INFORMATION ETHICS AND LIS PROFESSION IN DIGITAL ERA IN INDIA: A FUTURISTIC APPROACH

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Abstract

We are living in digital era where things are changing drastically in every domain of human life and consequence of that like other professions such as Banking, Insurance and Healthcare traditional approach of serving the patrons of libraries has become unproductive. Moreover, due to extensive use of ICT and availability of internet connectivity at easy, most of the library users have a lot of other options such institutional repositories, Information databases, social networking sites and search engines to get the required information in their desired format. The result of this, the number of library visitors and their frequency of library visit have been decreased remarkably which raised a big concerned for LIS professionals. Apart from this, it is also expected by the modern users that libraries professionals should provide the right information, in the least span of time, in the right format and in right professional way. To do so, the majority of libraries in India are in process of converting into digital libraries which are more suitable for the modern users and to meet the basic objective of making information accessible across this universe by passing all constraints to time and space. So, to make it on the ground reality, roles and responsibilities of LIS professionals have become very crucial and it is a high demand of time to incorporate some more professional ethics in all housekeeping operations of the library such as information searching, selection, storage, processing and dissemination. The key purpose of this study is to point out a few information ethics which are directly or indirectly associated with Library and Information Professionals.

Keywords: Information Ethics, LIS Professional, Library and Information Centers, Digital Libraries, India.

1.0 Introduction:

Today, we are living in the information society where information has become one of the fundamental needs of the human being like air, water, food and shelter. Since morning till the end of the day, everybody needs information to perform their daily tasks at their home as well as in the office. Therefore, availability of right information, at right time and in right amount plays a crucial role in the well-being of the society and the nation. So, keeping this in mind, we can say that Information selection, storage, processing and dissemination have become a very responsible task because the right information, at right time can make a big difference in growth and development of human being which is directly associated with the growth of our society and nation. So, there must be some ethics for information selection, storage, processing and dissemination. Moreover, all agencies such as author, publisher, distributor, researcher and LIS professionals which are directly or indirectly involved in information generation cycle should be well informed about the information ethics.

2.0 Definition

The word ethics has been derived from a Greek word 'êthikos', which means "custom, habit, character or disposition" (BBC, 2014). The literary meaning of ethics is the principles that govern a person's behaviour. In the present world, ethics has attained the status of a separate branch in the universe of knowledge and perceived as the branch of knowledge that deals with moral principles. Ethics can also refer to a common human ability to think about ethical problems that are not particular to philosophy (Wikipedia). As bioethicist Larry Churchill has written, "Ethics, understood as the capacity to think critically about moral values and direct our actions in terms of such

values is a generic human capacity." In other words, ethics is a branch of philosophy that involves systematising, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct (Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy). It also investigates the questions "What is the best way for people to live?" and "What actions are right or wrong in particular circumstances?"(Wikipedia) In practice, ethics seeks to resolve questions of human morality, by defining concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, justice and crime. In nutshell, ethics is a system of moral principles that affect how people make decisions and lead their lives. It is concerned with what is good for individuals and society and is also described as moral philosophy. In every religion and in every society man of good ethics is being respected and is the source of inspiration for others. Thus, ethics refers to the standards of right and wrong that prescribes what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues. The several well-known philosophers had explained the term "Ethics" as per their knowledge and experience out of which a few are given below:

- According to **Rushworth Kidder** "Standard definitions of ethics have typically included such phrases as 'the science of the ideal human character' or 'the science of moral duty"(**Kidder, 2003**).

- **Richard William Paul and Linda Elder** defines the ethics as, "A set of concepts and principles that guide us in determining what behaviour helps or harms sentient creatures" (**Richard & Linda, 2006**).

- The **Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy** states that the word ethics is "Commonly used interchangeably with 'morality' and sometimes it is used more narrowly to mean the moral principles of a particular tradition, group or individual."(**The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy**)

- According to **Paul and Elder** "Most people confuse ethics with behaving in accordance with social conventions, religious beliefs and the law and don't treat ethics as a stand-alone concept". (**Richard & Linda, 2006**)

3.0 Scope of Study

The scope of this study is to include general information ethics, information ethics towards the library users and Information ethics towards library resources for the LIS professionals in digital era. The study is based out on digital library scenario especially in India only.

4.0 Information Ethics

Information ethics has been defined as "the branch of ethics that focuses on the relationship between the creation, organization, dissemination, use of information and the ethical standards & moral codes governing human conduct in society" (**Joan, 2010**). It provides a critical framework for considering moral issues concerning to information privacy, new environmental issues, problems arising from the life cycle (creation, collection, recording, distribution, processing etc.) of information, especially ownership and copyright, digital divide, and digital rights (**Carbo & Almagno, 2001**). Information ethics is also related to the fields of computer ethics and the philosophy of information. The information ethics has a very short and progressive history; the origins of the field are in librarianship though it has now expanded to the consideration of ethical issues in other domains including computer science, internet, media, journalism, management information systems and business.

