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Information Ethics: a student's perspective

Abstract:

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

Agenda

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Introduction

Information Ethics (IE) is an important aspect of the Information Science (IS) 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 IS violate IE. Based on a student's perspective, this paper highlights incidences of the violation of IE. It also makes proposals towards better adherence to IE in Uganda.

Ethics defined

According to Capurro[1]; Kostrewski and Oppenheim[2], Ethics are 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; basic ethical principles guide the development of standards for specific professions and groups.

There are two aspects in the definition of ethics: being able to determine what is right or wrong, good or bad and a comittiment to doing what is right and good. Ethics are a subset of values: a value applies to things that are desired as well as what one ought to do, and can include such concepts as wealth, happiness, success, and fulfillment. Ethics define how a moral person should behave; values include other beliefs and attitudes that guide behavior (Froehlich, 1992)[3].

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[1] Capurro, Rafeal: Information ethos and information ethics. Ideas to take responsible action in the field of information, 2

[2] Kostrewski and Oppenheim: "Ethics in information science", *Journal of information science,* pp 277-278

[3] Froehlich, Thomas J: Ethical considerations of information professionals", *Annual review of information science and technology*

Brief history of Information Ethics (IE)

According to Adam (2005)[4], Information ethics is the field that investigates the 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 life-cycle (creation, collection, recording, distribution, processing, etc.) of information, especially ownership and copyright in the environment of a digital divide).

Information ethics has grown over the years as a field in Information Science (IS). It has evolved and been embraced by many other disciplines (Hauptman, 1988)[5]. In the United States information ethics has had a 20-year evolving history, pulling together strands from information science and computer science.

Addressing issues of information ethics, one source lists problem areas within librarianship, viz. 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 (Hauptman, 1988).

Besides Hauptman, there are other people who first used the phrase, *information ethics*. Capurro (1988) wrote an article in Information Ethos and Information Ethics, but did not raise some of the issues in information ethics. This prompted (Kostrewski and Oppenheim, 1980: 277-283) to write an article, raising such issues as 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.

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[4] Adam, D Moore ed. (2005). "Information ethics: Privacy, property and power"

[5] Hauptman, Robert (1988). *Ethical challenges in librarianship*

Key players in Information Ethics violation in Uganda

The experience as a student reveals that the key players in Information Ethics are: lecturers, students, information workers, and employers. They play both positive and negative roles.

Lecturers at university level

The first moral obligation of lecturers 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[6] enlists the good qualities of an ethically based lecturer: coming to work regularly and on time; being well informed about their student and subject matter; planning and conducting classes with care; regularly reviewing and updating instructional practices; cooperating with, or if necessary, meeting and discussing with parents of under-achieving students; cooperating with colleagues and observing school policies so the whole institution works effectively; tactfully, but firmly criticizing unsatisfactory school policies and proposing constructive improvement.

Whereas many lecturers fulfill the above, 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 teachers have been accused of breaching the code of confidentiality by leaking examinations or colluding with those who do so.

LIS Students

The most obvious incident in which some LIS students violate LIS ethics is through plagiarism. LIS students borrow from many sources, words, sentences, paragraphs 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 that once caught cheating or copying, one could be expelled. This does not deter students from copying. Copying could be associated with lack of confidence in producing an individual work or lack of skills to produce a good piece of work. And in some cases, there is this belief that 'everyone does it, why not me?' Another problem is photocopying that has become a plague in the academic setting. Too much photocopying is seen these days compared to years ago. This violates the ethical issues related to copyright.

For instance, at Makerere University, once students are given an assignment or a project, they take the assignment 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 incidence is that of photocopying almost the entire text book. Once the students are reminded about infringing on the copyright issues, they would photocopy the book chapter by chapter till the entire text is all done.

