

Ethical Issues in Library and Information Science Profession in Nigeria: An Appraisal

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ABSTRACT

Library and information science professional play an extremely important role in the society. However, in discharging their responsibilities and duties, core ethical principles are expected to be upheld by librarians and information workers as outlined in the professional codes of ethics. The aim of this paper is to appraise core ethical issues in library and information science profession in Nigeria. This paper discusses core ethical principle in library and information science profession such as universal access to information, intellectual property rights, intellectual freedom, copyright/fair use and privacy/confidentiality among others. This paper further identified ethical challenges confronting library and information science professionals in Nigeria. This paper concludes that regardless of the ethical challenges confronting library and information science professionals in Nigeria, the professional codes of ethics should be upheld.

KEYWORDS

Code of Ethics, Conduct and Professional, Ethical Challenge, Ethics, Information Science Professionals, Library, Professional Code

INTRODUCTION

Library and information science professionals play an extremely important role in the society due to their different capabilities in handling diverse information materials in a way that benefits everyone. However, in rendering quality services to the public, library and information professionals are expected to imbibe values such as honesty, integrity, transparency, accountability respectfulness, fairness, equity and justice (ALA, 2009; Rublin & Froehlich, 2011). Apart from this, a demonstration of sound ethical knowledge and practice is a *sine qua non* for library and information science professionals.

Quite a number of Professional bodies and associations have defined their ethical approaches comprising of several discrete components (Whitebeck, 1998). However, in the library and information science profession, professional bodies and associations, both locally and internationally have their ethical principles and values. These professional bodies and associations include: America Library Association (ALA), International Federation of Library Association (IFLA), Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN), Library bill of Right and Nigeria Library Association (NLA) among others.

The core ethical principles emphasized by these professional bodies and associations include intellectual freedom, equitable access to information, information privacy and intellectual property rights (Falis, 2005). These ethical principles are fundamental to the practice of librarianship and information science in Nigeria. It guides the library and information professionals in discharging their ethical responsibilities to the public. Library and information science professionals in Nigeria are guided by the code of conduct for librarians as specified in the Nigeria's Library Association and other professional bodies such as IFLA and ALA respectively (ALA, 2009). However, there are slight differences in the ethical principles of these associations and professional bodies. For instance, it was observed by Koehler, Hurych, Dole and Wall, (2000) that although there are differences in the ethical principles of library associations and professional bodies, however there is fairly wide agreement about what the principles are. For instance, principles of intellectual freedom and censorship, protection of users' right to privacy and confidentiality and recognition of intellectual property rights are upheld in librarianship and information science profession (ALA, 2009). In the same vein, Mbofung and Popoola (2014) submitted that ethical standards may be universal but are not absolute; rather it may be subjected to modification whenever the need arises.

Based on the importance of ethical standards and principles in the practice of librarianship and other allied profession, the aim of this paper is to discuss core ethical issues in library and information science profession in Nigeria; identify the ethical challenges encountered by library and information science professionals in Nigeria in discharging their roles; and suggests ways of combating these challenges. In view of this, the layout of this paper will cover the following sub-topics: concept of ethics/professional ethics, and purposes of librarians' code of ethics. It will further delve into core ethical concerns in library and information science profession as it relates to the Nigerian environment, ethical challenges encountered by library and information science professionals in Nigeria will also be discussed. Furthermore, this paper will suggest ways of addressing these ethical challenges and lastly, policy interventions, recommendations and conclusion will be made.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending and recommending ways of right and wrong conduct. It investigates the following questions: (i) what is the best way of people to live? (ii) What actions are right or wrong in particular circumstances? (iii) It resolves questions of human morality by defining concept of good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, justice and crime).

Another definition of ethics was proposed by Stueart and Moran (2002) as principles and values that govern the behaviour of an individual or group with respect to what is right or wrong. Agulanna (2011) also opined that ethics help to determine the appropriate way to conduct ourselves as individual. Based on the above definitions, it is right to say that ethics determines the behaviour of human being in the society. It is also an important yardstick used in determining what is right or wrong. Therefore, without ethical standards, it will be difficult to judge the appropriateness of people's behaviour in the society.

