Towards professionalism and commitment in Africa: The case for theory and practice of information ethics in Uganda

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Though one could not exhaustively and conclusively define all the attributes of an information/knowledge society, it seems Uganda has made commendable strides in achieving such a society. One of the prerequisites of such a society is a corps of well-educated, trained and experienced information professionals to manage information and knowledge effectively in that society. Furthermore, the corps must act professionally and ethically at all times. In order to achieve this, an information code of ethics (ICE) is required. However, Uganda has as yet to establish an ICE, the reasons for which are outlined in this chapter. The ICE has two aspects: theory and practice; these concepts are explained and related. The Library Association (US) and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professions (CILIP), formerly the LA (UK), are studied as real-life examples and the provisions of these ICEs are briefly explained. In view of past experience, a process of establishing an ICE for Uganda is considered. The chapter concludes with an outline of the content of an ICE for Uganda.

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Introduction

The era of the information society has tightened its grip on Uganda. The Ugandan parliament has enacted several laws related to library and information services, a reflection of the commitment to information that is key to the development of its citizens. Ugandans crave information either for business ventures or as raw resources for development. Many information professionals are employed by organisations and institutions throughout Uganda, and thereby through taxation contribute to the country's GDP. The above observations are indicators of an information society (IS) or knowledge society (KS).

One of the engines of an IS/KS is a corps of well-educated and trained information professionals to execute information-related responsibilities according to moral set standards. This is the concern of the theory and practice of ethics enshrined in an information code of ethics (ICE).

Theory of ethics

Theory in this chapter refers to documented literature on the concept, philosophy, mechanisms, principles, regulations and evaluation of an ICE. Such literature is consumed to guide and inform managers and practitioners, as well as students, researchers and library and information clients on issues of the ICE. Some of this "informing" literature is reviewed in the paragraphs that follow.

Codes of ethics

The word "ethics" comes from a Greek word *ethos* (custom) and has to do with "conduct, theory of what is ultimately good or worthwhile, of good conduct and character, or moral rights obligations" (Boaz, 1972). Ethics are the customs or standards that a particular group or community acts on (Donalson, 1990).

Information professionals should have a basic understanding of ethical behaviour by members, such as conducting oneself according to the highest moral standards, ensuring organisational compliance with both the spirit and the letter of pertinent laws and regulations, and reporting to appropriate internal or external authorities any illegal or fraudulent act by the organisation. The

ICE or the code of conduct gives guidelines for professional conduct and provides guidelines in the ethical decision-making process (Jefferson & Contreras, 2005).

An ICE also establishes high standards against which individuals can measure their own performance and communicate to those outside the organisation the value system that the members must be asked not to deviate from (Vanasco, 1994). Lacovino (2002) rightly concludes that ethical principles enable us to reach normative judgments, and guide our thinking by providing us with the basis for determining how we should act when ethical issues arise. They do not provide definite answers – only answers that can be justified by way of argument, depending on the ethical viewpoints adopted and the decision-making models and process employed.

The basis of information codes of ethics

The basis for ICEs can be outlined as follows (Kigongo-Bukenya, 1995):

- *Golden Rule:* This must either be stated or implied: loyalty, honesty, generosity, courtesy, frankness, goodwill, cooperation, friendliness, charity and sincerity, which are general standards of, or ideals for, conduct.
- *Voluntary spirit:* Most codes are voluntary because they are products of professionals' volition and therefore the extent of their efficiency depends on mutual understanding and common interest.
- *Machinery:* Each code should establish controlling machinery, and an arm in the form of a disciplinary committee to correct deviations.

Characteristics of ICEs

Any ICE should incorporate the following features (Kigongo-Bukenya, 1995):

- *Duty to the client and employer:* This refers to the guiding principle that priority should be given to the interests of clients within prescribed or legitimate requirements. Professionals must be loyal and obedient to their employers within legitimate requirements.
- *Updating professional expertise:* Members must be competent in their activities, including the requirement to keep abreast of developments and those branches of professional practice in

which their qualifications and experience entitle them to engage.

- *Supervision of staff and trainees:* Experienced professionals must provide supervision and training to the juniors in order to ensure steady professional development leading to independent responsibility.
- *Non-discrimination on the basis of race, colour, creed, gender, religion, etc.:* Professionals should not exercise discrimination based on such attributes in the execution of their services to clients, except as limited by legal practice.
- *Confidentiality:* Professionals should not divulge information gathered during the course of execution of duty to their clients. Clients are entitled to secrecy of what transpires between them and the professionals. However, professionals are absolved from the "confidentiality tenet" in so far as required by law, or in answering questions from a disciplinary committee.
- *Personal financial interest:* Members' actions and decisions should be determined solely by their professional judgment and they should not profit from their positions other than by normal remuneration or fee for professional services. Under no circumstances should a query remain unanswered.
- *Criminal offence:* Members must report the facts to the secretary of the professional association if convicted of any offence involving disciplinary action, or one that brings the profession into disrepute.
- *Cooperation in disciplinary proceedings:* Professionals must respond to any requirements from the disciplinary committee for comments or information on a complaint. They must attend committee proceedings when required to do so; and also attend upon a nominated person for the purposes of receiving guidance as to future conduct, if required to do so.