LIS Students and Computer Crimes

Though other key players in LIS have violated Computer Ethics, it appears like the major culprits are students. The problem is not so much about the physical security of the hardware (protecting it from theft, fire, flood, etc.), but rather "logical security". Spafford, et al, (1989)[7] divide logical security into five aspects: privacy and confidentiality, integrity - assuring that data and programs are not modified without proper authority, unimpaired service and consistency ensuring that the data and behavior we see today will be the same tomorrow and controlling access to resources.

Information Professionals (IPs)

Other key players in IS ethics violations are librarians/ IPs. Some of the ways in which they have violated IS ethics include: concealment, influencing staff, acting in a non responsible manner- 'every information professional is doing it, why not me', censorship and intellectual freedom.

Concealment

Information Professionals have been observed to avoid giving frank (negative feedback) because they do not want to offend others. However, it should

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[6] Miller, A. R. (1971). The Assault on Privacy: Computers, Data Banks, and Dossiers

[7] Sppaford, Eugene (1992) "Are Computer Hacker Break-Ins Ethical? Pp 41-47

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 facts. Besides, it is unethical to use one's position to bully others. Publicly criticizing college staff, programs, and other trustees abrogates the responsibility to protect the assets of the college.

Influencing staff

Information professionals have tended to influence staff by asking for favors. One may excuse behavior that might not meet ethical standards because "no one will be hurt." However, using one's position to influence staff, asking for special favors or perks, tips or sharing confidential information may seem easy and harmless, but the ethic of trustworthiness is violated.

Acting in a non responsible manner- 'Everybody's doing it, why not me?'.

In some cases, IPs have acted in non professional ways because others are also doing the same. Others acting in unethical ways is no excuse for unethical behavior. Some organizational 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 behavior against the Information Code of Ethics (ICE).

Censorship and Intellectual Freedom

IPs have been guilty of excluding from the collection materials to which they personally object. Some successfully pressurize schools to restrain children under certain ages from using certain materials. Abbott[8] concurs: "Censorship can occur when materials are restricted to particular audiences, based on their age or other characteristics." These groups of IPs do not want the materials sold in video stores or published; they do not want art galleries to display them.

According to Samek[9], 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 some information from the collection under the excuse of: "thrash" and "immoral" excuses. Restrictions do not only apply to printed information. It has extended to online information to the extent of buying special software to filter the so called information '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 violation of IS 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 life-cycle 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 organizations for which we work, and from ourselves. Understanding our own sense of ethics and calling upon that sense throughout all aspects of our work is the greatest challenge we face.

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[8] Abott, Randy: "A Critical Analysis of the Library-Related Literature Concerning Censorship in Public Libraries and Public School Libraries in the United States During the 1980s.

[9] Samek, Toni: Intellectual Freedom within the Profession: A Look back at Freedom of Expression and the Alternative Library Press

Recommendations

Freedom of access to information

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. Access to information is a welfare right.

According to Rawlsian Theory[10] people behind the veil of ignorance will 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.

Information professionals in Uganda need to promote intellectual freedom for the welfare of our society. This includes government agencies and the libraries collaborating to make the information accessible to everyone. According to Miller (1971), people need access to information and diverse perspectives to understand a topic. The US Library Bill of Rights promotes free and equal access to everyone regardless of age, level of education, or legal emancipation, or race. To accomplish the dissemination of so much information the 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 and it should provide materials on both sides of the issues. On the issue of labeling areas of the library collection, the librarians in Uganda need to be careful about censoring the materials by the content with biased labels. If a label will organize materials in a way that would allow patrons to quickly access a particular topic, it must be kept unbiased. Labeling 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 because of the disruptive behavior is breaking the contract of the social system. Fair equality is being denied to the people who are in the library and a just society would not allow someone to harm others. Under the "veil of ignorance" a patron who is uncomfortable around the disruptive patron may decide not to ever come back to the library. Therefore, this disruptive patron has limited others from using the library due to his or her presence and Rawlsian theory would choose to ban the disruptive patron 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 interpretation of the 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 the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

> "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 others' 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 fulfillment 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 origin, age, background, or views.

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[10] Rawls, John (1971): A theory of Justice.

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