organization turns the swirl of data into something useable—i.e., into information.

On reflection, one realizes that libraries and librarians have always done this for their patrons. They brought together the reference books, the texts, the journals that they thought would most effectively provide answers to the questions that were likely to be asked. They also gathered items that they thought patrons would enjoy. The difference was that most users never saw them making those decisions, never saw the maelstrom of wildly inaccurate reference books, idiotic texts, or simple trash that the librarians decided would waste space that could be put to better use. At present, all users face, on their desktops, this welter of information; people are brutally familiar with the riot of data available to them. This awareness makes them more appreciative of the need to turn these data into useable information.

A PROPOSED DEFINITION OF INFORMATION

Barwise and Seligman (1997) investigate the very possibility of one thing carrying information about another. They stress that there is noth-ing particularly modern or new about information:

> Once one reflects on the idea of information flowing, it can be seen to flow everywhere—not just in computers and along telephone wires but in every human gesture and fluctuation of the natural world. Information flow is necessary for life. It guides every action, molds every thought, and sustains the many complex interactions that make up any natural system or social organization. Clouds carry informa-tion about forthcoming storms; a scent on the breeze carries infor-mation to the predator about the location of prey; the rings of a tree carry information about its age; a line outside the gas station carries information about measures in the national budget; images on a tele-vision screen in Taiwan can carry information about simultaneous events in Britain; the light from a star carries information about the chemical composition of gases on the other side of the universe; and the resigned shrug of a loved one may carry information about a mental state that could not be conveyed in words.

> With this perspective, the current revolution appears to be prima-
> rily technological, with people discovering new and more efficient
> ways to transform and transmit information. Information is and al-
> ways was all around us, saturating the universe; now there are new
> ways of mining the raw material, generating new products, and ship-
> ping them to increasingly hungry markets. (p. 4)

Their investigation notes critical features of information that are some-
times overlooked:

> There are no completely safe ways of talking about information. The
> metaphor of information flowing is often misleading when applied
> to specific items of information even if the general picture is usefully
> evocative of movement in space and time. The metaphor of informa-
> tion content is even worse, suggesting as it does that the information
> is somehow intrinsically contained in the source and so is equally
> informative to everyone and in every context. (p. 12)

In recognition of the last point, that information is not like light,
which equally illuminates everything it touches, but depends integrally on
the receiver, one of their preliminary definitions becomes:

> To a person with prior knowledge k, r being F carries the information
> that s is G if in every state compatible with k in which r is F, s is G (and
> there is at least one state compatible with k in which s is not G). (p.
> 20)

They need the technical vocabulary for their theory, but one can stick
with the simple ideas that underlie this definition. The first clause is cen-
tral for distinguishing data from information.

To take a real, if somewhat embarrassing example, I was startled one
day to note that a small plastic device that belonged to my son, and was
lying on the library table, was quivering. I was astonished and assumed
that I was observing the death throes of something that might be impor-
tant. I called to my son to come quickly to save the device only to be told
with the scorn reserved for backward fathers that the quivering was the
way that a pager silently indicates that someone is paging you. The event
(r being F, in this case, the plastic device quivering) was the same for both
my son and me. But while that event carried the information for my son
that someone was paging him (s is G), it merely surprised me because I
lacked the needed prior knowledge k that the device was a pager and that
quivering is how pagers silently indicate a page. The parenthetical clause
in the definition rules out the claim that contingent events, such as the
device quivering, carry the information that some necessary fact, for ex-
ample, two plus two is four, is true; for while the first part of the definition
would fit that case, there is no state compatible with anyone's knowledge
k in which two plus two is not four.

Without the appropriate background knowledge, data are just data;
they are given to one but one has no idea what to do with them. Anyone

who seeks to teach recognizes this central factor; for some audiences a remark, a phrase, or a formula might be enough to convey the information that one seeks to transmit, but other audiences lack the background knowledge needed to see how such remarks are connected to the topic at hand. The theory applies to this case: a teacher ought to have enough background knowledge about instruction to recognize that the blank stares being given provide the information that one has not adequately prepared the audience.

Especially in the information age, libraries are, and should be, information providers, not just databases. This is not a new battle for libraries and their professionals. The Greek *bibliothêkê* became the Latin *bibliotheca* and literally meant "book-case," which could stand for an inert collection of books. But already with the library of Alexandria, the institution provided more than just shelving; it, along with the *Museion*, became gathering places for scholars. There is a need to have people with sufficient knowledge to turn the data found in books into information. Libraries are places where people learn, not just borrow.

The task continues today in every modern library where professionals seek to develop a collection adequate to provide clients with the background knowledge that will enable them to use the other items in the library in an informative way. Reference librarians are there to help users decipher the terms and references that mean nothing to the ordinary person. This distinguishes the information professional from the book clerk, and this makes the ethical life within the library profession more interesting than it is sometimes made out to be.

NEW FORMS OF INFORMATION FLOW

The discipline of library and informational science today faces opportunities and challenges analogous to those faced by modern biology as the federal government and the firm Celera Genomics announce the completion of the first draft of the human genome. This provides a generic representation of the total genetic composition of a human being. But the first warning that researchers give is that knowing the 30,000 or so genes encoded in human DNA, while fundamental, does not itself help explain how these contribute to the formation of the proteins which are in fact the building blocks of the organisms in which we are most interested. The genes are important data, but turning this into the information that will help develop better strains of plants or block horrific diseases in humans is going to require a great deal of intelligence and hard work.

Professionals in library and information science are being faced with a comparable task. The powerful search engines that are now available can often find thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of Web pages containing the code, the words for which one has searched. But while these

are important data, they are invariably too raw to be of much use. One needs to sift, organize, and coherently relate all these items in order to provide useful productive information. This is one way in which new technology is pressuring changes in the activities of libraries and their professionals.