The professional register

A professional register is a list of eligible professionals accepted by authority to practise in the profession. An independent body set up by law administers the register and performs the following functions:

- Exercises general supervision and control over professional education

- Advises and makes recommendations to the government on matters of the profession
- Exercises control over professional matters through the disciplinary committee

The concept of professional registers

Professionals provide very important services, which could mean life or death to some clients. Consequently, stringent measures must be taken to ensure that such persons are enrolled only after receiving proper education and training, subscribing to the code of ethics, undergoing constant inspection and, in the case of malpractices, facing disciplinary measures. This is a safety measure against impostors who, if they were allowed to practise, would misinform clients and tarnish the good name of the profession.

Criteria for inclusion in a professional register

The procedure for enrolling a practising professional might differ from profession to profession. However, the following requirements are similar:

- Having successfully completed a professional programme of study
- Having been supervised by a qualified senior professional in the field in order to gain experience (internship)
- Being a citizen (non-citizens may have other conditions to meet before registration)
- Fulfilling requirements for specialisation
- Passing inspection of facilities and equipment (legal chambers, clinics, hospitals, etc.) to ensure minimum standards and security to clients

The practice or application of ICEs

Practice concerns managing the process of applying the policies, mechanisms and regulations relating to the ICE. The theory, part of which has been reviewed above, is the knowledge base that drives the implementation. The role of partners in the processes is briefly discussed below.

The government

The government sets the pace in developing library and information services in any country.

It enacts legislation to provide the basis of authority, sets up the organisational structure, provides funding, specifies the staff required and provides inbuilt evaluative machinery. Examples of fast-growing library and information services in Africa show the impact of the personal commitment of respective heads of government in countries like Ghana and Tanzania, thanks to Presidents Nkrumah and Nyerere. Related to the specifics of implementing ICE, the government should pass a law to control the profession by creating a professional register and controlling authority through adhering to the ICE.

Professional Library and Information Association (PLIA)

PLIA, the Professional Library and Information Association, is the heart and brain of the library profession. It should unite all the information science professions through a common forum to resolve issues concerning the profession. It must play the role of a positive agitator to create awareness and support among the citizens and the government. One of the key responsibilities of the PLIA is to ensure accreditation of education and training institutions in order to produce quality professionals. Furthermore, the PLIA must create active and supportive member institutions and individuals, and should conceive and implement the professional register and ICE to ensure that only registered people participate in its professional activities and that they do so ethically.

Information professionals

These are the individual information professionals who shoulder the responsibility for planning, implementing and evaluating plans in the field. Their education, training, experience, commitment and entrepreneurship will ensure the development of the profession and institutions in the field. It is from them that the leaders of the profession will emerge.

International bodies – IFLA, etc.

National professional associations must work hand in hand with international associations in their field, particularly IFLA. This is a world professional body that is the umbrella of information professionals and institutions. IFLA organises annual forums to discuss and resolve issues related to the information fields. IFLA cooperates with institutions such as ISO, FID, ICA, etc., unique to the information professions with which mutual issues are decided and implemented.

ICE in the UK and US

The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) founded in 2003 (formerly the Library Association, UK), and the American Library Association (ALA) are cases of references in establishing ICE. It should be noted that, despite the fact that the LA and ALA were established in 1876 and 1877 respectively, the operationalisation of ICEs never got approved by the LA Council until 1983 (subsequently revised in 2005) and by the ALA Council in 1995. The reasons for this delay of 107 and 118 years respectively surely indicate the difficulty in concluding an ICE. What is striking, however, are the similar provisions of these codes. The ALA's ICE, for instance, affirms its contract with the American people towards:

- Providing the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organised resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased and courteous responses to all requests
- Upholding the principles of intellectual freedom and resisting all efforts to censor library resources
- Protecting each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted
- Recognising and respecting intellectual property rights
- Treating co-workers and other colleagues with respect and fairness and in good faith, and advocating conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of institutions
- Not advancing private interests at the expense of library users, colleagues or the employing institutions
- Distinguishing between personal convictions and professional duties
- Striving for excellence in the professional by maintaining and enhancing one's own knowledge and skills, encouraging the professional

development of co-workers, and fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession.

