Information Ethics: The Duty, Privilege and Challenge of Educating Information Professionals

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ABSTRACT

QUESTIONS CONCERNING ETHICS AND HOW AN individual can act ethically when confronted with issues related to libraries, archives, and, more broadly, information have ever been present in our professional lives whenever individuals considered their own principles and actions as related to creating, organizing, managing, using, disseminating, preserving, and providing access to information and documents in all forms. To address the duty, privilege, and challenge of educating librarians, archivists, and other information professionals to understand what ethics is and how to make ethical decisions in their personal lives and work, the School of Information Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh developed a Dean's Forum on Information Ethics, a course offered twice a year, a Web site, and an information ethics program.

This article describes the history and evolution of information ethics at the University of Pittsburgh and describes the course and its three components: an introduction addressing the reason and need for moral instruction and ethical reflection; the necessary steps for facing up to and resolving a moral dilemma; and the ethical issues in librarianship, information technology, and management. The course and lecture series are considered within the broader context of the school's curriculum and the multicultural international society.

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INTRODUCTION

Questions concerning ethics and how an individual can act ethically when confronted with issues related to libraries, archives, and, more broadly, information, have been ever present in our professional lives whenever individuals considered their own principles and actions as related to creating, organizing, managing, using, disseminating, preserving, and providing access to information and documents in all forms.

Librarians, archivists, and other information professionals often encounter conflicts when their own individual values differ with those of others or with those of the library or of the organization for which they work. While other articles in this issue address examples from individual libraries and organizations, this article is focused on the duty, privilege, and challenge of educating librarians, archivists, and other information professionals to understand what ethics is and how to make ethical decisions in their personal lives and work.

WHY STUDY INFORMATION ETHICS?

In our increasingly complex, multicultural, and information-intensive society, many critical issues related to information access and use are misunderstood, inadequately considered, or even ignored. These issues may involve balancing individual and societal needs (such as in protecting both an individual's privacy and the public's right to know); resolving conflicting views about library collection policies between librarians and parents of schoolchildren; resolving disagreements between individual archivists and retention policies concerning electronic records; understanding one's own view of what is ethical; or many other topics. In a growing number of instances, decisions concerning information access and use are placing information professionals in sensitive, and sometimes vulnerable, positions.

Knowing how to create, find, manage, access, preserve, and use information effectively provides a form of power to the information professional, whether it is through speed of access to needed sources, the ability to hack into a system, or complex skills to find and create new multimedia information resources. Information professionals, as well as those who rely on them to provide a wide array of services to help people work more efficiently, compete with others, or improve the quality of their lives, must recognize and understand that with power comes responsibility. Like those who acquired power from their knowledge of how to split the atom, librarians, archivists, and other information professionals must learn to understand the possible and real consequences of their actions, reflect on the alternative choices they may make, and determine how best to use their power and act responsibly.

Individuals seeking to become professional librarians or archivists, or seeking to work in other types of cultural heritage institutions or

information-related organizations must first learn to develop and hone their own individual sense of ethics, live an ethical life, and be educated about ethical issues in their professional life. In addition, the information professional must learn how—and be ready—to make ethical decisions and take ethical actions (Hammond, Keeney, & Raiffa, 1998).

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY OF INFORMATION ETHICS AT THE SCHOOL OF INFORMATION SCIENCES

Initial Idea

In 1980, when she was executive director of the U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS), Toni Carbo encountered numerous examples of ethical issues related to libraries, archives, and other information-related organizations and companies. She had learned over the previous years while working in libraries and with database producers about the many information policy issues facing decision makers, especially those issues relating to access. These issues included who should have access to what information; how to protect individual privacy, corporate proprietary information, and national security data; the best way to provide equitable access to individuals with disabilities; how to make complex scientific and technical data easily comprehensible by the lay public; along with a wide range of other difficult questions. At NCLIS, as she visited small libraries in rural remote areas, addressed questions of meeting the diverse needs of an increasingly multilingual and multicultural society, learned of archivists' concerns about saving "America's memory," responded to questions concerning archiving of data from land and weather satellites, and tried to help provide library and information services to meet the country's needs, she quickly learned that the problems were even more complex and challenging. What became increasingly apparent to her was that little was being done to help individuals understand the ethical implications of their actions and how they could behave ethically and make the best decisions.

