

Chapter 8

Duties and Ethics of Information Scientists

Dorcas Ejemeh Igberaese
Ambrose Alli University, Nigeria

Gabriel Aine Obinyan
Ambrose Alli University, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the duties of information scientists, their roles in various settings and the professional ethics that guide the conduct of the professionals. The need for Information scientists to know and understand their core duties and professional ethics was also emphasized. The significance of information ethics to 21st century information scientists was x-rayed along with how information ethics can be applied to the ethical dilemmas faced by information scientists. It contains recommendation on courses on information ethics that should be included in the curriculum of Information Science in order to make provisions for clear understanding of how to apply ethical theories to resolve practical cases. Such endeavors will make unambiguous the connections between information ethics and the mission of the information scientist.

INTRODUCTION

Information scientists are very vital in the chain of information organization, management, storage, retrieval, analysis and development of information systems in service to individuals and to the society at large. In view of the high worth of this group of professionals, their roles can neither be undervalued nor disregarded. Just like other professionals, information scientists would want

to be conscious of their general duties, contractual obligations and carry out their tasks in the most ethical manner. It is important for information scientists to know why they have to follow ethical principles. For one thing, even if one is already committed to following these principles, understanding how they are justified can make them easier to apply in concrete cases. Also, such an understanding allows information scientists to defend the decisions that they make when ethical dilemmas arise. Furthermore, according to many ethical theories, right action requires more than

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just doing the right thing. For example, Aristotle (350BC, Book II, section 4) claims that one has to do the right thing for the right reason.

The main thrust of ethics as a branch of philosophy is in its ability to assist mankind to clarify moral terms and concepts regarding how to officially or otherwise live a good life in the society. In other words ethics border on approved societal or organizational conventions that are accepted as behavioural manners. Globally, according to Ikpefan (2004), ethics evaluate the norms and roles that constitute relationships between the individual and society from a moral perspective. Professional ethics is meant to regulate the relationships between individuals within a professional group and their relations with the community. Information scientists play a unifying and intermediating role between information generation on one side and information use and seekers on the other side of the society. The reasons why ethical considerations are so fundamental to the information science profession are numerous. One of such reasons is that the Information scientists occupy positions of trust in the society and their duties require constant exercise of prudence and good judgment.

Like other professionals, information scientists regularly face ethical dilemmas. Unexpectedly, some of these ethical dilemmas have risen because of advances in information technology, but most of them do not necessarily involve new information technology to any large degree (Fallis, 2007). Dilemmas regarding the life of information professionals are becoming increasingly important in a society that is defined as “the information society”. Information transmission and literacy are essential concerns in establishing an ethical foundation that promotes fair, equitable, and responsible practices. Information ethics broadly examine issues related to, among other things, ownership, access, privacy, security, and community. Information technology affects fundamental rights involving copyright protection, intellectual freedom, accountability, and security.

The dilemmas of the information scientist, given his esteemed qualities, could actually be

compounded by the environment he operates in. By this we mean the commercial climate and the society with its people and evolved social structures and values. An Information scientist in a corrupt society will no doubt have exacting and challenging tasks to maintain appreciable ethical standards. When for instance an information scientist is in the business of researching information for patrons alongside those who masquerade as information scientists although without the requisite training because of the unregulated nature of admitting practitioners, the challenges can yet be daunting. Even though sharp practices seem to be the norm in some cases, it is not an excuse for an Information scientist to lose his grip on maintaining ethical standards as this is fundamental in strengthening the social system across all the various strata of the society.

The above considerations call for the existence of an acceptable code of ethics that should govern the practices of Information scientists. It is worth mentioning that even in developed economies, managing the life cycle of information poses Herculean challenges. In the Nigerian example, the fact that the nation is lagging far behind in the development of Information Technology as a tool and resource for economic growth, makes having a researched and well formulated code of ethics even more of an imperative.

This chapter focuses on Information scientists and their duties; general ethics and specific ethics within some Information profession settings that guide the conduct of the Information scientists.

BACKGROUND

For the purposes of properly situating the theme of the chapter, it is pertinent to define who an information scientist is. From a general perspective, anyone involved in all or any of the stages associated with the generation, collection, organization, dissemination and evaluation of information can be regarded as an information scientist. This definition of information scientist is far from be-

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