In the past, one of the reasons why libraries were important was the scarcity of the resources that they contained. It was not long ago that very few families had complete encyclopedias in their homes. Now anyone with a connection to the Internet can go to Project Gutenberg (1971-2000) or to BiblioBytes (2000) and download for free texts that many local libraries were never able to stock. People with a Rocket eBook can go to the Rocket-Library (2000) to download for free the thousands of texts that are there. At the Rocket-Library one can even see, within each category, which texts have been most often downloaded. A philosopher is somewhat nonplused to see that in the Rocket-Library's category labeled "Philosophy" the most frequently sought after title is *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu which has been downloaded 14,595 times. A distant second in this category is The Constitution of the United States, which was downloaded 1,348 times. In the category labeled "computers," the most frequently downloaded title was *How to Become a Hacker,* which got downloaded 5,683 times.

These collections and sites are growing like weeds. Most of the free sites depend on volunteers who type in or scan in the text and upload it to the site. This means that not only are there frequently mistakes in what gets contributed, but the selection of what gets contributed is totally dependent on the whims and interests of the volunteers. A quick glance over the 337 titles in the Rocket-Library collection called "philosophy" shows mostly gaps, bizarre inclusions, and no coherence.

One may go to more organized sites such as Russell McNeil's *Great Books* site (Malaspina 1995-2000), which enables one to find references and texts on the Web or to other truly useful sites such as, in philosophy, EpistemeLinks (2000), but it becomes apparent when doing this that one is haphazardly trying to set up a reference desk, a task for which one typically has not the time, the knowledge, or the skills. It is not that there is material to which one does not have access; the problem is that there is ready access to too much material and one needs help from someone with the knowledge and the skills to organize that material in ways that will help one pursue the topics that one really should be pursuing.

Part of the mission of the new technological library is that it must become the reliable informational and educational portal to the flood of information in which everyone is drowning. This is a very tough high stakes game. There are huge sophisticated commercial portals that dominate the Web. MediaMetrix (2000) recently related its list of the fifty sites throughout the world that were visited during May 2000 by the greatest number of different individuals. After AOL with 59 million unique visi-

tors, they report Microsoft with 49 million, Yahoo with 48 million, then Lycos and Excite with 32 and 28 million visitors respectively that month. These are all central sites from which one may then go off to find whatever it is that one specifically had in mind. The modern library will have to compete with such giants, creating more coherent, more useful guides to the oceans of data becoming available. To do this well, libraries will have to be more discriminating than these commercial portals. That means that libraries must choose to include and to exclude various items. And this raises the issue of restricting access to data, which often provokes charges of censorship.

IS ANY RESTRICTION ON PROVIDING INFORMATION CENSORSHIP?

One recognizes that the very task of organizing data coherently and effectively brings with it some of the ethical concerns that information specialists face. One must know the material well enough to produce an adequate organization and not to include material that is incorrect or will mislead. Here one faces the ethical concerns of professionalism in the field and the worry that at times one may be guilty of informational malpractice or of censorship.

The ALA document on *Free Access to Libraries for Minors* states: "The selection and development of library resources should not be diluted because of minors having the same access to library resources as adult users. Institutional self-censorship diminishes the credibility of the library in the community, and restricts access for all library users" (American Library Association, 1991). When dealing with topics about which there is disagreement, one must decide which views to include and which to leave out, which to emphasize and which to barely note, which to present approvingly and which to mention only to dismiss. The American Library Association Code of Ethics notes of its members: "We significantly influence or control the selection, organization, preservation, and dissemination of information" (American Library Association, 1995). Such tasks immediately raise the concerns of bias, censorship, or being judgmental.

These same ethical concerns arise when one asks how available to make this information, how to disseminate it, and to whom. The most widely reported cases of censorship typically have to do with sexual content or content that is in some other way offensive—*Playboy* and *Huckleberry Finn* get frequent headlines. It is an interesting question, however, to ask whether the importance given to such cases derives from a concern with censorship or whether it lies rather in the fact that many people are offended. When people are offended, they complain, and when people complain, public institutions such as libraries must respond. The discussion arises from deliberating over what is the appropriate response to the complaints. But while opposition to censorship may often be appealed to

as grounds for ignoring some complaints, it is less clear that there is anything more inherently wrong in censorship than in seeking to minimize noise, odor, or crowding. Libraries regularly have patrons complain that the library has gotten too noisy, that they are offended by the odors of the homeless sleeping on the couches, or that areas have gotten too crowded. While frequently recognizing such complaints as legitimate, one also knows that noise, odor, and crowding are always with us; there is no way to totally eliminate them and there is nothing inherently wrong about them. It is worth exploring whether opposition to censorship is more like opposition to noise than like opposition to theft which, one thinks, is unacceptable in any form.

WHEN IS ONE CENSORING?

The definition of information proposed by Barwise and Seligman (1997) makes it clear that what might be called censorship at times is nothing more than the considered judgment of an expert that the person in question does not have the background knowledge required to interpret the raw data as information. It is not censorship to decide not to purchase, for a mostly monolingual American community, a reference book that is in German. One would dissuade a middle-school student who was looking for a science project from taking out a book on quantum mechanics. But at other times the concern is not that there is a lack of technical understanding, but that the information could lead to harmful results if the user has not thought carefully about how to use it.

The problem was driven home to me when I was preparing material to give a presentation on professional ethics and librarians for Iowa's state library convention. While thinking about these matters, I ran across an item in a magazine that said that Paladin Press had an Action Library series that included titles such as *Homemade Mortar Construction Manual* and *Homemade Grenade Launchers* and *High-Tech Harassment: How to Get Even with Anybody, Anytime*. I did not investigate the matter any further, but remarked to the convention that I sincerely hoped that their libraries censored such material and did not make it available in their Junior Reader section.

