Suggested code of ethics and professional conduct for library and information science professionals in India

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Library and Information Science (LIS) education started in the year 1911 in India yet there is no code of ethics and professional conduct for LIS professionals till date. This paper suggests and presents a code that is based upon internationally acknowledged ethical standards and principles. In the absence of any government agency to suggest or approve an LIS ethical code, any professional association of national stature or LIS associations in India can meet on a common platform to brainstorm and bring out a final collaborative document to be implemented.

Introduction

Ethics systematically explains the concepts of right or wrong behavior. Merriam-Webster.com[1] defines it as "the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation". Many times, ethics and morality are used interchangeably or synonymously, but they are inherently different. Ethics are guidelines for society to conduct itself while morals relate to the individuals' own principles regarding the right and wrong conduct.

Through centuries, philosophers worldwide have been very interested in the ethical way of life and the rational ground it should be based on. They philosophized and put forth various concepts and theories after exploring the rationality of ethics and its application in personal and professional life.

Ethics encompasses several areas and is broadly divided into the following:

- Meta Ethics: Provides birds-eye-view and investigates universal truths, meaning, and judgments based on reason.
- Normative Ethics: Regulates the moral standards of right and wrong conduct.
- Applied Ethics: Applies to various fields like business, medicine, etc. and examines specific issues.
- Absolute Ethics: Universally binding on all.
- Conditional Ethics: A result of agreements or contracts between those concerned.
- Deontology Ethics: A moral judgment on if duty was duly complied or not.

As society developed, various professions came into existence. A need was felt to have a *code for these professions,* an *ethical way of life for the professionals.* A professional is a person who has specialized knowledge or skills and is capable of making judgments and reaching decisions in situations that a layman cannot. Professional code of ethics consists of a set of obligations professionals must follow while carrying out their duties. It also entails paying attention to the behavior to be adopted while implementing the values of the profession.

One of the earliest examples of an ethical code is the Hippocratic Oath for medical professionals, which has recorded origins in 5 Century BC[2] and is practiced by doctors world over. All ethical codes have the same underlying principle *Primum non nocere* (Latin) or *primum nil nocere* (Italian) meaning 'first do no harm'[3]. In LIS context it means 'do no harm' to self, place of work (institution or library), clients/users, society etc.

A standardized universal set of code cannot be devised as they can change over time and may

become irrelevant for all professions. A set of ethical standards that is meaningful and relevant for a particular profession need to be devised with a shorter version of similar core values throughout the world, as well as a detailed long version listing how they are interpreted in various countries due to prevalent social and cultural variations.

Ethical codes are thoroughly thought out, articulated, brainstormed, and debated before being approved. They can be revised or expanded later, if and when, necessary. A code is always vaguely defined so that it is open to interpretation with changing times. Every professional member is expected to ensure compliance with reading, understanding and following the code of ethical conduct, orient new members, and influence subordinates to comply. When this code of ethics is breached, disciplinary action is incurred that may be a warning or a reprimand; sometimes professional sanctions may be imposed, while other times it may result in dismissal/expulsion from their professional order. Self-awareness and a devotion to realize the prescribed code is a must, as the code cannot be legally enforced unless circumstances demand it.

Need of ethics in LIS profession

There is a need for a code of conduct to be established as it is a fundamental requirement of any profession and integral to the profession's development. It helps in defining what is important and relevant in the future and worthy of being included by examining and re-examining enduring values and demarcating professional boundaries. It is an obligation to the present and future generation of professionals by spelling out what is important and how the profession has developed. The ethical guidelines compel participating members of professional groups to uphold the code as it demonstrates how a professional member is expected to act. It is a guideline for ethical decision making as it encourages positive engagements and prevents exploitation. It also informs society in general by clarifying professional responsibility within society; and protects public from the effects and implications of the professional decision on society. The code prevents negative legal effects and serves as a point of reference in time of ethical dilemma or breach. It also prevents discrimination and harassment, so professional abuse can be dealt appropriately as a group. It not only helps in gaining respect and assertion of self but also reflects the prominence of LIS profession in society. A code of ethics become really important then for the LIS profession to be recognized as worthwhile, respected, valuable and professional as well as for professionalization of librarianship.

