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The International Information & Library Review
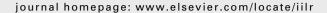
Information ethics education in Africa. Where do we stand?☆

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KEYWORDS
Information ethics;
Ethics education;
Africa;
Applied ethics;
Ethics

Summary This paper explores information ethics (IE) education within LIS (Library and Information Studies/Science) schools in Africa to investigate the following: (i) the extent to which IE is necessary; (ii) who should offer IE and why; (iii) who should be taught IE (and at what level); (iv) how long IE education should take; and (v) what should be included in an IE course. This was accomplished through a literature review and a case study conducted via email with purposely selected LIS experts from around Africa. Overwhelmingly, the LIS experts agreed that information ethics should be offered by LIS departments in courses that account for the multidisciplinary nature of the subject and that it should be made available to all students at all levels. The content should be objective and outcomes-based or outcomes-driven. The challenges and opportunities enumerated in this study could potentially be used to set the agenda for further research and professional engagement.
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Introduction

Since the concept was [re]conceived in the 90s by scholars like Rafael Capurro, Luciano Floridi, Stephen Almagno and Robert Hauptman (some of these authors are recognized by Thomas Froehlich (2005) in his ''*Brief history of information ethics*'' and the sterling work done towards the development of IE education by the University of Pittsburgh through the initiative of Toni Carbo), 'information ethics'

as a field of study has grown rapidly and seen the publication of a number of articles in various scholarly journals and databases such as LISA, ISA, LISTA and the Web of Science.

The epistemology of information ethics largely resides in applied ethics, which provides the basic theoretical framework on which the pedagogical foundation and practice of IE can be constructed and applied. Ethical theories that define what right actions and wrong actions people may take under different circumstances (also reflected in teleology and deontology) are generally accommodated under four widely known theories: consequence-based theories, duty-based theories, rights-based theories and virtue-based theories. These theories demonstrate the difficulties and contradictions that arise in the conceptualization and contextualization of ethics.

Don Fallis' (2007) recent article reminds us that consequence-based theories are founded on utilitarianism and

built on the premise that ''*what distinguishes right actions from wrong actions is that they [actions] have better consequences*''. Although Fallis feels that the consequence-based theory is the most applicable to the ''ethical dilemmas faced by library professionals'' (as illustrated on page 4), in actual fact, all four ethical theories bear weight in information practice. A notable example is right-based theories. Rights-based theories work according to the premise that ''*the right thing to do is determined by the rights that human beings have*'', for example, the rights agreed on in 1948's[1] United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNUDHR). UDHR provides common standards for understanding the rights of all nations and information workers from all corners of the world. Article 19 from the declaration stipulates that: ''*Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers*'' ''United Nations, (1948),'' Over time, recognizing such fundamental rights has meant defining information ethics and creating an inclusive paradigm with an emphasis on benefits and shared values and understanding.

The problem with these theories is the difficulties faced in their application, particularly because of the contradictions one encounters when attempting comparisons, both within and without. For example, an excellent consequence that brings happiness to an individual, a family, a community or an institution may not necessarily be either right or virtuous. Similarly, the way people understand duty varies, and the question is, therefore, duty to whom — family, belief/religion, employer, government or nation? Some of the most virile conflicts in family units, workplaces, governments and international relationships have largely arisen from conflicts in the interpretation and application of ethical values.

Furthermore, the interpretation and implementation of rights across communities around the world is not uniform. For example, marginalized groups, referring here to children, women, the illiterate, rural dwellers or others who are disadvantaged because of race, creed, religion, poverty, age, etc., may not necessarily benefit from the human rights that others (the more privileged) enjoy. In most instances, equality and human rights as experienced and perceived by these groups are utopian in nature — what is naturally right to them is often decided not by themselves, but by some 'superior' body (those at the top in a given social hierarchy through politics, culture, traditions and/or the religion of a community).

An alternative or supplementary approach to the question of ethical theories can be found in the relationships and tensions between mores, ethics and laws (see Froehlich, 1997: 1, 2). While distinguishing between the three concepts, he notes that morals, ethics and laws may contravene one another (see Froehlich, 1997: 3). Ultimately, the nature, level and challenges of such contraventions must be understood by the information ethics scholar and professional.

From these definitions, ethics seems to primarily focus on the norms and standards of behavior of individuals or groups within a society based on normative conduct and moral judgment: principles of wrong and right; ''moral consequences of human action'' (Wojtzak, 2002); and responsibility and accountability (Sembok, 2004). Gleaning from these definitions, the role or purpose of ethics in society is to promote what is good in people, avert chaos, and provide norms and standards of behavior based on morals and values that are unifying, as opposed to dividing. Information ethics is seen to provide ''*a critical framework for considering moral issues concerning informational privacy, moral agency (e.g. whether artificial agents may be moral), new environmental issues (especially how agents should one 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, n.d.: np). Examples of possible dilemmas in the process of information gathering, processing and distribution that would require this framework, as highlighted by Don Fallis (2007: 23) [citing Doyle, Garoogian, Nesta and Blake, Baldwin, Wolkoff, Hannabus and Pendergrast] include the following:

- Should internet filters be put on all the computers in a public library?
- Should law enforcement officers investigating a potential terrorist be allowed to know what a particular person checked out?
- Should books donated by a racist organization be added to the library collection?
- Should a homeless person who smells very bad be allowed to use the library?
- Should Holocaust denial literature be included in the library collection?
- Should there be charges for specialized information services in a public library?
- Should a warning label be placed on an encyclopedia that contains clearly inaccurate information?

Other dilemmas put forward by Fallis include:

- Should we stop a music fan from downloading music from the Internet without paying? (Fallis, 2007: 34)
- Should a bookseller tell law enforcement officers what books her patrons are reading? (Fallis, 2007: 34)

Ethical dilemmas in modern information environments are raised in many case studies. In order to effectively deal with them, some form of IE education is necessary.

Case study of selected LIS schools in Africa

There are well over 60 LIS programs in Africa today. The largest contingents are located in South Africa (12), Nigeria (8) and Kenya (7). Most of the LIS schools are located in Anglophone Africa and within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), particularly universities (Ocholla, 2008; Ocholla & Bothma, 2007).

In order to compare the views expressed in literature with those expressed by participants for this survey from LIS programs in Africa on information ethics education in

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[1] See http://www.un.org/overview/rights.html.