Being the information specialists that they are, one of the participants came up afterward and asked for the reference to the item that I had cited. Embarrassed, I sheepishly admitted that I had not brought it with me, but I promised, on getting back to my office, that I would send it to him. I did, and in my accompanying note to him I speculated that the whole thing might be a send-up, might be a joke. Two weeks later I received a note from him saying that it was no joke, and he included a copy of the catalog for Paladin Press, which included the above items and much more.

Today one can go to the Paladin Press Web site (Paladin Press, 2000) to review all the titles in the Action Library. How about the following for your video library?

> B.A.D. (video) *A Video Guide to Constructing and Firing Your Own Back-*
> *yard Artillery Device* by Ed Carson. With this video, an assortment of
> parts from your local hardware store and a few hours of semi-skilled
> labor, you too can have your own backyard artillery device. Powered
> by a few drops of gasoline and a shot of oxygen, it will shoot full beer
> cans up to 300 yards. For academic study only. Color, approx. 80
> min., VHS only. ISBN 087364932X $29.95

One does wonder which academic department might need such a
video. A visitor to this site can be linked to the burgeoning number of
hacker sites that will show a bright teenager how to snoop out other people's
passwords or how to crash their computers. Not only do these sites tell
one how to do it, they provide one with the software to accomplish all this.
Here is a selection from a list of programs that can be downloaded from
one such site (BlackCode, 2000):

- FLOODERS Crash computers and networks by sending huge amounts
  of information to them.
- NUKERS OOB nukers, multi-port nukers, etc. These tools crash com-
  puters and networks.
- TROJANS These tools give you full access to a victim's computer if
  they have a server running.
- CRACKING From password crackers, dial account rippers, bios crack-
  ers, etc., to password generators, wordlists, etc.
- ICQ related stuff... Password stealers, ICQ crashers, etc.
- MAILBOMBERS These programs send lots of e-mails to the victim.
  Some anonymously, others not.
- SPOOFERS Programs that let you hide or change your real ip identity
  on ftp and irc sessions etc.
- CARDING Programs that let you fake or counterfeit different credit
  card numbers.

An enterprising library could construct a lively exhibit on physical
and electronic mayhem. One could stock the entire Action Library and
set up Internet access to the Web sites that contain such material. Not
doing so is a form of censorship; one is refusing to make available mate-
rial that one knows a number of patrons would find very interesting, and
which they might very well put to use. One would hope that no public
library would do such a thing, and one knows what sort of outraged re-
sponse one would get from parents and other adults if such an exhibit
were mounted.

Yet there is no denying the complications raised by not providing
ready access to such material. The central reason for limiting access is the
worry that young people who are perfectly capable of understanding and
implementing this material, even more capable than most adults, may
lack the sense to realize what harm could result from experiments with

such items. It is exactly the same attitude that used to lead libraries to have restricted areas where only adults were allowed. If you are opposed to such restrictions you call them paternalistic, while if you favor them you call them prudent. But it gets driven home that there is nothing inherently bad or vile about the information in question. In fact, looking at the hacker sites, one may find oneself thinking that one really ought to investigate some of these tools, especially password sniffers and crackers, in order that one may see how they operate and so be aware of what precautions to take in order to better protect one's own passwords. Adults would be aghast and outraged if someone told them that they may not see such material.

But it is not the case that, since one is an adult, one should be allowed access to any material at all. Some people work on classified matters, and while one would love to know what they are doing, it is often recognized that there is no need for one to know, and that others knowing could have unforeseen consequences that might harm their project. In the library and information services profession, medical librarians handle large amounts of information that they do not allow even the most qualified researchers to see unless those researchers can provide explicit grounds for why they should be given access. Every university has a rare book room that invariably requires some sort of special authorization of a patron in order for that person to use certain material.

Once more, the information itself seems to be ethically inert; there is nothing inherently good or bad about the information. All of our ethical concerns turn toward the possible consequences of revealing the information, the possible uses to which the information might be put. Professionals who work in libraries know that this concern can occur at the most basic level. Some libraries have stopped requiring their staff to wear name tags for fear that doing so might provide information to patrons who might go on to harass them. These same libraries then face the perfectly reasonable complaint from patrons that they want the staff to wear name tags, since the tag helps the patrons identify who it was who helped them. Knowing a name enables patrons to call back to ask questions of the staff person who has already worked with them on a topic. It enables them to accurately praise or criticize the service that they received.

Censorship, then, turns out to be fundamentally an exercise in judging what possible consequences might result from providing various data and information, and then deciding which of those consequences are harmful enough that it is better to suppress or restrict access to the information rather than to allow those possible harmful results. It is a judgment not so much about the data or information itself, but about the potency of the data, about the possible uses to which these data might be put by this particular person. Seeing that, we realize that the activity is a complicated balancing act, one that requires weighing competing consid-

erations and coming to a judgment that we recognize perhaps cannot be infallibly correct but which we seek to make as rationally defensible as possible. One understands that, in order to avoid such difficult judgments, it is often simpler and cleaner to announce that no one will be restricted from any data. But it is not clear that practice can live up to this policy.