In 1981, in an "endpoint" article in the *American Society for Information Science Bulletin,* Carbo asked whether a code of ethics was needed for information professionals. In a response to the article, she learned that ASIS already had a code of ethics, but that it had lain dormant and unpublicized for some time. Others in ASIS were also interested in reviving and updating the code. The ASIS Professionalism Committee undertook this responsibility. The revised draft code was completed in June 1990 (Barnes, 1990). She also approached the Dean of the School of Library and Information Science at Catholic University of America to see if the school would be willing to work with her to develop a course on ethics related to the information society. Because of other priorities at the university, the school was not interested in taking this on, and the idea of a course remained only an idea.

In 1986 when she became Dean of the School of Information Sciences (then the School of Library and Information Science), Carbo was asked by Stephen Almagno about her individual goals for the school. In addition to the three she had identified (pushing for excellence in all the school did, increasing funded research, and developing a high quality continuing education), she added her own personal interest in developing a course on the ethics of information in society (now known as Information Ethics) as an initial step in promoting education, reflection, and action on the ethical issues of the information professions. Almagno offered to help, and together they decided to begin with a lecture series that, it was hoped, would raise awareness of the topic and encourage attention to, reflection on, and action about ethical issues.

Lecture Series

Selecting the first lecturer was a difficult decision for Carbo and Almagno because they believed it was essential to find someone who was widely respected, had outstanding credentials, would attract a good audience, and would present an intelligent and thought-provoking lecture. After considerable discussion, on January 26, 1989, the school hosted its first "SIS Dean's Forum on Information Ethics." The Reverend Robert Drinan, S. J. Professor of Law and faculty advisor to the *Georgetown Journal of Legal Ethics* and former U. S. Representative from Massachusetts, spoke on "The Ethics of Information in Society." The current information ethics Web site, www.sis.pitt.edu/~ethics, gives a complete listing of the eighteen lecturers and their topics. From Drinan to Martin Walker (then Washington, DC-based bureau chief of *The Guardian*), and from John Leo, University of Rhode Island (who spoke on Robert Mapplethorpe) to Pamela Samuelson, professor of Law at the University of Pittsburgh (who questioned "Who Owns Information?") and Robert Park, professor of Physics, University of Maryland (who addressed the "Ethics of Information in Science and Technology") the forum has been immensely successful. Interested individuals from the larger academic and local community joined SIS faculty and students in an experience which Vice-Provost Baranger described as being "what a university is all about."

Master's Level Course

In fall 1990, Carbo and Almagno introduced a team-taught, master's level course, then called "The Ethics of Information in Society." The course's stated purpose was "to educate students about ethical issues in the Information Profession."

Over the next several years, interest in the course continued to grow as students studying library science (now library and information science), information science, and telecommunications took the course and were joined by students from business, law, psychology, and other majors at the University of Pittsburgh, as well as students from Carnegie Mellon

University. Because of student interest and to accommodate their sched-
ules, the course was offered twice a year, both during the day and in the
evening.

Doctoral Students

Several doctoral students have worked with Almagno. A one-time doc-
toral seminar based on a close reading of Plato's *Republic* has been fol-
lowed by doctoral students doing both independent research and doc-
toral dissertations under his direction. Jeffrey Huber, presently on the
faculty at Texas Woman's University, editor of the forthcoming *Journal of
Gay and Lesbian Studies,* and internationally recognized specialist on infor-
mation ethics and AIDS, was the first SIS student to write and defend his
dissertation on information ethics under the guidance of Almagno. Cur-
rently, doctoral candidate, Joyce Li, is writing her dissertation on the sub-
ject of "Internet Privacy: A Study of the Center for Democracy and
Technology's Influence on Legislation and Opinion, 1995-2000." Carbo
chairs her dissertation committee and Almagno is a member of the com-
mittee.