Some of the benefits of implementing code of conduct in LIS are listed below:

- Improves self-awareness

- Promotes moral behavior by obligating member to follow the group guidelines

- Enhances reputation of the organization implementing it

- Upholds diverse perspectives

- Highlights values of professional groups

- Safeguards the reputation of the professionals and vouches for personal integrity

Professionalization of people working in the library was felt by M. W. Schrettinger, who in his book, 'Versucheinesvollständigen Lehrbuchs der Bibliotheks-wissenschaft' (Munich 1829) was probably the first to suggest special schools for training librarians. He was followed by F. Rullman, who outlined a university course in library science in 1874. The first constructive work began with the establishment of American Library Association (ALA) in 1876[4] which adopted an ethical code in 1939[5] and core values in 2004[6] as given below:

1. Access
2. Confidentiality/Privacy
3. Democracy
4. Diversity
5. Education and Lifelong Learning
6. Intellectual Freedom
7. Preservation
8. The Public Good
9. Stewardship
10. Courteous
11. Professionalism
12. Service
13. Social Responsibility

International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) was founded in 1927, but an international code of ethics was outlined only in the year 2012 with a full[7] and shorter[8] version now available. The key points include:

1. Access to information

2. Responsibilities towards individuals and society

3. Privacy, secrecy, and transparency

4. Open access and intellectual property

5. Neutrality, personal integrity, and professional skills

6. Colleague and employer/employee relationship

Besides ethics for libraries by ALA and IFLA, the International Council of Archives[9] (ICA) and International Council of Museums[10] (ICOM) have also developed international codes of ethics for archives and museums, respectively.

There are approximately 62 National Codes of Ethics for Librarians by Country listed by IFLA[11] as well as translated IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and other Information Workers in 20 languages[12] in long and short versions. Though there are 196 countries in the world including Taiwan[13], only 62 countries have their ethical codes. The remaining 134 countries, including India are yet to propose a code of ethics for LIS professionals in their countries.

Code of ethics and professional conduct for LIS professionals in India

Ethics or *neeti-shastra* has always been a part of Hindu philosophy - taught by word of mouth or set by example. It has also been practiced from ancient times as prevalent in Indian culture, rather than presented as an explicit ethical code that had to be drafted or written down to be passed down the generations. Ethics was much debated and discussed by philosophers, sages, and seers since time immemorial in India. Complex concepts of ethics like *Dharma* were discussed and detailed under virtue, morality, justice, good, right conduct etc. These were never imposed but voluntarily practiced in Hinduism. *Vedas, Upanishads*, *Manu-Samhita*, *Bhagavad Gita* - all of these prominent texts not only discuss various aspects of what, when, how and why of *dharmic* life and practice of various virtues of religious import, but also discuss *karmic* results that extended to the

afterlife ensuring blind dedication and practice to attain *nirvana.*

Another reason argued was that no ethical code was necessary, as the Five Laws of Library Science proposed by S.R. Ranganathan[14] in 1931 were informally accepted as an ethical code:

1. Books are for use.

2. Every reader his/her book.

3. Every book its reader.

4. Save the time of the reader.

5. A library is a growing organism.

These five laws form the very foundation of librarianship and are followed not only by librarians in India but all over the world.

LIS professionals face a lot of ethical dilemmas in course of their work. In this context, the term LIS professionals, includes all working staff members of a library, regardless of educational or professional qualifications and official rank or gender. With increasing complexity in communicating and sharing information in the modern society, the role of LIS professionals is not only limited to archiving but encompasses a wide range of activities using modern information and communication technologies, tools and devices. There is a lot of anxiety about the changing role of LIS professionals and the very survival of librarianship with internet, social media and mobile apps becoming increasingly used for accessing information. Despite these, LIS professionals have always made their presence felt and proved to be relevant in all ages and times, probably because of a code of ethical librarianship, whether written or perceived; and a willingness to adapt to constantly changing situations equipped them with the necessary survival skills.

To professionalize librarianship, a professional code of conduct is necessary. The code of ethics and professional conduct for LIS professionals offers guidelines and propositions to guide them in times of dilemmas, confusions, and ambiguities, assist in self-reflection and improve self-awareness. LIS professionals face ethical issues while handling various stakeholders. Certain duties are expected of them, which may be at odds with other responsibilities. The old school of ethics and moral behaviors and rules are no more relevant in the

current dynamic environment that has morphed the landscape with an added dimension of ICT to the existing ethical predicaments. It is imperative that new ethical and moral rules need to be put in place.

Code of ethics and professional conduct for LIS professionals in India: a proposal

A few points towards a code of ethics and professional conduct for LIS professionals in India are proposed in the following paragraphs. These are based upon internationally acknowledged ethical standards and principles. A detailed explanation is provided under each head for clarity. There is no particular order or priority in following or implementing the code. It covers ethical responsibility towards:

1. Five laws of LIS
2. Self
3. Workplace (Institution and Library)
4. Library Staff
5. Users/Patrons/Customers
6. Other Libraries/ Peers and Professional Groups
7. Using Internet, Social Media and Mobile Apps
8. Information and Sources
9. Publishing
10. Society

Five laws of LIS

Uphold not only the Five Laws propounded by Dr. S R Ranganathan but also continue his legacy by ensuring that future generations know his contributions towards the various facets of librarianship.

