

## **Information ethics: A student's perspective**

Sarah B. Kaddu

*Based on personal experience, and content analysis, this chapter examines information ethics (IE) from a student's perspective. Within this framework, it defines IE, outlines the history of IE and highlights incidences of IE violations in Uganda. The chapter concludes with proposals for better adherence to IE in Uganda. The chapter presents personal experience, observation and a content analysis methodology.*

### **Contents**

Introduction .....	322
Ethics defined .....	322
Brief history of information ethics .....	322
Key players in IE violation in Uganda .....	322
Conclusion .....	324
Recommendations .....	324

### **Author's details**

Ms Sarah B. Kaddu

East African School of Library and Information Science, Makerere University, P.O. Box 7062, Kampala, Uganda

☎ +256 712 983837

✉ sarkaddu2@yahoo.com

## Introduction

Information ethics (IE) is an important aspect of the information science discipline. Being able to determine what is right or wrong, good or bad, is very important in any discipline. IE directs a vision in life. It is a commitment to do right and uphold the good in the execution of responsibilities in the profession. Not doing so would be violation of IE. Nevertheless, some players in the information science field violate IE. Based on a student's perspective, this chapter highlights incidences of the violation of IE. It also makes proposals for better adherence to IE in Uganda.

## Ethics defined

According to Capurro (1988:2) and Kostrewski & Oppenheim (1980), the word ethics is derived from the Greek word *ethos*, which means "way of living". Ethics is a branch of philosophy that is concerned with human conduct, more specifically the behaviour of individuals in society. Ethics examines the rational justification for our moral judgments; it studies what is morally right or wrong, just or unjust. Ethics leads to a set of rules of conduct for specific situations, and basic ethical principles guide the development of standards for specific professions and groups.

There are two aspects to the definition of ethics: being able to determine what is right or wrong, good or bad, as well as a commitment to doing what is right and good. Ethics is a subset of values - a value applies to things that are desired, as well as what one ought to do, which can include such concepts as wealth, happiness, success and fulfilment. Ethics defines how a moral person should behave, whereas values include other beliefs and attitudes that guide behaviour (Froehlich, 1992).

## Brief history of information ethics

According to Moore (2005), IE is the field that investigates ethical issues arising from the development and application of information technologies. It provides a critical framework for considering moral issues concerning information privacy; moral agency (e.g. whether artificial agents may be moral); new environmental issues (especially how agents should behave in the infosphere); problems arising from the lifecycle

(creation, collection, recording, distribution, processing, etc.) of information, especially ownership; and copyright in the environment of a digital divide.

IE has grown over the years as a field in information science and has been embraced by many other disciplines as well (Hauptman, 1988). In the US, IE has had a 20-year history of development, pulling together strands from information science and computer science.

In addressing issues of IE, Hauptman (1988) lists these problem areas in librarianship: censorship, privacy, access to information, balance in collection development, copyright, fair use, codes of ethics, and problem patrons:

*In fact, even at its beginning the domain of concern in information ethics spilled over to other areas: computer ethics, information systems ethics, ethical issues in Management Information Systems, and Information Policy.*

Besides Hauptman, others also began using the phrase *information ethics*. Capurro (1988) wrote an article on "Information ethos and information ethics", but did not raise some of the issues in IE. This prompted Kostrewski & Oppenheim (1980) to write an article raising such issues as the confidentiality of information, bias in information provided to clients or consumers, the quality of data supplied by online vendors, and the use of work facilities.

## Key players in IE violation in Uganda

In my experience as a student, the key players in IE have been lecturers, students, information workers, and employers. They play both positive and negative roles.

### *Lecturers at university level*

The first moral obligation of a lecturer is to prepare, teach and evaluate students effectively. This would include preparing course outlines, schemes of work, and setting and marking course work and examinations. Miller (1971) lists the good qualities of ethically based lecturers:

- Coming to work regularly and on time
- Being well informed about their students and subject matter
- Planning and conducting classes with care

- Regularly reviewing and updating instructional practices
- Cooperating with or, if necessary, meeting and holding discussions with parents of under-achieving students
- Cooperating with colleagues and observing university policies so that the whole institution works effectively
- Tactfully, but firmly criticising unsatisfactory policies and proposing constructive improvement

Whereas many lecturers meet the above requirements, there are others who do not plan what is to be taught in advance, miss lectures, fail to report on duty daily, are drunk on duty, or demand money from students in exchange for marks, etc. Many times, lecturers and teachers have been accused of breaching the code of confidentiality by leaking examination papers or colluding with those who do so.

