Applied information ethics

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What do ethics mean in the context of Information and Knowledge Management in the business sector? Professional practice in librarianship and information management rarely approaches the life-and-death situations characteristic of medical practice, or the life-changing circumstances characteristic of legal practice. It is perhaps understandable then that the professional ethics of information work has never attained the same status as medical or legal ethics. Nevertheless over recent decades there has been growing recognition that professional information work of involves significant ethical issues.

One of the drivers of this shift was the publication of Robert Hauptman's *Ethical Challenges in Librarianship* (1988), in which "Information Ethics" was coined. All the major professional bodies now have frameworks for ethical practice. The eldest of these is the American Library Association's (ALA) Code of Ethics (2008), originally published in 1939 and updated several times since including most recently in 2008, which tends to emphasise intellectual freedom through its eight principles. The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professional's (CILIP) Ethical Framework (2018) emphasises seven principles:

- Human rights, equalities and diversity, and the equitable treatment of users and colleagues
- The public benefit and the advancement of the wider good of our profession to society
- Preservation and continuity of access to knowledge
- Intellectual freedom, including freedom from censorship
- Impartiality and the avoidance of inappropriate bias
- The confidentiality of information provided by clients or users and the right of all individuals to privacy
- The development of information skills and information literacy

The Special Libraries Association (SLA) Professional Ethics Guidelines (2010) have perhaps the most relevance for readers of *Business Information Review,* emphasising as such the relationship with clients, employers and competitors. Nevertheless the ethics of information work in the commercial sector is perhaps less fully discussed that in other sectors of Librarianship and Knowledge Management.

Twenty years after *Ethical Challenges in Librarianship* Hauptman published an overview of his work on Information Ethics in *Business Information Review* (Hauptman, 2008). That encyclopaedic article addresses a very wide range of issues that involve ethical consideration, and is well worth revising. These include:

- Ethical decision making;
- Professional values;
- The integrity of information resources;
- The production, dissemination and storage of information;
- Access and retrieval or information;
- Information poverty and global information justice.

However, beyond noting the apparent conflict between profit and ethics, and briefly addressing competitive intelligence, Hauptman's article has relatively little to say about information ethics in the commercial sector. Only two other papers substantively addressing information ethics have been published by *Business Information Review* in addition to Hauptman's 2008 article (Gordon-Till, 2002a; 2002b). Although ethics is frequently highlighted as a significant issue of professional concern in the business sector, the conversation often goes no further than that. This editorial explores information ethics, its relationship to technology, and why the ethical considerations are likely to become an ever-increasing component of information work in the near future.

What is information ethics?

Information ethics has been defined as “the branch of ethics that focuses on the relationship between the creation, organization, dissemination, and use of information, and the ethical standards and moral codes governing human conduct in society” (Reitz, 2014). UNESCO describe information ethics as “concerned with ethical, legal and societal aspects of using information and information and communication technologies” (cite). Fallis (2007) suggests that information ethics is “essentially concerned with the question of who should have access to what information” and highlights intellectual freedom, equality, privacy, and intellectual property rights as key considerations. Information ethics as such extends beyond the ethics of professional practice itself and ranges over multiple domains (D’Alfonso, c. 2020), nevertheless it has implications of an draws on several domains of applied ethics including:

- Computer ethics: the professional ethics of the computing industry and obtaining to the uses of computers in society.
- Business ethics: the ethics obtaining to commercial and business practice in contemporary society.
- Data ethics: the ethical considerations obtaining to very large data sets (big data) and their uses.

Information ethics therefore implies meta, normative and applied aspects. That is to say that it implies questions about the nature of ethical judgements, about the kinds of ethical problems associated with information, and the practical application of those ethical considerations. Of these the applied ethics of information are perhaps most important for professional practice. That is to say that the finer points of ethical debates matter less than the immediate practical concerns of professional practice.