SOME COMPLEXITIES OF PRIVACY

Libraries frequently claim that one of the reasons that they do not limit access to, or interfere with the use of, materials by their patrons is because the library respects the privacy of others. Modern technologies are applying pressure about whether such claims can be consistently maintained. One may go to the site for Net Detective (2000) and read that:

> IN A FEW MINUTES YOU CAN . . . .
> . . . LOCATE old friends and classmates, lost relatives or a long lost love.
> LEARN ALL about friends, enemies, coworkers, your (ex)spouse, your boss, your new date.
> SCREEN your daughter's husband or new boyfriend.
> DIG OUT INFORMATION on your mysterious neighbors.
> INVESTIGATE your family history, DISCOVER SECRETS about anyone's past.
> FIND THAT GIRL you met in the traffic—through her license plate number.
> SKIP TRACE debtors and hidden assets,
> FOLLOW THE TRAIL of skipped renters and dead beat spouses.
> VERIFY anyone's employment history, income, and educational background.
> CONDUCT BACKGROUND CHECKS on employees before you hire them.
> TRACK DOWN people who have changed their name, address, e-mail, or phone number.
> FIND OUT addresses, car and property ownership, addresses from phone numbers.
> SEARCH FOR lawsuits, trial transcripts, and court orders.
> GET TO KNOW what's in your credit report and what the FBI has on you.
> Learn how to FOLLOW THE PAPER TRAIL almost everyone leaves.

In another place you are told that this program will enable you to:

> Locate E-MAILS, PHONE NUMBERS, and STREET ADDRESSES
> Get a COPY of your FBI File
> FIND DEBTORS and locate HIDDEN ASSETS
> Check DRIVING and CRIMINAL RECORDS
> Locate old CLASSMATES, missing FAMILY member, or a LONG LOST LOVE
> Do BACKGROUND CHECKS on EMPLOYEES before you hire them
> Investigate FAMILY HISTORY, BIRTH RECORDS, DEATH RECORDS, and SOCIAL SECURITY RECORDS
> Discover how UNLISTED PHONE NUMBERS are located

Check out your new or old LOVE INTEREST
Verify your CREDIT REPORTS so you can correct any WRONG info
Track anyone's INTERNET ACTIVITY to see the sites they visit
Explore SECRET WEB SITES that conventional SEARCH ENGINES miss
Discover ways to make UNTRACEABLE PHONE CALLS
Check ADOPTION RECORDS, locate MISSING CHILDREN, or RELATIVES
Dig up INFORMATION on FRIENDS, NEIGHBORS, or BOSS
Discover EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES from AROUND THE WORLD
Locate TRANSCRIPTS and COURT ORDERS from ALL 50 STATES
CLOAK your E-MAIL so your true ADDRESS can't be discovered
Find out how much ALIMONY your NEIGHBOR is paying
Discover how to CHECK your PHONES for WIRETAPS
PLUS MUCH MORE!!!

A satisfied customer of this product exclaims: "I have been telling my friends about Net Detective. I have also been snooping on my friends, and they don't even know it. I found out how much alimony and child support my next door neighbor gets, and that my neighbor across the street has some big credit problems. This is AWESOME!!!" One is relieved, seeing the name and city of this user, to note that this person is not one's neighbor. Given that this person provides name and city, one is tempted to track down this person's address—perhaps using the program—in order to warn the neighbors.

The product can be downloaded for twenty-five dollars, and so it would be well within the budget of any library to purchase several copies. The program insists that everything that the program does is "perfectly legal" and so a library might set up a terminal or two that patrons might use to probe the information that this program provides to its users.

Even if it is perfectly legal, libraries ought not set up workshops to help patrons learn how to investigate their neighbors in this way. But appeals to privacy will not resolve this question; respecting the privacy of the patron might give the patron free reign to invade the privacy of others. Finally, the claim that one must respect an individual's privacy is ultimately based on the concern that certain information about the individual could be used by others in harmful ways. The claim is, at base, a claim for the right to practice censorship with regard to such information, giving the classical argument that is usually used to justify censorship. The only difference is that, at present, the justification is widely accepted.

It may be that new technologies, especially the Internet, will relieve libraries of some of the pressures that they have had in the past over issues of censorship. It used to be that libraries were the primary portals to any of these data; libraries were almost the only place where anyone, young or old, could access certain information. Now the portals are mostly electronic. Today, a young (or old) person with a connection to the Web can

access more pornographic, violent, racist, or otherwise vicious material than any library could possibly house. A parent who is worrying about what his or her child is finding in the library is almost surely worrying about the wrong thing. Requests to have libraries remove offensive material may become as infrequent as requests to remove comic books from libraries; it is so easy to get them elsewhere that there is hardly any purpose to worrying anymore about their presence in the library.

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF ETHICAL DEBATES AND THE CONSEQUENCES FOR LIBRARIES

Ethical concerns have almost always been seen as having a strong practical aspect. Some see this as what makes ethical understanding uniquely different from other areas of knowledge. Unlike most of our scientific judgments, ethical judgments are essentially tied to how we shall act. At least since Aristotle it has been argued that a distinctive feature of our ethical thought is that it involves not just reason but *practical* reason. A large part of contemporary theoretical debate about the foundations of ethics turns on how continuous this practical ethical reasoning is with our reasoning in scientific realms. Some maintain that ethical and scientific reasoning proceed in basically the same ways, but that ethical reasoning simply has a distinctive subject matter. Others argue that ethical reasoning is discontinuous with, different in kind from, the sort of reasoning to be found in our search for truth among factual matters (Darwall et al., 1997, pp. 8-9). These others see differences—i.e., discontinuities in the fact that ethical judgments are aimed at action—that seem to involve the attitude of those making the judgment in integral ways and are essentially contestable. Obligations and values, they say, are not found lying about the universe in the way that stars and trees are. Given that, our mode of knowing them must differ as well.

This theoretical debate touches on library professionals in subtle ways. It is natural to distinguish facts and values. While some philosophers do hold that ethical properties and facts can be investigated in the same way that natural properties and facts can, most do not. The more common view is to deny that statements of value or of obligation provide *information* about their subject matter; rather they express one's attitude toward one's preferences concerning the matter. And, most distinctively, ethical statements involve the claim that we, and others, *ought* to have such attitudes and preferences in this matter and that we should behave accordingly. This is what makes ethics *normative* and provides it with its distinctive contrast from the natural sciences.