Impact on Students

Although most courses have an impact on students' preparation for
their careers and often on their individual lives as well, graduates report
that the information ethics courses have had a much greater effect on
their personal and professional lives than other courses. Over the years
since the course was introduced, scores of students have sent unsolicited
letters and e-mail (or have spoken directly to Carbo and others) about
how the course changed them.

In 1998, SIS graduate and first Information Ethics Fellow, Barbara
Rockenbach, wrote an article in the *Journal of Information Ethics* in which
she quoted Almagno:

> Much of the evidence that I have of the course's impact is either
> confidential or anecdotal. Two students, Jeffrey Huber and Leslie
> Lee, have gone public and allowed me to publish their feelings about
> the course. Dr. Huber commented: "having had the opportunity to
> study Information Ethics under the direction of Stephen Almagno
> has proven to be invaluable. Insights Professor Almagno presented
> in the classroom and in subsequent discussion continue to provoke
> ethical consideration in my current role as researcher, practitioner,
> and educator. Ethical reflection, where the information-knowledge-
> wisdom continuum is concerned, is no longer a luxury but a neces-
> sity."

Leslie Lee, the collection services librarian at Jacob Burns Law Library,
wrote:

> Of all my experiences in graduate school, the most enduring is the
> way Professor Almagno constantly challenged, encouraged, and

guided his Information Ethics students to love the questions. To me, that is precisely what the course is all about—being open and willing to examine life critically and to appreciate the process of ethical decision-making as much as, if not more than, the decision itself.

And, in 1999, the university's Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs informed Almagno that, in a student survey conducted by the Vice Chancellor's office, he had been identified as someone "who has made a significant and positive impact on their lives."

Ethics Fund

In 1996, to recognize and honor Almagno for his twenty-five years of excellence in teaching at the University of Pittsburgh, contributions were received from foundations and individuals, including many former students, and the Information Ethics Fund was established. Its purpose is to support:

• an Information Ethics Fellowship,
• acquisitions of print and non-print library resource materials,
• travel expenses and honoraria for Dean's Forum Speakers, and
• participation by Almagno and students in information ethics conferences.

Information Ethics Fellows

The Information Ethics Fellowship was established in 1996 to help promote and support the information ethics program at SIS. The fellowship is for students interested in information ethics or in pursuing a career in the field of information ethics. The fellowship is funded by donations from the Information Ethics Fund. To apply for the fellowship, the student must be currently enrolled or accepted into Pitt's SIS master's or doctoral program. Applications are reviewed by a committee of faculty and an outside expert, and recommendations are made to the dean, who selects the fellows.

Former fellows have been hired by prestigious universities (Yale), highly influential organizations (QVC Inc.), and most of them have already published articles in the *Journal of Information Ethics* (edited by SIS alumnus Robert Hauptman) and other leading journals.

The Web Site

Established in 1997, the Web site was created to provide information to the SIS and University of Pittsburgh community as well as incoming students and individuals from around the world interested in information ethics. It is the responsibility of the Information Ethics Fellow to maintain and update the Web site. Currently, with input and cooperation from Capurro (head of the International Center for Information Ethics), Marti Smith (Palmer School of Library and Information Science), Nancy Zimmerman (University of South Carolina, Columbia, College of Library

and Information Science), and Barbara Rockenbach (Yale University), efforts are underway to have the Web site reach an even wider audience.

A Course in Process

In the twenty years since the idea of a course on information ethics was first conceived, many of the issues addressed remain constant (although the circumstances in which they exist have undergone a dramatic revolution), and some issues are new and "hot." The course and the lecture series have, naturally, evolved over time. Initially the course was experimental in every sense. But now, benefiting (in his own words and admission) from the great contributions of Alfino, Pierce, Mason, Stichler, Smith, Hauptman, and especially the thinking of Martha Nussbaum, Almagno sees the course based on three main components. First, he provides an introduction addressing the reason and need for moral instruction and ethical reflection. Next, he tries to teach the necessary steps for facing up to and resolving a moral dilemma. And finally, he looks at ethical issues in librarianship, information technology, and management. And basic to the entire course—as a constantly repeated theme—is the conviction that moral education and ethical reflection is first and foremost directed to the individual and only later is it directed to others. Information ethics has, in our conviction, a place—a vital place—in the curriculum because, in a professional school, the student is constantly involved with the "know-how." And while/when ethical issues may come up in other classes, the student does not have the chance to really look at those issues—or simply responds to them from a "gut level." The present SIS information ethics course strives to combine the "know-how" with the "know-why" and thus is constantly in process.