The main objective of LIS professionals is to provide pinpointed, exhaustive and expeditious information service to the patrons of the library. Therefore, LIS staff should have some social responsibilities to perform each and every activity which is very crucial for the smooth functioning of the library. To perform any activity related to the library, LIS staff should keep in mind the ethics which are associated with the particular task. The following are some ethics which need to be followed by LIS professionals while performing any housekeeping operations:

4.1 Information Ethics towards Users

LIS professionals always work for the wellbeing of the users, strive to understand their information needs and try their best to fulfil information need of the users in the least span of time. The LIS professionals should assist the users to access materials they are in search of, regardless of their content and access method involved. Apart from this, the following are the few ethics which need to be followed by the LIS professionals while serving the users:

4.2 Availability of right Information

The core mission of LIS professionals is to make sure the availability of right information to right the users for personal development, education, cultural enrichment and leisure. The Government of India and UGC have strongly recommended that information is accessible for all without any differences. Therefore, LIS professionals should make sure that the right of accessing information is not denied.

4.3 Respect Personal Privacy of Users:

The LIS professionals protect and keep secret all information concerning to the users such as their interests and personal data. The users' personal information should be used only for the purposes defined by the law. Moreover, LIS professionals should respect the users' freedom and privacy of using library resources. Apart from this, the LIS professionals should respect personal privacy, and the protection of personal data, necessarily shared between individuals and library. The personal data of users should not be shared with any third parties without the consent of users.

4.4 Welcoming Atmosphere:

The LIS professionals should try to develop the best research environment. All resources of the library should be arranged in simple, understandable and logical order. The organisation of collected and in-house developed products and services should be maintained properly. The circulation of library resources should be regularly analysed to find the usage of resources and necessary steps should be taken to enhance the usage of resources and services. All requests of users for information should be answered in a stipulated time frame and an industry defined 'Service Level Agreement' (SLA) should be implemented to respond the users' queries in time bound manners. The LIS professionals should also care about the aesthetic and functional value of their institution.

4.5 Unbiased Behaviour:

Today, we are living in the inclusive society in which each and every member of the society deserves equal importance irrespective of their education level, physical and mental capability. So, in order to promote inclusion and eradication of discrimination in our society, the LIS professionals should make sure that equitable services are provided for everyone, including differently abled persons. Differently abled persons have the same information needs as normal people and they are valuable part and parcel of our society. Therefore, their information needs cannot be ignored and LIS professionals should adhere the professional ethics while serving to differently abled users because without their empowerment overall development of our society is not possible. Moreover, the LIS professionals understand and respect the fact that all users are not equally capable of receiving information and using the library. Therefore, LIS professionals strive to equalise the chances for differently abled, minority and socially disadvantaged users. As the contributors in the process of children and youth education, LIS professionals should do their best to develop information needs and encourage all patrons without making any differences.

4.6 High Quality of Services:

LIS professionals care about the high quality of services they offer and strive to explore all possibilities of satisfying users' needs. The LIS professionals provide the users with honest information on the full and actual scope of library services, the content of circulating collections and information resources, the quality of information tools employed and the possibilities of compensating limits to the available services through the cooperation of libraries and information centres.

4.7 High Professionals Decorum:

The LIS professionals strive to provide clear information on the rules and regulations of the library. They should avoid informal solutions that may create a problem at the later stage. Moreover, LIS professionals should attempt to offer their services to as many users as possible, yet they are entitled to refuse those who do not fulfil with the accepted principles, violate the rules or make other users feel uncomfortable.

5.0   Information Ethics towards Resources

The resources are the backbone of library and play a crucial role in smooth functioning of the library. Therefore, LIS professionals should respect all resources they have and should not limit their access. Moreover, LIS professionals comply with the regulations on the use of computer hardware and software, including license agreements and netiquette. Apart from this, professional should care about the compliance with the regulations on the use of resources, in particular, those which result from the active copyright and should not allow the production of illegal copies or alterations of original works. The following are some ethics that should be addressed while dealing with information resources:

5.1 Open Access:

LIS professionals should provide the best possible access to library resources and services to all users. The LIS professionals should deny all types of restrictions that prevent open access to information. These restrictions are in the form of censorship, religious barriers, and community created bias. All other factors such as caste, creed, colour, age, gender etc are being ignored by LIS professionals while serving to their users. This also includes support for the principles of open access, open source and open licenses.