It is here that information professionals have made substantive decisions. A central theme running through the ALA's *Code of Ethics*, through the *Library Bill of Rights* and its various interpretations, is that library professionals will not take a stand on ethical matters beyond the insistence

that patrons should have equal and open access to whatever resources they desire. An information-professional might correct you were you to state that Chicago is the capital of the state of Illinois, but that same professional apparently will refrain from criticizing your opinion were you to state that sadism is to be encouraged. Notice that making such distinct responses assumes that the two items of belief are radically different in kind: the one is factual information about which a professional can make judgments, the other is not.

This contrast is widely felt by many. It has led some theorists to suggest that ethical notions at base are not features of the world but really result from the social procedures such as agreements and contracts that humans enter into with one another. Such procedures embody our notions of fairness and professionalism. Even if the actual consequences at times may be awkward or even unfortunate, so long as the agreed upon procedures have been followed, there is no cause for complaint.

Among the attractive aspects of such theories is that they can explain how it can be maintained that people have been treated equitably even when the material results for those people are wildly unequal. For example, so long as the balls in a lottery drawing are randomly chosen, no participants can complain that they have been treated unfairly just because someone else won a million dollars while they won nothing. So long as the procedures are followed, resulting inequities in the outcomes do not count as unethical or unfair treatment. Similarly, so long as elections are run cleanly, so long as admissions committees or hiring committees treat all applications alike, the results, no matter how disappointing to some, can be ethically justified.

This sort of procedural characterization of what is ethically relevant is typical for the official statements of most professions, including those of library and informational professionals. The codes of professions lay out professional behavior stating what procedures a professional in that field must follow. An attractive feature of such professional statements is that someone in the field may then defend his or her actions against criticism that the actions led to unfortunate results. The defense is that the stated procedures, the standards of professional behavior, were met. Defense lawyers, for example, are often criticized for enabling a criminal, maybe even a violent criminal, to go free by appealing to some legal technicality in the arrest process. The defense lawyers' response is that their professional obligation is to use every possible legal means of defense on behalf of their client, and that the solution is for the arresting authorities, next time, to observe the technicalities.

These separate concerns raise the more general question of whether, as an information professional, one may do things that an ordinary citizen ought not to do, or not do things that an ordinary citizen would be expected to do. This sometimes gets labeled the "separatist thesis"

(Gewirth, 1986). The thesis maintains that professionals in a field may at times behave in ways that would be considered wrong for any layperson— i.e., for anyone not a professional in the field. Obvious cases involve physicians cutting into the bodies of patients or giving their patients powerful drugs. Because of the physician's professional role, we allow her or him to do such things, while we would condemn anyone from outside the profession for such actions and would even prevent them from performing them. Another claim commonly made is that professionals may withhold information about another human because of the professional relation that they have with that person. Priests, doctors, lawyers, and others claim a prerogative of confidentiality; they maintain that, because of the special relation that they have with people who use their professional services, they should be allowed to refuse to provide any information about these clients to others. Even in cases where society could legally compel others to reveal what they know about an individual, various professions maintain that, if the individual is one of their clients, they need not do what is morally and legally expected of others.

THE RIGHTS AND RULES MENTIONED IN THE
ALA CODE OF ETHICS

There is something of the separatist approach in the ALA *Code of Ethics* and in the *Library Bill of Rights*. The central issue that gets raised is whether subscribing to such a code insulates one from complaints that would be recognized as legitimate in most other circumstances. If an adult were to give a ten-year old child a book that provided directions on how to make a home-made explosive device from material that could be bought at the local hardware store, and if that child ended up getting injured in the attempt, society would hold that adult morally responsible for contributing to the child's injuries. People would be even more outraged if it was learned that the child's mother had asked that adult whether her son had borrowed any books, only to be told that it was a private matter between the lender and her son about which she had no right to be told. Such a person would be seen as merely piling deceit on top of providing information to minors that could bring those minors bodily harm.

But now consider the situation where the adult is a professional who subscribes to principle III in the ALA Code of Ethics which says: "We protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted" (American Library Association, 1995), along with principle V of the Library Bill of Rights, "A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views" (American Library Association, 1996b). This latter right gets spelled out in considerable detail in the additional Interpretation, entitled *Free Access to Libraries for Minors* where, among other things, it is stated that,

"Librarians and governing bodies should not resort to age restrictions on access to library resources in an effort to avoid actual or anticipated objections from parents or anyone else" (American Library Association, 1991).

The issue raised is not peculiar to the American Library Association or even to professional groups. It touches on one of the deepest divides on ethical matters generally: Do we judge matters to be right or wrong by what rules are followed or by what results are produced?

Giving primacy to following rules has many attractions. Rules provide the demanding call of obligation, they identify something that *must* be done. In addition, rules tend to be short enough that one can understand them well enough to know when they have been followed and when not. In this way they provide relatively clear norms to follow and something short and specific to which one can appeal when criticized. The problem with results is that it seems practically impossible to identify all the possible relevant results that might follow from an action or proposed policy. And even if one has some idea concerning what results are likely to follow from an action or policy, one still faces the daunting task of evaluating those results, deciding which are beneficial and which are harmful, and finally one must weigh the resulting benefits against the resulting harms before being able to decide whether one has done the right thing.