On the other hand, Professional ethics relates to moral rules that influence a professional's actions or behaviour in the discharge of his/her professional responsibilities (Onoyeyan, Ajayi, Adesina & Bamidele, 2014). Professional ethics is more or less a yardstick that enables a professional to know what steps to take in a particular circumstance especially when faced with a problem that raises a moral issue (Strahlendorf, n.d). Most professions are governed by their code of ethics which are guiding principles for acceptable behaviour. Professional code of ethics also enlightens the public on the expected behaviour of a professional in a particular field of endeavour. Any behaviour that is invariance with the expected is tantamount to 'misconduct' 'unprofessionalism' or mediocrity.

PURPOSES OF LIBRARIANS' CODE OF ETHICS

Code of ethics in any profession is intended to guide behaviour and to ensure that members behave in ways that are acceptable to the society. For instance, the codes of ethics for librarians are sets of rules that are to be strictly followed in discharging their duties and responsibilities to the society. According to the LRCN Act 12, 1995, the purposes of the code of conduct for librarians are highlighted below:

- To guide the librarian in maintaining standards of ethical behaviour in his relationship with state and society, clients, profession and colleagues and oneself.
- To guide registered librarians in their daily discharge of duties as it will help to regulate professional behaviour in terms of safeguarding the interests of the community served, as they are engaged in the process of providing access to information.
- To provide objective benchmarks for assessing librarians conduct and discharge of professional duties.
- To clarify the librarians' rights, privileges, obligations and their legal bases.
- To re-awaken the sense of self-esteem, dignity, honour, service and moral rectitude of the librarian and re-affirm the librarians age-long position of leadership as gatekeepers and disseminators of information.

- To boost public confidence in the ability of the library and information science profession to regulate itself and contribute meaningfully to national development in order to enhance the professional image of librarians.
- To build a strong moral and ethical foundation for the actualization of an information society (LRCN, 1995).

In short, the essence of the librarians' code of ethics is to build well branded people who are professional in their outlook and in practice; and also to instill confidence in the public on services rendered by library and information science professionals. However, there are ethical challenges encountered by library and information professional in Nigeria in the course of discharging their roles as it will be unveiled in this paper. One of the biggest challenges is ethical dilemma and ethical dissonance among library and information science professionals in Nigeria. Ethical dilemma occurs when a professional is faced with two options of doing what is right but ethically wrong or doing what is wrong but ethically right (Rubin & Froehlich 2012). Examples of ethical dilemmas that librarians frequently face are as follows:

- Should we tell law enforcement officers investigating potential terrorists what a particular patron has checked out? (Garoogian 1991).
- Should we allow a homeless person that smells very bad to use the library? (Baldwin 1996).
- Should we charge for specialized information services in a public library? (Hannabuss 1996).

On the other hand, ethical dissonance occurs when there is conflict or disagreement between one's professional interest and the organization's interest. Rubin and Froehlich (2012) cited two examples of ethical dissonance as stated below:

1. When someone is deprived someone of information or ideas based on these reasons:
 - a. Censoring or restricting library materials.
 - b. Withholding information from a fellow employee to encourage his or her failure.
 - c. Withholding information concerning the inadequacies of an information source or database.
2. When one is asked by someone in authority to act in an unlawful or unethical fashion
 - a. Falsifying or backdating a record to hide unlawful activity.
 - b. Being encouraged to misrepresent oneself to get information from an unknowing source.
 - c. Being asked to deceive others for the "best interests" of the organization.

Librarians most especially are often faced with ethical dilemmas or ethical dissonance due to the need to take certain right decisions that might equally conflict with the interest of the organization they serve. Unfortunately, very often information professionals demonstrate more loyalty to their organizations than their profession (White, 1991) due to likely reasons such as favouritism, nepotism, politics, and selfish ambitions among others, thereby overriding their professional interest.

