Chapter 71

Ethics in the Age of Technological Change and its Impact on the Professional Identity of Librarians

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ABSTRACT

Professional ethics and core values provide professionals with guidance for their actions by helping professionals determine what constitutes right and wrong professional action. Because they are written for and by librarians, these documents offer one articulation of librarians' professional identities. This chapter examines the core values of librarianship with an eye to how they articulate the relationship librarians have with technology. These documents illustrate that librarians understand technology to be a tool that is used to meet the information needs of users. The Social Construction Of Technology (SCOT) is discussed as an alternative approach to the understanding of technology by LIS professionals. SCOT examines the social processes that are behind the development of technologies and highlights how different social groups contribute to the social meaning and even use of technology. SCOT provides an expanded view of ethics that encourages librarians to not only consider their professional ethics when implementing a new technology but also the intentions of the technology's developers, its various users, and their local communities. To illustrate the potential of SCOT for librarians, this chapter explores an examination of how librarians have managed the ethical challenges that Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) has brought to library services, followed by an examination of how librarians interpret their ethical role as service providers.

INTRODUCTION

Identity has been described in this book as a narrative, or description, of the self within a specific discourse. Professional identity is often articulated in such documents as codes of ethics and statements about professional values. LIS educators point to the need for a strong ethical foundation from which LIS students can embrace information work. Britz and Buchanan (2010), for example, argued that in

an age of rapid technological change, ethics needed to be taught throughout the LIS curriculum – not only as a single topic in a larger course, but as an embedded topic in all LIS courses. There has been a lot of debate over whether or not technological changes have impacted, or should impact, the core ethics and values of the profession. This chapter will explore these debates and their impact on the professional identity of librarians. First, the core ethics and foundational values of the profession will be explored. Next, the value of technology will be considered. Is technology a neutral tool or a value-laden social construction that shapes how it is used? How does the neutrality or value-laden nature of technology impact professional ethics? And, what impact does this have on professional identity? Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) will be used as a case study to examine how librarians have interpreted or amended their professional ethics in the face of a technology that has the potential to threaten a core value of the profession. Lastly, the ethical implications of mobile technologies, specific smartphones, will be examined to see how librarians interpret their roles as service providers in the face of ethically challenging technology devices.

THE ETHICS OF LIS

Codes of ethics are a common document for library associations to draft. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), for example, listed 38 different codes of ethics written by 38 different national professional associations (IFLA, 2012). This list does not include codes of ethics from specialized professional associations, such as the Special Libraries Association (SLA) or the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). The ACRL's Rare Books and Manuscript Section, for example, has a specific code of ethics for rare books librarians developed to supplement the over-

arching American Library Association's (ALA) Code of Ethics (RBMS, 2011). Codes of ethics are usually intentionally vague. Their intent is to provide a framework for ethical decision making, not to dictate actions and conduct. The Canadian Library Association's (CLA) Code of Ethics, for example, consists of only four statements. These statements focus on four main areas: intellectual freedom, service, access, and privacy (CLA, 1976). Ethics statements serve a very important purpose. Firstly, formal codes can be considered one of three indicators of professionalism, alongside a professional association and educational preparation (Preer, 2008). Secondly, they formally articulate the principles that determine right and wrong professional conduct (Preer, 2008; Rubin, 2010). In essence, codes of ethics define the duties and obligations of professionals and thus provide a formal description of professional identity. Preer provided an excellent history of the development of the ALA's Code of Ethics. The ALA first adopted its Code of Ethics in 1938, after an initial proposal by Charles Knowles Bolton in 1909, which in turn built upon Mary Plummer's remarks at the Illinois Library Association in 1903 about the need for ethical standards for librarians to further the professional status of librarians. The ALA's Code of Ethics was updated or amended in 1975, 1981, 1995, and 2008 (Preer, 2008). Du Mont (1991) argued that there were three stages of ethical development in LIS. The traditional stage (before the 1930s), the stakeholder stage (1930s-1950s), and the affirmative action stage (1960s onwards). During the traditional stage, the focus was on ethical questions related to collections, such as whether or not collections should include potentially "corrupting" materials. During the stakeholder stage, attention was directed towards the ethical issues surrounding how people in libraries should be treated, including staff. Specifically, attention was paid to job security, safe working conditions, and professional development. Since the start of the affirmative action

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