And yet, attractive as rules are, thinking that the rules that get followed exhaust the ethical content of the situation is an ugly trait that occurs in some of the worst forms of bureaucracy. When rules get disconnected from the consequences that result from following those rules, people can be very badly treated. Insisting that one's obligation is merely to follow the rules leads one to see one's ethical life as a life of avoiding the blame of having broken any rules. But in our ethical lives we need to attend not only to the rules, the principles of our professional or personal lives; we also need to be attentive to what effects following those rules may have on those with whom we live. Our sole goal ought not be to be morally blameless; we would also like to contribute to making better the lives of those around us and who share our communities.

Once again technology provides interesting possibilities for weighing just how bureaucratic one may have become. If your ethical approach comes down to asking the staff in the library to behave toward patrons with the same cooperative nonjudgmental attitude that the library's computer terminals provide, something is missing.

Profession after profession is discussing how much of their activities could, and should, be replaced by computers and their surrounding technologies. Those who teach are being asked what it is that they do in their face-to-face meetings with students in classes that could not be done asynchronously and at a distance. It is a fair complaint that if all that happens in one's classroom is that one reads from last year's lecture notes, one might as well put those notes on the Web and let the students sleep in.

More positively, and here some library and information schools have been at the forefront, perhaps one could design online courses that do an even better job than one could do in a traditional university classroom. New technologies provide alternative ways of doing things that have been done the same way for centuries. The field of medicine is facing the very real possibility that, as the genes and proteins that indicate or cause certain diseases are identified, certain long-cherished skills and specialties may disappear, replaced by computer-driven procedures that will more accurately diagnose problems and prescribe even more targeted cures ("Survey of the Human Genome," 2000).

Libraries are making similar self-examinations. Given the increasingly convenient access to reference material and other documents over the Internet, what items does a library need to physically possess? Just as people are questioning whether there is the continuing need for classrooms in which teachers and students meet, one might question whether there is still the need for the substantial physical edifices that most still have in mind when they think of libraries. Such buildings are expensive to build and to maintain; they call for large expenditures on many staff and on the purchase and upkeep of the physical collection maintained within the building. Rather than build their own, members of a community might decide instead to simply subscribe to www.library-online.com (this site is fictitious).

While one may be completely opposed to the suggestion in the previous paragraph, it is a real concern and that concern should be one considered by library professionals to reflectively explore, articulate, and explain to the public the benefits that a real brick and mortar building, staffed with real people who are knowledgeable in the field, has for the community. But this will be a harder case to make if library professionals present themselves as being the absolutely neutral rule-following automatons that their computer terminals are.

And, of course, library professionals should not think of themselves in that way, nor do they. They are inventive, innovative, and deeply involved in seeking to provide material, exhibits, and services that they think will benefit their patrons and the community. Our ethical lives are shaped not just by what we must do, by our obligations, but also by what attracts us, what we find worthwhile in life. St. Augustine of Hippo had argued that the central force that moves us to act is what we love, *Pondus meum amor meus; eo feror quocumque feror* (My weight is my love, I am borne by it wherever I am borne) (Augustine, 396, Book 13, chap. 9, section 13.9.10). His view was that, if you love the right things, all the rest will follow. His famous moral advice was, *Dilige, et quod vis, fac* (Love, and do what you will) (Augustine 406-407, p. 2033). But he was assuming that your love was directed toward the appropriate object which, for him, was God. At other times he recognized that our loves are what move us, but that we can love

things we ought not. He agreed that humans choose on the basis of what they love, but he doubted that any humans had the power to decide what it is that they shall love. As a profoundly religious thinker, he concluded that ending up loving the right things is not something within the power of humans themselves to choose; it must, he thought, be the result of divine grace.

Others are not so pessimistic about the ability of humans to shape what they or others come to appreciate, come to love. One must be optimistic if one thinks that one human can teach another (Augustine, consistent with the inexorable logic of his own position, concludes that, strictly speaking, no human can teach another human). This is the aspect of library professionals that makes them, and their libraries, such a central vibrant part of a community's intellectual, social, and moral life. Libraries and their staffs cannot pretend, must not pretend, that they are simply neutral in such regards.

Philosophers have to continually remind themselves that moral matters, ethical matters, are not limited to matters of duty, to obligations. Central to our moral and ethical lives also is what we value, what we think is worthwhile in a human life. Foot (1958) has argued that the promotion of human well-being and the prevention of cruelty provide the material content of our ethical concerns. We have real recognizable results that we are interested in attaining. Merely following certain prescribed rules would be an empty exercise unless doing so fairly reliably led to results that are recognized as in some way bettering matters.

Seeking to make the contrast between obligation and value, another philosopher, David Wiggins, has suggested that we think of our ability to ethically value features of the world as the unique ability that humans have to provide "a kind of attractive highlighting of the landscape of choice" (Darwall, et al., 1997, footnote 91). And here the word "attractive" is meant to be more than cosmetic. The goal is to show some of the choices that are available as desirable, as ones that humans come to see as having features that an attentive human will find attractive to her or him.

This describes a central role of a good library. A library is more than just a utilitarian institution that enables patrons to conveniently check out whatever material the patrons antecedently desire. Libraries do, and should, inculcate those desires. In St. Augustine's terms, libraries seek to develop the loves in their users for topics and materials that are worthwhile. Libraries are not quite the neutral clearinghouses that interpretations of the various codes would sometimes lead one to think.

Simple thought experiments of the kind that have already been mentioned bring this out. Libraries regularly mount exhibits or workshops by means of which library professionals seek to acquaint patrons with topics and materials that library professionals think are worthy of the patrons' interest. These provide one of the best indicators of the values that the

library professionals hold, and which they wish to encourage in others. Here, matters are not perhaps like the lending policy, that is, morally neutral. A library might very well have a copy of the Marquis de Sade's *Justine*, and the library might even insist that no patron will be forbidden from reading or borrowing the book, but the local library won't create a colorful exhibit on the literature describing the attractions and pleasures of sadism. One could create an exhibit which would probably fascinate many on Nicholas Saunders, who wrote the book *E for Ecstasy* and whose posthumous work on the spiritual use of psychoactive drugs can be found online (Ecstasy.org). And popular as they might be, a library will resist setting up exhibits displaying the literature that will help junior high school students create home-made explosives or learn how to become computer hackers. No library is going to bedeck the exhibit area by its entry with "The Best of Pornography" or with a display on "The Arguments for Racism." Why not?