### ***LIS students***

The most obvious example of some library and information science (LIS) students violating LIS ethics is plagiarism. Some LIS students borrow words, sentences and even paragraphs from many sources without acknowledgement. This is especially common with assignments or projects submitted by students.

Further, some students have a habit of buying other students' work from secretarial bureaus around universities and pretend that it is their own work. The rules in universities are clear in this regard: once caught cheating or copying, such a student can be expelled. This does not, however, deter students from copying. Copying can be associated with a lack of confidence in producing individual work, a lack of skills to produce a good piece of work, or laziness. In some cases, there is the belief that "everyone does it, why not me?" For instance, at Makerere University, once students are given an assignment or project, they take the instructions to a nearby secretarial bureau and for a fee the bureau prepares the assignment. This is done at a fee payable to the person managing that particular bureau.

Another problem is photocopying, which has become a plague in the academic setting. Too much photocopying is seen these days compared

with years ago. This violates the ethical issues related to copyright. In some cases, almost the entire textbook is photocopied. Once students are reminded about infringing copyright, some will photocopy the book chapter by chapter until they have eventually photocopied the entire text.

### ***LIS students and computer crimes***

Though other key players in LIS have violated computer ethics, the major culprits appear to be students. The problem is not so much about the physical security of the hardware (protecting it from theft, fire, flooding, etc.), but rather "logical security". Spafford et al. (1989) divide logical security into five aspects:

- Privacy and confidentiality
- Integrity, ensuring that data and programmes are not modified without proper authority
- Unimpaired service
- Consistency, ensuring that the behaviour and the data we see today will be the same tomorrow
- Controlling access to resources

### ***Information professionals***

Other key players in information science ethics violations are librarians, or information professionals (IPs). Some of the ways in which they have done so are discussed below.

#### ***Concealment***

IPs have been observed to avoid giving frank negative feedback because they do not want to offend others. However, it should always be remembered that being dishonest is disrespectful. The key in this case would be to share negative information, or disagree with others, in ways that still communicate the facts. Besides, it is unethical to use one's position to bully others. Publicly criticising college staff, programmes and other trustees abrogates the responsibility to protect the assets of the university or college.

#### ***Influencing staff***

IPs have tended to influence staff by asking for favours. They may excuse behaviour that might not meet ethical standards because "no one will

be hurt". Using one's position to influence staff, to ask for special favours, perks or tip-offs, or to share confidential information may seem easy, but violates the ethic of trustworthiness and is never "harmless".

### *Acting in an irresponsible manner*

In some cases, IPs have acted in non-professional ways because they have observed others doing the same. Seeing others act in unethical ways is, however, no excuse to perpetuate unethical behaviour. Some organisational and group practices or systems may be so deep-rooted that they seem acceptable, even if they are ethically questionable. Ethical trustees will always evaluate their own and other's behaviour against the institution's information code of ethics.

### *Censorship and intellectual freedom*

Some IPs have been guilty of excluding from the collection materials to which they personally object. Some successfully pressurise schools to restrain children under certain ages from using certain materials. Abbott (1987) concurs: "Censorship can occur when materials are restricted to particular audiences, based on their age or other characteristics." For instance, groups of IPs may not want such materials to be sold in video stores, published, or displayed, for example, in art galleries.

According to Samek (2003), intellectual freedom is the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. It provides for free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, cause or movement may be explored. Many IPs have denied users freedom of access to information. There have been restrictions to information in the collection based on it being "trash", "immoral" or "biased". Restrictions not only apply to printed information, but have also extended to online information, to the extent of buying special software to filter information that is "unfit for consumption". Concerns have been raised about freedom of access to information. Samek (2003) states:

*Our citizens must be informed; intellectual freedom is the basis for our democratic society. Our people are self governors and to do so responsibly, our*

*citizenry must be able to access information to make well-informed decisions. Libraries must be dedicated to providing the ideas and information, in a variety of formats, to allow people to inform themselves. Intellectual freedom is the freedom to hold, receive and disseminate ideas.*

### **Conclusion**

IPs, lecturers, students and information workers have been identified as key players in the violation of information science ethics in Uganda in their diverse roles. As IPs continue to develop, they face new challenges in balancing the many roles demanded of them. We are called upon to develop and implement policies throughout the entire lifecycle of information.

Among the greatest challenges facing IPs in Uganda is the need to earn "ethics trust" from those to whom information is provided, and to expect IE from the organisations for which they work, and from themselves. Understanding our own sense of ethics, and calling upon that sense throughout all aspects of our work, is the greatest challenge we face.