CORE ETHICAL CONCERNS IN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE PROFESSION IN NIGERIA

Core ethical principles in library and information science profession are expected to guide behaviour and code of conduct. Core ethical principles that are applicable to librarians and information science professionals in Nigeria include among others universal access to information, intellectual freedom, intellectual property rights, copyright/fair use, censorship, use and misuse of information, information security. A brief explanation on these ethical issues in library and information profession is discussed below:

1. **Universal access to information:** Universal access to information is one of the core values for in librarianship and information science profession. Information is a free resource, therefore, should be made available and accessible to everyone irrespective of ethnicity, race, belief and religious differences. However, in the Nigerian environment, universal access to information has not been achieved due to digital divide based on varying dimensions such as disability, technological barriers, inability to read and write, religious factors among others. In line with this argument, quite a number of researchers have identified barriers hindering access to information in the Nigerian environment (Gbenge-Ilori & Ibiyemi, 2010; Akanbi & Akanbi, 2012). In spite of these challenges, librarians have the ethical responsibility of providing unlimited access to information for different sect of people- young, old, poor and the rich without any form of discrimination. The question is how can universal access to information be achieved in Nigeria?
2. **Privacy/confidentiality:** Privacy and confidentiality is one of the core ethics in librarianship due to the need to protect library users' right to privacy and confidentiality. Generally, privacy can be defined simply as the right to be left alone without interference. However, according to American Library Association (2006) privacy can be defined as the right to open enquiry without having the subject of one's interest examined or scrutinized by others. In other words, library users have the right to request on any subject matter without any form of resistance by library staff. Laudon and Laudon (1998) defined privacy as the right of an individual to be left alone, free from surveillance or interference by other individuals. Therefore, an individual's Privacy in any democratic society is seen as a fundamental human right that should be respected (Rubin, 2000). On the other hand, confidentiality is the ability of a librarian to protect users' personal identifiable information (PII) in their possession such as circulation records, website visited reserve notices, patrons' records among others (ALA, 2006). For example, it is the responsibility of the librarian to keep all records of library users and their transactions secret and confidential. This means that information of users should not be divulged to third parties or used for unintended purposes. Based on this code of ethics, librarians are expected to protect the privacy and confidential records of library users.
3. **Intellectual freedom:** Another ethical issue is intellectual freedom which is the ability to freedom of opinion and expression without any form of restriction. For instance, the author of a book has the right to use the library as a viable channel for distributing his books. However, if the author of a book is denied intellectual freedom by government's removal of such books from circulation, then it becomes

an ethical clash of interest for the librarian who is expected to provide free access to information in his or her custody. It is the responsibility of the librarian to ensure that library users access information, at the same time the librarian needs to obey government's orders. The question is, how does the librarian resolve this ethical dilemma? Library and information science professionals in Nigeria are frequently faced with ethical dilemmas of this nature.

4. **Intellectual property rights:** Intellectual property refers to creations of the mind such as inventions, literary and artistic works, symbols, names, images and designs (WIPO). Intellectual property rights can be described as a broad term that encompasses patents, plant breeds, copyrights, trade secrets and other type of rights granted as a way of protecting creators' efforts and knowledge creation (World Bank, 1999). These rights are granted to safeguard creators and inventors interest and regulate the use of their products. By the granting of these rights, it creates a balance between the creators' right and the right of the public in accessing the intellectual work. It is the duty of librarians to protect intellectual property rights by ensuring that copyrighted materials are protected from infringements by library users. Apart from this, librarians are expected to ensure 'fair use' of copyrighted works, which is an exception to the rule of copyright infringements. Under this principle, the law permits the use of some portion of the copyrighted works for purposes such as criticism, comments, teaching and research without seeking permission from the copyright holders. In determining the extent of fair use of copyrighted materials, the court of law considers four factors which are: purpose of use, nature of use, amount of the work taken and the effect it will have on the value of original work (Fabunmi, 2007). Due to non-enforcement of copyright laws, most Nigerian librarians and library workers violate the protection of intellectual property rights of authors, thereby acting unethically.
5. **Information security:** Information security is an ethical concern for librarians, due to the urgent need to protect electronic and non-electronic resources in the library. Without adequate information security, there is the tendency of exposing library resources to natural and non-natural disasters. Information security encompasses information management, information privacy and data integrity. In the proper management of library resources, the need for an information security plan or policy cannot be overemphasized. Library resources need to be protected from theft, privacy intrusion, damage and undue access. Information security ethics include: assigning staff to information security tasks, training all library staff on information security issues and procedures, physical security of equipment and computer related technologies, physical security plan, specific policies on information privacy, data integrity measures, levels of access to data or equipment and monitoring for different types of access (Newby, n. d.).
6. **High level of service to all library users:** The provision of equitable services to the library users is one of the ethical principles that are upheld by librarians. Librarians are expected to show fairness and justice in rendering library services. It is unethical when a librarian treats library users unjustly by exhibiting favouritism, prejudice or bias towards a particular person or group of persons. The highest level of service should be rendered through ways such as appropriate and useful

organized resources, equitable service policies, equitable service and unbiased and courteous responses to all enquiries (ALA, 2009).