Ethical responsibility towards self

LIS professionals have a responsibility first towards self before others. They should not carry personal problems to the workplace or take official problems home; a work-life balance must be maintained. If the person is happy and enthused about work, only then can a happy environment be created for others. LIS professionals should have a professional demeanor- at all times, look competent and dependable, and have an amenable smiling countenance that is welcoming at all times; so that users can comfortably approach and discuss their information needs. Honesty, personal and professional integrity, discretion, transparency, accountability, confidentiality, objectivity, respect, loyalty etc., are other equally sought-after qualities in professionals.

The LIS professionals must pledge to take a committed and unbiased stance towards collection, access, and service; build balanced collections; and ensure familiarization with library collection. Honoring the past and ensuring the preservation of human record for future posterity is equally important. The benefit of the user is of prime importance, so consistent service, which is free of cost should be provided to all users of the library. The LIS professionals must also provide information via those media or devices the users find comfortable rather than introducing the latest tools/technologies/devices for sake of adopting such tools. They must show commitment to literacy by arranging information literacy classes, develop reading skills, encourage the use of the library and its resources, design services to draw in potential users and sustain existing user base, and implement protocols/best practices/standardizations.

Professionals must also eradicate discrimination at all levels and genders; promote inclusion; and not deny library service based on personal bias or caste, race, religion, gender, creed, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political affiliations or social status/heritage, education, financial ability, country of origin, citizenship or immigration status, physical or mental ability, or religious affiliations. They should adopt a neutral stance without bias or impartiality towards or against any group; and ensure that personal beliefs or biases and convictions should not interfere or hinder in extending professional duty at the expense of institution, colleagues, staff or users.

Professional independence, freedom of opinion and expression should be practiced at all times. Library professionals should resist any effort to censor library resources and should not be without being threatened by bureaucracy and anti-intellectualism or cowed down by the administration but at the same time being obedient to law. LIS professionals must ensure to not only uphold copyright but also respect user rights and fair use. Library professionals should devise a fair service policy that does not impact the library or the users unfairly. An environment of open access, open

source and open license should be promoted and corruption at all levels should be combatted by encouraging transparency in working.

LIS professionals must self-regulate with the constant revision of goals to help have a clear vision. They should constantly endeavor to equip themselves with professional skills necessary for the job by attending seminars/conferences/workshops; be able to work solo or in a group, as the work situation demands; embrace advancement and challenge mediocrity by being proactive; and accepting diverse roles when the occasion arises. 'Think local act global' approach should be adopted. They must contribute towards professional associations and share professional experience to benefit students and junior staff; and seek to archive highest standards of professional excellence.

Ethical responsibility towards workplace (Institution and Library)

Only when a person is happy with self and workplace, is he/she able to contribute productively. Extending access to information is the prime mission of LIS professionals. Technically, their first responsibility is towards their institution, but according to professional ethics, the user takes precedence sometimes, leading to conflict. LIS professionals should handle the issue in such a manner so as not to impact any particular stakeholder or alienate them. They should also be conscious and guarantee privacy, security and confidentiality issues, except those regulated by law; and avoid unethical practices.

LIS professionals must bring any concerns to the immediate attention of the employer. Censorship and banning materials should not be promoted, but materials that advocate inequality, and incite disharmony on the basis of race, religion, politics, and gender should be monitored. Professionals must ensure compliance towards IPR, copyright, OA policy, etc.

Ethical responsibility towards library staff

Workplace includes not only administration but also its staff at all levels and genders. If the environment is conducive, only then can productivity increase and library users will be well catered for. Dignity of labour has to be maintained and ensure to

treat fellow professionals with respect and fairness by opposing discrimination, if based for or against on the basis of caste, race, religion, gender, creed, sexual orientation, age or marital status, political affiliations or social status/heritage, education, financial ability, country of origin, citizenship or immigration status, physical or mental ability, and religious affiliations. LIS professionals must support equal pay for men and women; oppose administrative discrimination, and support ethical decisions, however difficult it may be. They must demonstrate empathy towards fellow professionals in personal and professional situations; support or discipline library staff as per situations and handle altercation of staff with users in a balanced way. They must owe responsibility towards the library staff and secure a proper climate and labour conditions so that they can pursue their interests and create a work-life balance.