Koehler & Pemberton (2000) state that ICEs in the US are prescriptive and aspirational in nature. Koehler (2001) further clarifies:

The prescriptive, aspiration nature of codes of ethics is in part a function of the society in which these associations are found and in part a function of the role the professional organisations have been ascribed and ascribe to in the society.

The UK's ICE makes similar provisions:
- Avoiding misconduct in providing information services
- Members' compliance with the Charter and bylaws of the Association
- Catering for the interests of clients at all times
- Protecting users' right to information
- Fulfilling contractual obligations owed to the employer
- Avoiding any type of discrimination
- Observing users' privacy and confidentiality
- Exercising professional judgment
- Members responding to any requirements of the disciplinary committee

As Hill (1997) emphatically states, the practical use of the code is an occasional reminder to members, especially new ones, that being a member of a profession does entail an obligation to conform to standards of behaviour normal among other members.

Challenges of developing an ICE for Uganda

A few decades down the road since the Uganda Library Association (ULA) was formed in 1972 after the dissolution of the East African Library Association, no law to control the affairs of the Uganda Library and Information Association (ULIA) – which ULA became in 2004 – a professional register or an ICE has been adopted in Uganda. The reasons for this are not clear, but it is believed that some of the causes are as follows:
- There is selfishness among professionals, organisations and institutions, who seem not to like interference in their affairs.
- The government has taken its time to enact enabling legislation, partly because of little

pressure, or negligible political gain that would accrue. For any ICE, there is a need for a professional register of practising professionals. Such a register is administered by the designated authority, which should be set up by law. In Uganda, this authority is ULIA, which is yet to be established by law and then can set up a professional register. It would otherwise be very difficult to develop and enforce the ICE.
- There are also many people who pose as information professionals in different disciplines that have sprung up. Examples include journalists, computer scientists, and so on. There is a need for a clear identity of who the information professional is, and such a person should register with the Association.
- There appears to be a lack of seriousness on the part of both the ULIA leadership and membership to exert due pressure to put their house in order.
- These efforts are further affected by the nature of the employment sector, which is now becoming more and more privatised. Many organisations employ libraries or information professions without consulting the Association.
- Given the socioeconomic, political and cultural conditions of Uganda as a developing country, there is a likely need to censure certain information, for example concerning different political ideologies, pornography, etc. However, this may conflict with the need to provide for freedom of access to information, as may be required under the ICE.

The writing is on the wall, however. An ICE is long overdue. ULIA should wake up and normalise this situation if Uganda is to be counted among information/knowledge-based societies, managed by professionals who are controlled by legal authority to ensure quality and professionalism in the field.

Proposed elements of a Ugandan code of information ethics

Vanasco (1994) lists the following elements. First, unethical behaviour should be avoided. The professional code of ethics for Uganda should therefore define unethical behaviour to include all actions that result in unfairness to others, whether those behaviours are legal or not.

Examples may include:

- Bribery, which is considered to be the ethical problem occurring most frequently internationally
- Accepting personal gifts, because professionals' ability to maintain professional objectivity might reasonably be questioned

Second, information professionals should stay abreast of developments and constantly develop themselves and grow professionally. When professionals are unaware of current developments and standards, they are likely to conduct themselves in an unethical manner.

Third, the professional body must render final decisions on disciplinary matters by taking either of the following actions:

- Censure, involving a written reprimand that outlines the consequences of repeated actions
- Suspension, which is imposed when the misconduct warrants more serious disciplinary action than a censure
- Expulsion of a member or forfeiture of membership for the most serious cases of misconduct

Creating a more ethical work environment consists of several steps, which may include:

- Establishing of a code of conduct, an ethics committee and a policy empowering the professional body to check compliance with the code as part of its responsibility
- Continuous training on how to deal with ethical dilemmas
- Willingness to accept responsibility for one's behaviour

A summarised proposed code of ethics

An ICE for information professionals must essentially address issues related to the standard of conduct, competence, honesty, social implications, professional development and protection of the profession. A proposed code of ethics for the information profession of Uganda appears below.

Information professionals should act with professional responsibility and integrity in dealing with clients, employers, employees, students and the community generally. By this is meant the following:

- *Priorities: To serve the interests of clients and employers, employees and students, and the community generally, as matters of no less priority than the interests of colleagues or oneself.*
- *Competence: To work competently and diligently for clients and employers.*
- *Honesty: To strive for integrity and reliability under all circumstances.*
- *Social implications: To strive to enhance the quality of life of those affected by an information professional's work.*
- *Professional development: To enhance information professionals' development, and that of their colleagues, employees and students.*
- *Information profession: To enhance the integrity of the information profession and the respect of its members for each other.*

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