7. **Non-advancement of private interest:** It is ethically wrong for librarians to advocate for their own personal interest over and above library users, colleagues or the employing institution (ALA, 2009). In essence, the librarian's interest should not override the interest of users in rendering of services. The interest of users should be paramount to the librarian in spite of the challenges he or she may encounter in the course of discharging professional duties.
8. **Fairness in the treatment of co-workers and colleagues:** Co-workers and colleagues should be treated with respect, good faith and their individual right must be safeguarded (ALA, 2009). A librarian who treats his or colleagues with contempt, disrespect is not acting ethically. All library staff should be treated equally irrespective of the cadre of the librarian. When there is equity, fairness and justice in the work place, library staff is motivated to contribute positively to the growth of the organization.
9. **Striving for professional excellence:** Professional excellence should be given priority by promoting the development of knowledge and skills of all library staff. In fulfilling this ethical issue, library staff improves their knowledge by enrolling in library schools to advance their career. Library staff is classified along three continuums based on their professional qualification: professional librarian, para-professional and support staff (Yaya & Adeeko, 2015). This is a way of motivating librarians and library workers to improve themselves career wise.

ETHICAL CHALLENGES FACED BY LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE PROFESSIONALS IN DISCHARGING THEIR ROLES

Librarians and information science professionals follow clearly stated rules and guidelines in ensuring that they are professional in their conduct and behaviour towards themselves and the public. However, in the fulfilment of these ethical responsibilities, librarians and information scientists do err due to several challenges encountered in the course of discharging their duties and responsibilities. Some of these ethical challenges are highlighted below:

1. **Unequal access to information:** Information is a free resource for everybody irrespective of age, ethnic group, socio- economic status. Therefore, a librarian's duty is to ensure universal and equal access to information irrespective of age, ethnicity, tribe or status. However, in the Nigerian environment, due to problems of digital divide, universal access to information has not been possible due to factors such as illiteracy, poverty, lack of ICT infrastructures, lack of stable power supply and telecommunication infrastructure (Gbenge-Ilori & Ibiyemi, 2010; Akanbi & Akanbi, 2012). Unless these challenges are painstakingly addressed by government, universal access to information becomes unachievable. On this account, librarians are hindered in the fulfilment of their ethical responsibilities and duties to their clientele.
2. **Non- protection of user's privacy and lack of confidentiality:** The privacy and confidentiality of most library users in Nigeria are not adequately protected

due lack of a vibrant information security policy. Based on this laxity, privacy and confidential records of library users are found littered around in some public libraries, as a result can easily be abused. Onoyeyan et al. (2014) affirmed that the abuse of confidential information is rampant among librarians in Nigeria.

3. **Copyright infringements/ Misuse of fair Use:** Copyright infringements have been the order of the day in most Nigerian libraries by library users and librarians. Copyright infringements occur in these libraries due to lack of education on the part of the public and the librarians themselves (Fabunmi, 2007). For instance, most libraries allow users photocopy of a substantive portion of a book or other materials as a means of generating revenue for the library, which negates the principle of fair use. Fair use entails that a certain percentage of any copyrighted materials should be photocopied. However, most Nigerian librarians are equally perpetrators of copyright infringements due to inadequate copyright education (Fabunmi, 2007). For instance, electronic products such as library software are being downloaded or copied due to non-availability in the market or high cost of developing one, thereby contravening copyright law. This challenge negates the ethical principle of protecting intellectual property rights of authors and enforcement of copyright.
4. **Lack of a standard information security Policy for libraries:** Due to the lack of a standard information security policy in most Nigerian libraries, information security ethics is still at low ebb. This is a peculiar challenge in almost Nigerian libraries due to lack of funds, lack of trained personnel on information security issues and most importantly the lack of a standard information security policy (Newby, n. d.).
5. **Unprofessional conduct:** One of the ethical challenges confronting library and information science professionals is unprofessionalism in discharging their duties. Most often than not, some librarians may exhibit unprofessional attitude and behaviour due to non-familiarisation with the professional code of ethics. Unprofessionalism is one of the biggest challenges confronting librarianship due to the fact that some librarians are not properly schooled on the professional ethics guiding librarians' conduct. For instance, the professional standard of most library schools in Nigeria is getting 'watered down' due to lackadaisical attitude and lack of required training on ethical principles.
6. **Ethical Dilemma:** Library and information professional in Nigeria face ethical dilemma in the course of discharging their responsibilities to the society. Ethical dilemma occurs when a librarian is faced with the two options of doing what is right but ethically wrong and doing what is wrong, but ethically right (Rubin & Froehlich, 2012). Based on such circumstances, librarians often face dilemma due to lack of sound knowledge on information ethics. It had been argued that in order to deal with ethical dilemma, library professionals need to engage in ethical reasoning (Hannabuss, 1996).