Interest Beyond the University

In March 1997, Unesco held the first "Info-Ethics: International Conference on Ethical, Legal, and Societal Aspects of Digital Information." Carbo served on the planning committee for the conference and presented a paper on "Mediacy: Knowledge and Skills to Navigate the Information Highway." The proceedings from the conference are published in *The International Information and Library Review* (1997) and cover three major themes: (1) accessing digital information, (2) preserving digital information and records, and (3) preparing society for the multimedia environment.

Through our SIS efforts, several library associations and other organizations have been interested in and convinced about the importance of information ethics. In recent years, Almagno has spoken to Pittsburgh law librarians (1998), to the Puerto Rican Library Associations at the University of San Juan (1999), and to the 1999 Buffalo meeting of the New York Library Association where his topic was "Information Ethics: Our Profession's Reluctant Response." In March 2000 he lectured on the "Ethics of Our Profession" at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, Col-

lege of Library and Information Science. And during 2000 and 2001, he is scheduled to deliver a paper (together with Barbara Rockenbach) on "Distance Learning Education: Some of the Unasked and Unanswered Questions" at the Ethics of Electronic Information in the 21st Century symposium in Memphis and to give four major addresses: a lecture in celebration of the commencement of delivering the library science program, with a focus on health sciences librarianship/health information (13 September 2000, Texas Woman's University) at the university's Houston campus in Texas Medical Center; Long Island, New York, at the LILRC Ninth Annual Conference on Libraries and the Future (19 October 2000); Saratoga, New York, a day-long presentation on information ethics for the New York Library Association (1 November 2000); and Columbia, South Carolina, the USC Dean's Lecture (30 March 2001).

Future Plans
    Information ethics is expected to become even more important in the years ahead. Recent articles and news reports about breaks into security systems, viruses, whether access to the Internet should be limited to certain groups such as children and, if so, how, are just a few examples of questions facing information professionals today. Very soon, many students at universities will probably have digital cameras built into chips on their computers, giving them the opportunity to share full motion video with others. Some students are running businesses from their dorm rooms; in public areas, some are viewing materials considered objectionable (or even "obscene") by others. Downloading of music from the Web raises questions of violation of copyright and also of appropriate use of university-provided or corporate-provided networks and other services. Monitoring of employees' uses of the Internet or other information-technology services provided by the employer is becoming commonplace and has been determined to be legal. Questions about these and other practices become more challenging each day.
    No other school has followed SIS's lead in integrating four components (a course, lecture series, Web site, and fellows) into an information ethics program, and only a few teach even one course on this important subject. In the future, it is expected that more schools will introduce such a course. Interest in the Web site and in conferences, such as the Unesco and Memphis conferences (*The International Information and Library Review*, edited by Toni Carbo, will publish the proceedings of EEI21-MEMPHIS-2000), indicate growing international concern about these issues. The authors hope that this interest will result in more library, archival, and information programs developing and teaching courses on information ethics.
    SIS plans to continue to teach these courses and to maintain its program and Web site. To date, more than 400 students have taken the courses

and well over 1,000 people have attended the forums. Two forums in 2000 featured Sanford Berman speaking on library catalog access to materials concerning ethnicity, seniors, gays and lesbians, and other groups; Jerry Berman, the executive director of the Center for Democracy and Technology, addressed issues of privacy in the electronic environment. The forum series will continue to seek to address the most challenging issues of the day in the years to come.

Almagno, after thirty years at SIS, will retire in 2002, and Carbo will teach the ethics course. SIS plans to continue with the duty, privilege, and challenge of educating in information ethics in the years ahead.

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