The ALA document, "Access to Electronic Information, Services, and Networks: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*," states:

> Libraries and librarians should not deny or limit access to information available via electronic resources because of its allegedly controversial content or because of the librarian's personal beliefs or fear of confrontation. Information retrieved or utilized electronically should be considered constitutionally protected unless determined otherwise by a court with appropriate jurisdiction. (American Library Association, 1996a)

It also insists that: "Libraries and librarians should not deny access to information solely on the grounds that it is perceived to lack value." But, in the final paragraph, the same document states: "The provision of access does not imply sponsorship or endorsement."

And that is the point. Libraries and librarians do sponsor and endorse some things while they disapprove of and criticize others; unlike many citizens, for example, they disapprove of censorship. Library professionals and the institutions they staff really do have concern for the well-being of their patrons and others in the community, and they seek to minimize the harm that might come to anyone. The exhibits imagined above would almost surely have little benefit and could lead to harmful effects. Libraries favor familiarizing their patrons with material and resources which will make the patrons' lives healthier, expose the patrons to things of inherent interest and beauty, open up opportunities for investigation and development by the patrons, help patrons see all their fellow citizens in an appreciative light, and ultimately, it is hoped, make our communities better places.

None of the above judgments is neutral. They require substantial choices concerning what is worthwhile, what is beneficial, and what is harmful. These are not matters on which everyone agrees, and libraries would be dissembling to suggest that they do not take stands on these matters.

There are views and programs that libraries do and should promote, and making the choice to endorse some of these necessarily closes off making other choices.

In this regard, libraries are similar to many other institutions in seeking a balance between the neutrality expected of public institutions and the expectation that public institutions will make a positive contribution to the communities they serve. There are published statements of the principles by which public bodies shall abide. But those statements are made against a background where it is assumed that the institution and those who run it have the interests of the patrons and the community at heart. Libraries and their staff have long been adept at developing lively innovative ways to seek to get their patrons, young and old, engaged with the many productive possibilities that there are for humans to pursue. Well-chosen collections of books and selections of magazines along with other materials provide the basis; exhibits and lively programs seek to show library users the attractive aspects of these possibilities. The challenge now is how to do something comparable when the data and information are no longer contained in the packets, such as books, journals, videos, and the like with which we were raised. The Web now gives access to information that used to come contained in the controllable form of books whose authors were often known, whose publishers had reputations, and whose reviews could be checked to be assured of the quality of what the book contained.

ARE RIGHTS ENOUGH?

The discussion of rights takes up a large part of contemporary ethical discussions (Dworkin, 1977), as it has for hundreds of years, and the founding documents of the United States rely heavily on the notion. Besides the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness mentioned in the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights in the Constitution mentions the right to peaceably assemble, to keep and bear arms, to be secure against unreasonable searches and seizures, to a speedy and public trial by an impartial jury, and the Ninth Amendment warns that: "The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people" (Bill of Rights, 1791).

The many lawyers involved with the Constitutional Convention were influenced by having read William Blackstone, who had defended the claim that we have an absolute right to life and liberty and that:

> The third absolute right, inherent in every Englishman, is that of
> property: which consists in the free use, enjoyment, and disposal of
> all his acquisitions, without any control or diminution, save only the
> laws of the land . . . . So great moreover is the regard of the law for
> private property, that it will not authorize the least violation of it; no,
> not even for the general good of the whole community. . . . In vain

> may it be urged, that the good of the individual ought to yield to that
> of the community; . . ." (Blackstone, 1899, Book I, chap. 1, p. *139)

But there is an equally strong tradition that complains that such appeals to absolute rights are fictions, attempts to pretend that they are features of the world that exist independently of whether a society agrees to them. In the second article of the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789), the claim was made that: "The aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression." Jeremy Bentham famously complained in his *Anarchical Fallacies* that "*Natural rights* is simple nonsense: natural and imprescriptible rights, rhetorical nonsense,—nonsense upon stilts" (in Waldron, 1987, p. 53). It is not that Bentham denied all discussions of rights, but he thought that disconnecting rights from the laws that gave them was to pretend that they could have an existence independent of the society that constituted them. "Right and law are correlative terms: as much so as son and father . . . . A natural right is a son that never had a father" (p. 73).

Bentham is reflecting on the results of the French Revolution, and he sees the language of rights, so central to that event, as "terrorist language" (Waldron, 1987, p. 53). Instead of calling for a careful investigation and weighing of the factors relevant to the judgment at hand, the language of natural rights, Bentham claims (in Waldron, 1987):

> require nothing but a hard front, a hard heart and an unblushing
> countenance. It is from the beginning to the end so much flat asser-
> tion: it neither has any thing to do with reason nor will endure the
> mention of it. It lays down as a fundamental inviolable principle what-
> ever is in dispute: admit it, you are an honest fellow, a true patriot;
> question it, or so much as ask for a proof of it, you are whatever is
> most odious, sinning equally against truth and against conscience.
> The strength of this argument is in proportion to the strength of
> lungs in those who use it. . . . Weak as it is in the character of an
> argument, it is proportionably strong as an insult and a menace; and
> indeed, the plain and simple version of it is a menace and nothing
> else. List yourself under my banner, join in my howl, swallow my non-
> sense—or you are a tyrant, or a slave, an accomplice of tyrants . . . .
> (p. 74)

Readers are sometimes shocked by the vehemence of Bentham's attack on natural rights, but it is worth remembering how shocked people were by the use to which the appeal to rights was put in the French Revolution. And there is no denying the power of the argument contained within Bentham's vehement attacks. The same argument has been continued by others in less colorful language.