5.2 Balanced Collection:

The LIS professionals develop balanced collection keeping in view the information needs of their users and adjust information resources of their institution for the well-being of the users and their professionals. The professionals take care of the appropriate standards of their content as well as continuous updates. As far as the choice and selection of resources are concerned, library staff should comply with the principle of impartiality and objectivity in the evaluation of resources.

5.3 High Quality Information Systems:

The LIS professionals strive to ensure the highest quality of information systems and services that are used to fulfil the information need of users.

5.4 Proper Resource Evaluation:

The LIS professionals should strive to learn various methods of resource evaluation, taking into consideration the opinion of scientific and literary critics. While selecting resources, they are guided by user needs and the principle of prioritising the materials of the highest quality.

5.5 Fair Selection Process:

While acquiring, cataloguing, organising, selecting, evaluating and circulating library resources, LIS professionals should resist all manifestations of discrimination and remain impartial.

5.6 Informed Decision:

If some library materials/resources need to be excluded from circulation due to their rarity, value, confidential or socially detrimental character, library staff should inform the users of the existence of such materials and state the rules and regulations on their use.

6.0 IFLA Code of Ethics for LIS Professionals

IFLA code of ethics is offered as a series of ethical propositions for the guidance of LIS professionals. The following are a few codes of ethics defined by IFLA for LIS professionals.

6.1 Access to Information:

The core mission of LIS professionals is to ensure access to information for all for personal development, education, cultural enrichment, leisure, economic activity and enhancement of democracy. To this end, library and other information professionals reject censorship in all its forms, support provision of services free of cost to the user, promote collections and services to potential users and seek the highest standards of accessibility to both physical and virtual services.

6.2 Responsibilities towards Individuals and Society:

In order to promote inclusion and eradication of discrimination, LIS professionals ensure that the right of accessing information is not denied and that equitable services are provided for everyone whatever their age, citizenship, political belief, physical or mental ability, gender identity, heritage, education, income, marital status, origin, race, religion or sexual orientation. Apart from this, to enhance the access of library resources, LIS professionals support people in their information searching, assist them to develop their reading skills and information literacy, and encourage them in the ethical use of information with particular attention to the welfare of individuals and society.

6.3 Privacy, Secrecy and Transparency:

The LIS professionals respect personal privacy and the protection of personal data shared between individuals and library. At the same time, they support the fullest possible transparency for information relating to public bodies, private sector companies and all other institutions whose activities affect the lives of individuals and society as a whole.

6.4 Open Access and Intellectual Property:

The LIS professionals should provide the best possible access to information resources and ideas in any media or format, whilst recognizing that they are partners with authors, publishers and other creators of copyright protected works. The Library staffs seek to ensure that both users' rights and creators' rights are respected. They promote the principles of open access, open source and open licenses.

6.5 Neutrality, personal integrity and professional skills:

The LIS professionals are strictly committed to neutrality and an unbiased stance regarding collection, access and service. They seek to acquire balanced collections, apply fair service policies, avoid allowing personal convictions to hinder the carrying out of their professional duties, combat corruption and seek the highest standards of professional excellence.

6.6 Colleague and employer/employee relationship:

The LIS professionals treat each other with fairness and respect. They should oppose discrimination in any aspect of employment because of age, citizenship, political belief, physical or mental ability, gender, marital status, origin, race, religion or sexual orientation. They support equal pay for equal work between men and women, share their professional experience and contribute towards the work of their professional associations.

(http://www.ifla.org/news/ifla-code-of-ethics-for-librarians-and-other-information-workers-full-version#accesstoinformation)

7.0 ALA Code of Ethics for LIS Professionals

American Library Association (ALA) code of professional ethics was propounded in 1939 (http://www.ala.org/advocacy/proethics/codeofethics/codeethics) and since has been updated regularly. The code

is a guideline for LIS professionals on how to uphold the values that libraries symbolise. The following are a few ethics suggested by ALA:

- Provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests.

- Uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources.

- Protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted.

- Respect intellectual property rights and advocate balance between the interests of information users and rights holders.

- Treat co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness, and good faith, and advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institutions.

- Do not advance private interests at the expense of library users, colleagues, or our employing institutions.

- Distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources.

- Strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing our own knowledge and skills, by encouraging the professional development of co-workers, and by fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession.

(http://www.ala.org/advocacy/proethics/codeofethics/codeethics)

8.0 Conclusion

Since the inception of ICT in library and information centres in India, a drastic change has been observed in collection development, information searching pattern and information requirement of library users. But, still, most of the traditional libraries are not ready to adopt the current approach to serve the library users which caused a huge gap between the libraries have and users' expectations. To overcome this serious issue, all library housekeeping operations should be performed in ethical manners.

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