It is traditional to divide ethical systems into two broad classes. Deontological ethics are those systems that base judgements over the rightness or wrongness of an action on systems of rules, duties, or obligations. The most famous example of this is Kantian ethics, which proceeds from a consideration of duty to consider the motivations for an action. Frequently contrasted with deontological systems are consequentialism ethics, the most famous of which it Utilitarianism. Consequentialist systems base judgements over the rightness or wrongness of an action on the consequences that accrue from that action. In fact the divide between these two is not as clear-cut as is sometime suggested, and to them we can also add virtue ethics and pragmatic ethics. Information ethics as a normative field does not necessarily imply either a deontological or consequentialist perspectives; applied information ethics perhaps owes more to pragmatic perspectives than we might imagine.

In general the kinds of ethical issue that arise in information work have been discussed under a few broad categories:

Standards of professional practice: including integrity of relationships, professional responsibilities to clients, employers, and colleagues and subordinates, and wider responsibilities to the information and library profession including towards the development of others. Most of the professional codes of ethics highlights standards of professional practice as a key ethical concern.

Integrity of information: to some degree information professionals are responsible for the integrity, accuracy, appropriateness and completeness of the information that they work with on a day-to-day basis. The extent of this responsibility depends perhaps in part of the degree to which they are personally involved in collating, processing, or sourcing that information.

For example, we bear less responsibility for the accuracy of information in a book sitting in a library collection than for information that we have personally collated in response to a user query. Because information professionals in the commercial sector are frequently more involved in business research, and in collating information from diverse sources, than information processionals in other sectors, there is perhaps a greater responsibility to ensure the integrity of the information with which we work.

Censorship: occasionally information professionals may confront issues of censorship. This may include removing from collections information that is deemed, for example, offensive, or unsuitable for end users for a variety of reasons. Information professionals may occasionally also self-sensor in relation to the information provided in response to user queries. Censorship is a significant issue in public libraries, but is less of a factor in commercial contexts.

Privacy: Perhaps more relevant to commercial information work are issues around privacy. This of course includes the privacy of clients, and end users, but also perhaps more frequently privacy issues in relation to the subject of due diligence searches or personal searches.

Intellectual property: the ethical issues around observance of intellectual property law, particularly in relation to delivery of information to third-parties, again frequently arises in discussion of information ethics.

Computer misuse: generally more relevant to the public libraries sector, the misuse of computers for which information professionals have responsibility has also been a frequent part of discussion around information ethics, particularly open access computers.

Many of these areas are also covered by legal codes, nevertheless the presence of laws pertaining to intellectual property and computer misuse, for example, and the obligations arising from those laws, does not perhaps exhaust the ethical considerations. Clearly many of these areas of discussion have relevance for commercial contexts, and indeed will involve existing corporate policy. But the presence of corporate policy pertaining to, for example, standards of workplace behaviour, does also not exhaust the wider professional considerations. Indeed values, practices, and concerns deriving not from the immediate work context, but from the wider participation in and contribution to a professional community if part of the defining aspects of a profession, and the ethics of information work sits perhaps in these wider set of professional concerns.

But while the dimensions of information ethics clearly apply in the commercial sector, it is also true that information work in the commercial sector is likely to pose different kinds of ethical questions. If the debate about ethics is driven by public and academic library contexts, then it is likely to overlook important issues for commercial information work. Fallis (2007) for example summarises some of the ethical questions that have been raised in the professional literature:

- Should we put internet filters on all the computers in a public library? (Doyle, 2002, cited by Fallis, 2007)
- Should we tell law enforcement officers investigating potential terrorists what a particular person has checked out? (Garoogian, 1991, cited by Fallis, 2007)
- Should we add a book donated by a racist organization to the library collection? (Nesta & Blanke, 1991, cited by Fallis, 2007)
- Should we allow a hopeless person that smells very bad to use the library? (Baldwin, 1996, , cited by Fallis, 2007)
- Should we invlude Holocaust Denial literature in the library collection? (Wolkoff, 1996, cited by Fallis, 2007)
- Should we charge for specialised information services in a public library? (Hannabuss, 1996, cited by Fallis, 2007)
- Should we make photocopies of an article for a class when the school library cannot afford multiple copies of the book itself? (Fallis, 2007)

- Should we put a warning label on an encyvlopedia that contains clearly accurate information (Pendergrast, 1988, cited by Fallis, 2007).