Ethical responsibility towards users

The principal responsibility of LIS professionals' lies towards the users of the library. A librarian should never discriminate between/against library users and should respect 'all' users of library, irrespective of caste, race, religion, gender, creed, sexual orientation, age or marital status, political affiliations or social status/heritage, education, financial ability, country of origin, citizenship or immigration status, physical or mental ability, and religious affiliations. A librarian should ensure to have all privacy policies and security systems in place, protect personal data of the user and maintain confidentiality at all times, provide transparency in all activities, encourage ethical use and access of information, and teach them to respect copyright issues and intellectual property rights. A librarian must also try to provide users with all sources and resources as per requirement within the time requested and provide access to both print and electronic resources via physical, virtual world across devices.

Ethical responsibility towards other libraries, peers and professional groups

Ethical relationship with other libraries, peers and professional groups is almost mandatory for a professional to develop or collaborate. An LIS professional should develop understanding and maintain cooperation at all levels - local, national and

international amongst various libraries by establishing partnership and collaborations to advance the ethical values and professional development as well as extend better services to users. They must bridge the gap between teaching LIS professionals and working LIS professionals in terms of respect, designation, pay parity, guideship/supervisorship, project, vacation, and other perks.

Ethical responsibility in using Internet, social media, and mobile apps

The advent of ICTs and tools and their application in libraries across devices have given rise to many complications that was unseen before. A written policy should be adopted so as not to have any ambiguity. It must be made clear who will be posting and what type of information can be posted or be accepted. Information should be moderated and approved before posting. Social media page must be maintained with frequent updations to attract users. All emails, SMS and other messages should be replied to in 24 hours or 48 hours, and must be in a friendly tone but ensuring to use formal language at all times. A moderator should take responsibility for their words and also for the comments allowed on social media. Indicating tolerance level is mandatory as it helps the moderator to know when to ignore the trolls (someone who posts inflammatory messages) or consider eliminating anonymous comments. Use social tools most used/preferred by library users and refrain from introducing new apps that are not used by library users. LIS professionals must also provide training or conduct workshops in a group or as per individual requirement before new applications are introduced.

Ethical responsibility towards information and sources

LIS professionals should assist students & faculty in searching for information and extend all library related assistance to researchers, scholars and authors to help them get published. They identify authentic and verifiable information by sourcing it, discover untruths and detect fake news. Providing information literacy sessions to users and make them adept at recognizing fake and authentic information.

Ethical responsibility towards publishing

LIS professionals also do research and publish journal articles and books in their field. Proper ethical processes have to be followed in publishing process and plagiarism should be avoided. An article submitted to one journal should not simultaneously be submitted to another journal.

Ethical responsibility towards society

Last but not the least, is the ethics towards society in general. LIS professionals should foster a relationship between library and community by endeavoring to contribute towards culture and history of society via., preservation for future generations. Collecting and archiving all publications that support different viewpoints and ensure not to be biased towards/against a certain group. Ethical responsibility also includes taking a stand and opposing 'Banned' books culture and enable users to have access to all kinds of literature. All these efforts transform library spaces into community centers, which stimulates thought process and encourages inclusive environment. LIS professionals must also liaise with local groups in times of crisis/distress or during disasters for the benefit of society.

Suggestions and conclusion

There are approximately 50 LIS associations in India as per the data available on India Libraries Blog[15]. The current president of any of the LIS associations of national stature should initiate and bring all other associations under one umbrella for discussion and should finalize an ethical code for India. Geeta Gadhavi (personal communication, Jan 7, 2018) who was the Coordinator and Organizing Secretary communicated that an attempt had been made on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee celebrations of the Department of Library & Information Science, Gujarat University. The department organized a UGC-sponsored three-days national conference on "Ethical Issues of LIS Profession in Knowledge Society: Problems and Prospects" in collaboration with ILA and RRRLF from 18th to 20th March 2015. A similar attempt can be once again made but with the fixed agenda of establishing and publishing a code of ethics and professional conduct for LIS professionals in India.

IFLA states "Librarianship is, in its very essence, an ethical activity embodying a value-rich approach to professional work"[16]. All LIS professionals from 134 countries should make efforts to see that the code of ethics and professional conduct for LIS professionals

is crafted and adopted in their respective countries including India.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Dr. A L Moorthy, Former Director-DESIDOC, Delhi and Former Chief Consultant (Information Science), BrahMos Aerospace, Hyderabad for his advice and guidance in writing this article on Ethics.

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