Information ethics in Pakistani librarianship: The role of online mailing groups

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Abstract   This study examines the practice of information ethics of the members of the mailing group of the Pakistan Library Automation Group, called PAKLAGPK who participate frequently in the discussions on a variety of LIS ethical issues. The research uses both qualitative and quantitative methods, including a survey questionnaire to measure subscribers' prior knowledge about certain issues in Information Ethics (IE). The research also uses the content analysis method to investigate the information communication behavior of the subscribers over this mailing group.
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Introduction

Information Ethics is an area of concern for information profession, which over time has been greatly affected by developments in information technology. Information Ethics (IE) is not something new in the information profession. The term was widely used during the 1990s and even earlier in the Library and Information Science (LIS) field. Among the major contributors in information ethics are Rafael Capurro, Luciano Floridi and Robert Hauptman (Ocholla, Onyancha, & Britz, 2010), Johannes Britz, Thomas Froehlich, and many others.

Information ethics issues arise from traditional and contemporary issues, such as privacy, whose nature and purview are made more complex and challenging by Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). With the increased use of ICT, some Library and Information Science (LIS) professionals in Pakistan seem to be ignoring that ethical issues in their communications over mailing groups. For over a decade the LIS profession in Pakistan has been adopting technological changes for use by members of the profession and for use within the organizations in which the members work. These developments include library automation, Internet research, and the use of commercial and non-commercial databases in reference and research work. Unfortunately, the only professional association of librarians in Pakistan has been inactive for more than two decades and has not provided continuing education opportunities for its members. During this period, the LIS education programs around the country also did not provide

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much guidance or continuing professional development opportunities for the young professionals, or for those continuing, in the field. As a result, some young professionals took the responsibility to raise the concerns of the community and their professional development through non-profit small interest groups.

Among these groups, the Pakistan Library Automation group (PLAGPK) has been the lead group, with the Librarians' Welfare group, LIBCOOP, and some others also playing a role. The PLAGPK, the most successful group, has more than 3000 members on a Yahoo! mailing group who most often communicate with each other to share ideas, discuss different issues facing the profession, seek help from peer professionals in finding the resources for their patrons, etc.

Sloan (2006) defined electronic discussion lists as the form of communication which uses email to facilitate members of group to discuss a particular topic. Different terms have commonly been used which refer to this form of communication over the Internet. Sloan uses different terms for the "electronic discussion groups," e.g. email discussion groups, email lists, and the most commonly used term, listservs.

All the LIS mailing lists in Pakistan are un-moderated groups, use free services offered by the search engines and do not have their own domain names. Instead, they use free hosting services offering search engines. In contrast to the un-moderated lists in Pakistan, Sloan (2006) defines "moderated lists" as those that require a moderator to serve as an editor, making decisions about whether an email message should get posted to the list.

In these changing circumstances, as in many countries, the LIS profession in Pakistan is facing ethical issues such as plagiarism, intellectual freedom and concerns about copyright violations. This study aims to investigate these and other issues in information ethics in the Pakistani LIS profession as indicated by listserv use and suggest remedies for better education and awareness of the library professionals about information ethics on the Internet.

Problem statement

In December 2000, a few active LIS professionals from Lahore (capital of Punjab province of Pakistan) started a group with an interest in bringing Pakistan LIS professionals into a single forum to interact and communicate about the latest developments in the profession and provide them a forum to share their opinions and problems in the profession (Khan, 2004). Since then more than 3000 LIS professionals and para-professionals have joined the PLAGPK mailing group. It is at present considered the most effective and popular platform for communication by the LIS professionals in Pakistan.

Along with its many positive and productive uses, the PLAGPK mailing group is sometimes used inappropriately by members, including abusive language toward others, or as a tool for personal promotion. Although the list is supposed to be moderated, the role of the moderator is not defined clearly and all the emails, no matter what the messages contain, are released over the group-wide subscription. There are no clear policies for the use of the listserv or for the role of the moderator. The PLAGPK has not developed

any mission statement and instructions for the users to tell them what the group is for and what the ethics of information communication are for the mailing group.

The researcher used the PLAGPK mailing group as a case study to investigate some issues in information ethics. Of course, what a member does on a mailing list does not necessarily reflect that individual's entire approach to information ethics, so the results provide only limited information about the participants' attitudes and practices. In addition, some questions beyond information ethics (e.g. related to whether they are subscribers to an international professional association) were included in the study. A content analysis of the emails over the group communication was undertaken. The study aims to examine attitudes and behaviors of the library and information science professionals on the PAKLAG Yahoo! mailing groups. The overall objective of this research is to identify some of the latest issues and dilemmas regarding information ethics in LIS profession in Pakistan, with a focus on intellectual property rights and privacy issues.

Literature review

Ethics and morality are not the same. Ethics is usually considered to be the reflection an individual does, based on that person's values from a particular cultural perspective, to determine what moral action should be taken. Mason (1986) divides Information Ethics (IE) into four elements: privacy, accuracy, property, and accessibility. Issues regarding all of these elements are found in communications on mailing groups among the LIS professionals in Pakistan.

Since 1980s, most of the LIS programs in the United States have included discussions on information ethics, but there have been very few courses in these programs that are specifically devoted to the topic of information ethics. Many LIS administrators and educators in the profession have endeavored to make ethical issues a concern and to educate professionals about the issues (Carbo, 2008). The LIS programs in Pakistan have not incorporated information ethics into their curricula by having a specific course devoted to it.

On the foundations of information ethics theories, Froehlich (1997) notes that "ethics seem to primarily focus on the norms and standards of behavior of individuals or groups in a society based on normative conduct and moral judgment." IE 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, digital divide)" (Information Ethics 2010).

Many LIS professional associations have codes of ethics, often called Guidelines. For example, the American Library Association (ALA) identifies its list of core values of information ethics in its Code. These include: "access, confidentiality/ privacy, democracy, diversity, education and lifelong learning, intellectual freedom, preservation, the public good, professionalism, service, and social responsibility" (ALA, 1999). The Pakistan Library Association (PLA) has not yet developed such a code of ethics for its members.