None of these moral dilemmas are like to trouble information and library professionals in the commercial sector for very long other than for those working in the increasingly scarce public library business services sector. Like in other areas of professional practice, the ethics of commercial information work have perhaps been largely overlooked.

It may be that information professionals in the business sector have felt less need to raise, discuss, and debate information ethics. This does not mean of course that they behave in a less ethical way, but simply that the context of commercial information work, and the legal and policy codes covering that work, tend perhaps to exclude individual responsibility for the kinds of ethical decisions that might be confronted. Nevertheless it is easy to see why this may not remain true into the future.

It is arguable that the ethical considerations of information work have grown more significant over recent years in part because of the expanding uses made of information technology both within the profession and in society as a whole. Fallis (2007) for example argues that "some of the ethical dilemmas faced by library professionals have arisen because of advances in information technology" (2007: 24). Furthermore, while as Hauptman (2008) and others have observed many of the same deontological ethical principles apply regardless of the format of information or the mode of its processing and dissemination, it is also perhaps apparent that technology exaggerates the consequence of ethical decisions.

As information technology has become increasingly central to our lives, the ethical issues that relate to information, its generation, storage, and use, have become more significant. Privacy has become more significant because of the ability to aggregate vast data sets, and to employ them in automated processes without perhaps much oversight. The integrity of information sources has become a very real problem in recent years, with the rise of fake news, and deliberate attempts to disseminate misinformation and propaganda, and growing concerns about the potential of cyberwarfare. Likewise, the internet and World Wide Web have posed more questions about censorship. As we become more reliant on information and information technology, the ethical questions are only likely to proliferate. More importantly perhaps, as the pace of change outstrips the pace of regulation, greater onus falls on individual ethical decisions. As we have seen through the Business Information Review Surveys (see: Tredinnick, 2019) the commercial sector as often been at the forefront of the adoption of technology. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that the commercial information sector may confront growing ethical issues into the future.

March 2020 Business Information Review

The March issue of *Business Information Review* contains the usual mix of professional and research articles from different information sectors. Our first article outlines the transformation of the role of librarians and knowledge specialists in the National Health Service (NHS) enabling them to become business-critical in mobilising evidence and organisational knowledge across in England. Written by Alison Day from NHS health libraries and Louise Goswami who works for Health Education England as Head of Library and Knowledge Services, the paper is entitled "Driving change with evidence and knowledge: transforming knowledge services for the NHS across England". It explains the planning and delivery of this transformation, and an initial evaluations, and describes a "sea change in the way NHS librarians and knowledge specialists are regarded".

The second of our articles this month returns to the continuing issue of GDPR. The implications of the General Data Protection Regulations continue to be of interest. In this paper, Stephen Breen, Professor Karim Ouazzane, and Preeti Patel of London Metropolitan University address the issue of consent, and its implications for corporate processes and procedures. The article explores the philosophical background of consent and attempts to develop an understanding of it in the context of the growing influence of information systems and the data driven economy. The paper is entitled

"GDPR: Is your consent valid?" and concludes that "the new regulation provides an opportunity for many companies to develop a new relationship with their clients based on trust, transparency and partnership".

It is sometimes interesting and useful to look beyond out immediate contexts to explore the challenges in business information in other context. Our third paper does precisely this, exploring the provision of academic business reference services in Kazakhstan. It is written by Joseph Yap who works as Information Literacy Coordinator at Nazarbayev University Library and Subject Librarian for the Graduate School of Business, Education, and Public Policy. The article is called "Not All Students Are Online: The Case of Business Graduate Students in Kazakhstan" and emphasizes the importance of human interaction.

The March issue of *Business Information Review* is brought to a close by two research articles. Our fourth paper is entitled "Direct effects of knowledge management practices on organizational performance" and written by Nelson Lozada. The paper examines the impact of knowledge management practices, including knowledge creation, continuous learning, knowledge and feedback systems, and employee management, on financial and nonfinancial performance. Our final paper entitled "Business Process Modelling and Diagnosis" and explores the computerization of business information. It was written by João Pedro Santos, Pedro Ramos, José Farinha, Sérgio Moro.

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