MacIntyre (1984) argued against both Bentham's principle of utility and against the notion of natural or human rights. MacIntyre complains that the notion of rights is in fact a social invention that pretends to have

an independent natural existence, where this has no basis in fact. He argues that one sees the implausibility of the claim that rights are naturally existing features applying to all humans when among them are claimed to exist "the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay" in Article 24 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1997).

Natural rights are claimed to be naturally occurring, objective phenomena, when they are no such thing. Human wants, of course, occur regularly in us all. As had Bentham, MacIntyre (1984, p. 67) sees a tendency to identify individual wants with natural rights; and, once a want becomes a right, the claim is made that no one may interfere with the wish to fulfill that want whether it is good for one or not.

MacIntyre (1984) sees such an approach to rights as providing a narrow limited view of what a human is. On a rights-based view, humans are treated as egoists whose wants are to be fulfilled. But as MacIntyre stresses, the good for us as humans essentially involves others whom we love, with whom we work, with whom we live. "The egoist is . . . always someone who has made a fundamental mistake about where his own good lies and someone who has thus and to that extent excluded himself from human relationships" (p. 229). MacIntyre argues that those who see morality as little more than obedience to rules that require us not to interfere with others' wants have lost the central vision "of a public good which is prior to and able to be characterized independently of the summing of individual desires and interests" (p. 236).

Opposition to such a narrow view of humans leads MacIntyre to put the concept of a human *practice* at the center of his theory. A human is more than a retention pond of pleasures and pains, desires and fears on which we must not trespass. Being the humans that we are essentially involves what we seek to do in our lives, what efforts we give to which projects, and how well we carry those out. MacIntyre (1984) claims that it is human activity, not human feeling, that leads us to enrich our lives by discovering new ends and even new conceptions of what our ends should be (p. 273).

And this is really the central conclusion that this article would like to press for its relevance to the ethical role of libraries. Yes, of course, libraries provide material for people's entertainment, material that gives them pleasure. But to run a good library is more than to be in the entertainment business. Libraries are staffed by information professionals, not by entertainers. Libraries as institutions play crucial roles in the various projects that people within the community have in their lives. Libraries can suggest and even promote various ends and highlight the means needed to attain those ends; they can assist in mastering the means and achieving the ends. Libraries can note the drawbacks and harmful effects of other ends or means and even refuse to assist on certain projects.

Is this to take an ethical stand on these matters? Yes. Should libraries do this? Of course. Libraries should present ideals, help innovatively with the projects of users and suggest more efficient, more productive, ways to attain the goals that a patron is after. Libraries should not be hesitant to suggest better or more appropriate goals on learning from the patron what the purpose of the project is. This is what libraries do and always have done. The lesson to be drawn from the preceding criticisms of theories of rights and theories of utility is that one does not want to let a narrow view of ethics push one toward a narrow view of libraries.

THE LANGUAGE OF RIGHTS

The argument here is not that the various codes should be abandoned. It is rather that the codes must be seen against the rich background of activities that make libraries so precious. The code is a leitmotiv, but not the whole orchestral score. We need to understand and express the code within the setting that gives it sense.

Mary Ann Glendon is Learned Hand Professor of Law at Harvard Law School. Glendon (1991) is concerned that "American rights talk is set apart by the way that rights, in our standard formulations, tend to be presented as absolute, individual, and independent of any necessary relation to responsibilities" (p. 12). She points out that the new right of privacy has taken over the absoluteness that used to be attributed to the right of property (p. 40), and she relates the interesting historical fact that the major impetus for creating a legal right of privacy was technological—it was the combination of instant photography along with increasingly rapid modes of communication that led certain famous people to seek legal recourse to prevent photographs of them being sent around the world (p. 49).

Glendon (1991) repeats the concerns expressed by Bentham and MacIntyre: "Unfortunately, American political discourse has become vacuous, hard-edged, and inflexible just when it is called upon to encompass economic, social, and environmental problems of unparalleled difficulty and complexity . . . . When political actors resort to slogans and images rather than information and explanations, they hinder the exercise of citizenship" (pp. 172, 173).

Perhaps Glendon's diagnosis better illuminates the concern that is being expressed here about discussions of ethics in libraries. As noted, libraries in fact do the very sorts of things that Bentham, MacIntyre, and Glendon think are critical for the ethical lives of our communities. But when library professionals talk about ethics, they typically express rights talk, and they do so in ways that suggest that there are never exceptions.

CONCLUSION

Library professionals are wise to have published codes that outline central concerns of their profession. But they need to be open to the fact

that their ethical lives involve a great deal more than what is found in the articulated rules of the code. Library professionals should make it clear to their patrons, and to the public, that while they are rule-guided, they are not rule-governed. They are teachers, not automatons.

Another way to put the point is that libraries should not see their primary mode of interaction with the public as one in which they cater to the community, but rather one in which they engage the community. Those who teach are being told that they could be much more effective if they integrated what is called "active learning" into their instruction. Students learn best not when they are listening to some professor drone on, but when they have a project, when they try to do something in the field. Libraries have always excelled at this; they are the active learning centers of the community. They are where people go to develop, flesh out, and enrich various projects in their lives. Like any good teacher, while tolerant of a student's interests, the library should be prepared to warn someone of the folly or harmfulness of pursuing certain lines of investigation and should show how the matter could be done better. This may at times meet resistance, but that is usually required for generating warmth and life.

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