Policy Recommendations in Overcoming Ethical Challenges in Nigeria

In addressing ethical challenges confronting library and information science professionals in Nigeria, the following policy options should be given priority by management of libraries, Nigeria library association and the government at large.

Firstly, due to the high level of unprofessionalism being exhibited by librarians of nowadays, NLA should mandate all library schools in Nigeria to introduce considerable number of courses on information ethics in their various curriculums. These courses will serve as a means of inculcating ethical standards and principles, and offer different ways of handling ethical dilemmas and dissonance. As a matter of policy, these courses should be taught both at the undergraduate and masters level. By this, upcoming librarians would be better equipped on the ethical principles of librarianship.

Secondly, management of Nigerian libraries should organize workshops and seminars on copyright education for librarians and library users based on the need for enforcement of fair use and preventing copyright infringements. Since Nigerian librarians are not left out in the business of contravening copyright laws, which ensure the protection of intellectual works in their custody; policies on fair use and copyright enforcement for librarians should be enforced by Nigeria Library Association and other professional bodies.

Thirdly, management of libraries and government should address strictly the barriers hindering access to information by library users taking into cognisance the needs of the physically challenged people. Therefore, librarians should make available information accessible to all categories of users.

Furthermore, due to the low level of knowledge on information security ethics among librarians in Nigeria, NLA and other allied associations should drive the development of a standard information security policy for all Nigerian libraries. This information security policy should be reviewed from time to time to conform to best practices. Management of Nigerian libraries should organize seminars and workshops for librarians in order to educate them on information security ethics and to ensure proper management and security of information resources in their custody.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the forgoing, conformance to core ethical principles by library and information science professionals in Nigeria is of paramount interest to everyone-public, practitioners and professional bodies. However, in meeting with this goal, ethical challenges confronting library and information professional in Nigeria should be tackled with all seriousness by all stakeholders -library schools, library associations and professional bodies both locally and internationally. The following recommendations are made towards addressing ethical challenges among library and information professionals in Nigeria.

Firstly, continuous training and re-training on ethical practices in librarianship and allied professions is necessary to avoid unethical behaviour by librarians. Without the required training, librarians will continue to act unethically and unprofessionally.

Secondly, management of Nigerian libraries should serve as change agents by organizing enlightenment programmes for librarians and library users on library

ethics. Librarians should be educated on the implications of flouting professional ethical rules and spell out appropriate sanctions to would be violators of ethical rules.

Thirdly, management of Nigerian libraries should orientate new librarians and library staff on ethical rules and inculcate in them the culture of ethical behaviour. By this, librarians and library staff would act ethically in every situation they find themselves.

Lastly, professional bodies and library associations in Nigeria should reward ethical behaviour as a way of motivating members and ensuring conformance to ethical standards in various library organizations. Therefore, management of libraries should appraise and reward librarians and library workers as a way of motivating them to discharge ethically their responsibilities and duties to the public.

CONCLUSION

Library and information science professionals in Nigeria should uphold their professional code of ethics, regardless of ethical challenges confronting them. Ethical challenges confronting library and information science professionals in Nigeria should be addressed urgently by all stakeholders-government, library schools, professional bodies and associations both locally and internationally.

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