### **Recommendations**

#### ***Freedom of access to information***

Access to information is a welfare right. The issue of access to information as a welfare right requires IPs and information science institutions in Uganda to take positive steps to satisfy those rights.

According to Rawlsian theory (Rawls, 1971), people who are behind a veil of ignorance need access to information. In order for a society to make informed decisions and understand the consequences of social policies, the people must have access to the information for a democratic society to function effectively. This is a basic right in order to facilitate the decision-making process.

IPs in Uganda need to promote intellectual freedom for the welfare of our society. This includes government agencies and libraries collaborating to make the information accessible to everyone. According to Miller (1971), people need access to information and diverse perspectives to really understand a topic. The US Library Bill of Rights promotes free and equal access to everyone

regardless of their age, level of education, legal emancipation, or race. To accomplish the dissemination of so much information, access to information would have to be a welfare right in order to work effectively.

The library collections in Uganda should include a wide variety of topics, providing materials on both sides of an issue. As regards labelling areas of the library collection, librarians in Uganda need to be careful about censoring the content of materials through using biased labels. For labelling to organise materials in a way that would allow patrons to access a particular topic quickly, it must be kept unbiased. Correct and efficient labelling could save the patron the time of sorting through thousands of pieces of irrelevant information.

### ***Equal access to library use***

All IPs in Uganda should note that patrons should not be denied access to materials on whatever basis. Rawlsian theory would deny access only if disruptive behaviour is breaking the contract of the social system. By allowing a disruptive patron, others who are in the library are being denied fair equality, and a just society would not allow someone to harm others. Patrons who are uncomfortable around the disruptive patron may decide never to come back to the library. Therefore, this disruptive patron has limited others from using the library due to his or her presence. Rawlsian theory would choose to ban this person in order not to make the majority of the patrons comfortable.

### ***Privacy rights***

The responsibility of all IPs in Uganda should be to ethically facilitate, not monitor, access to information. This is according to the American Library Association's (ALA) interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information and enlightenment of all people of the community that the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of their origin, background or the views of those contributing to their creation. The ALA's Library Bill of Rights continues:

*This commitment is implemented locally through*

*development, adoption, and adherence to privacy policies that are consistent with applicable federal, state, and local law. Everyone (paid or unpaid) who provides governance, administration, or service in libraries has a responsibility to maintain an environment respectful and protective of the privacy of all users. Users have the responsibility to respect each other's privacy. Anyone on the library staff who collects or accesses personally identifiable information in any format has a legal and ethical obligation to protect confidentiality.*

Libraries in Uganda should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.

IPs should also challenge censorship in the fulfilment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas. A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of his or her origin, age, background or views.

### REFERENCES

- Abbott, R. 1987. *A critical analysis of the library-related literature concerning censorship in public libraries and public school libraries in the United States during the 1980s*. Project for the Degree of Education Specialist, University of South Florida [ED 308 864].
- Capurro, R. 1988. Information ethos and information ethics: Ideas to take responsible action in the field of information. *Nachrichten für Dokumentation*, 39(1): 1-4.
- Capurro, R. 2004. Intercultural information ethics. In International ICIE Symposium, *Localizing the Internet: Ethical issues in intercultural perspective*. Karlsruhe, Germany: Centre for Art and Media.
- Froehlich, T.J. 1992. Ethical considerations of information professionals. *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*, 27: 291-324.
- Froehlich, T.J. 1997. *Survey and analysis of legal and ethical issues for library and information services*. UNESCO Report (Contract No. 401.723.4) for the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA Professional Series).
- Hauptman, R. 1988. *Ethical challenges in librarianship*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.
- Kostrewski, B.J. & Oppenheim, C. 1980. Ethics in information science. *Journal of Information Science*, 1(5): 277-283.

- Miller, A.R. 1971. *The assault on privacy: Computers, data banks, and dossiers*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Moore, A.D. (Ed.). 2005. *Information ethics: Privacy, property, and power*. Seattle, VA: University of Washington Press.
- Rawls, J. 1971. *A theory of justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Samek, T. 2003. Intellectual freedom within the profession: A look back at freedom of expression and the alternative library press. *Counterpoise*, 4(1/2).
- Severson, R.J. 1997. *The principles of information ethics*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Spafford, E.H., Heaphy, K.A. & Ferbrache, D.J. 1989. *Computer viruses: Dealing with electronic vandalism and programmed threats*. Arlington, VA: ADAPSO.
- Spafford, E.H. 1992. Are computer hacker break-ins ethical? *Journal of Systems and Software*, 17: 41–47.