Ethical Issues in Library and Information Science: A Cursory Look at the Nigerian Practice

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Abstract

The importance of library and information science to the evolution of modern societies cannot be overemphasized. In meeting the set objectives of its task of national development, ethical principles which are labelled as professional codes of conduct are put in place to regulate the practice of library and information professionals. Since the practices of librarians and the different challenges in the field vary depending on space and location, this paper looks at the critical ethical issues in library and information science in Nigeria. The paper discusses the ethical practices in the library and information science profession in Nigeria such as universal access to information, intellectual property rights, intellectual freedom, copyright/fair use, and privacy/confidentiality, and proposes solutions to these hindrances. While engaging with the ethical issues militating against the performance of library and information professionals in Nigeria, this conceptual paper identifies, among others, major hindrances in unequal access to information, copyright infringement, ethical dilemmas, non-protection of privacy, and confidentiality, and lack of information security plan. The conclusion of the paper strikes a balance between the code of practice and the challenges highlighted by supporting the urgent need by all stakeholders to take, more seriously, the issue of ethics and practice in order to navigate the sundry challenges highlighted and to improve on the current status of library and information science practice in Nigeria.

Keywords: Ethical issues, Nigeria, library and information science, code of practice

Introduction

All over the world today, important roles are given to Library and information science professionals because of their capacity to manage information resources set in place to serve diverse needs. Any profession that handles sensitive tasks such as this, comes with calls that demand honesty, integrity, transparency, accountability, respectfulness, fairness, equity, and justice (American Library Association [ALA], 2009; Rublin & Froehlich, 2011). However, for the library and information science professional, these critical attributes must be imbibed to demonstrate sound knowledge and practice of the code and ethics of the profession.

Dues cognizance must be given to the fact that all bodies of professional workers have their itemised ethical procedures which take care of the peculiarities, hazards, and risks of their duties (WHO, 2017). For the library and information science profession, ethical procedures and standards are both localised and globalised through the various bodies and associations that regulate its values and ethical principles locally and internationally. Examples of international bodies include the America Library Association (ALA) and the International Federation of Library Association (IFLA) and national library associations across the globe, but specifically in Nigeria, the Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria

(LRCN), Library bill of Right, Nigeria Library Association (NLA), and other related bodies, exist to support the LIS practice with clearly defined boundaries and assignments.

For the avoidance of doubt, these bodies do not work across purposes but play complementary roles which explains why the basic ethical principles are considered sacrosanct by these regulatory (professional) bodies and associations are similar. These mutually inclusive principles include: intellectual freedom, equitable access to information, information privacy, and intellectual property rights (Fallis, 2005). Just as in other nations of the world, ethical principles are critical to the practice of librarianship and information science in Nigeria, because they regulate the activities of practitioners while performing their social responsibilities to the public. It is a fact that, in Nigeria, the code of conduct for librarians are specified in the Nigeria's Library Association in tandem with other international professional bodies such as IFLA and ALA (ALA, 2009; IFLA, 2011; NLA, 2009). Although, there are divergences in the ethical principles of library associations and professional bodies, there is fairly wide agreement in their ethical principles of these bodies. As an example, the principles of intellectual freedom and censorship, protection of users' right to privacy and confidentiality and recognition of intellectual property rights are reflected in librarianship and information science profession in Nigeria. (ALA, 2009).

Having established the essence of ethical standards and principles to the practice of library and information science, it becomes auspicious to examine the ethical challenges encountered by library and information science professionals in Nigeria. This paper will examine the core ethical concerns, and ethical challenges encountered by library and information science professionals in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Concept of Ethics

Ethics, a branch of philosophy that deals with systematizing, defending, and recommending ways of right and wrong conduct, interrogates the ways of life and living, the best or wrong responses to certain situations or circumstances, the centrality of morality in relation to attitudes or behaviour in the overall sense of good and evil (Annabelle, 2017). Agulanna (2011) draws a link between philosophy and ethical behaviour by pointing out that philosophy makes distinctions by delineating the good and the bad, ethics filters what is considered bad and retains the good which becomes the regulation for proper conduct in individuals or a (professional) community. It is, therefore, true to submit that ethics, in an actual sense, modulates the way of human living, whether right or wrong. Beyond this, ethics are a body of prescriptions that set the yardstick for what is right or wrong and form the basis of judgment for (in) appropriate behaviour in society.

In Professional terms, ethics strictly underpins the moral rules that influence professional actions or behaviour, a thermometer that dictates behaviour, and the discharge of professional responsibilities (Onoyeyan, Ajayi, Adesina & Bamidele, 2014). Professional ethics is, therefore, more or less a yardstick that enables a professional to know what steps to take in a particular circumstance, especially when faced with a situation that carries a moral burden (Strahlendorf, n.d). But the knowledge of these ethical issues and behaviour are not only available to the professionals even though they are constrained to be masters of them. Many at times, they are also well known to the public and those outside the profession especially those aspects of ethics that fall within the rubrics of moral standards set in society. This explains the reason why professionals must take the issue of ethics seriously as their actions after assessment by laymen in the society can be judged as 'misconduct' or 'unprofessional conduct.

Librarians' Code of Ethics and Essences

Just as the code of ethics of any profession controls behaviour and aligns members with acceptable conduct in society the codes of ethics for librarians are sets of rules that are to be strictly followed by librarians in discharging their duties and responsibilities to society. In the LRCN Act 12, 1995, the purposes of the code of conduct for librarians are to: (LRCN Acts 12, No 3 Pp 2).

a. Guide the librarian in maintaining standards of ethical behaviour in his relationship with state and society, clients, profession and colleagues, and oneself.
b. Guide registered librarians in their daily discharge of duties as it will help to regulate professional behaviour in terms of safeguarding the interests of the community served, especially as they are engaged in the process of providing access to information.
c. provide objective benchmarks for assessing librarians' conduct and discharge of professional duties.
d. clarify the librarians' rights, privileges, obligations, and legal bases.
e. re-awaken the sense of self-esteem, dignity, honour, service, and moral rectitude of the librarian and re-affirm the librarians' position of leadership as gatekeepers and disseminators of information.
f. boost public confidence in the ability of the library and information science profession to regulate itself and contribute meaningfully to national development in order to enhance the professional image of librarians.
g. build a strong moral and ethical foundation for the actualization of an information society.

An aggregation of these points reveals that the essence of librarians' code of ethics is to build professionalism in outlook and in practice so as to instil in the public confidence of professional conduct and quality service delivery. However, there are ethical challenges faced by library and information professionals in Nigeria in the course of discharging their duties.

Ethical challenges faced by Library and information professionals

One of the biggest challenges faced by library and information science professionals in Nigeria is the issue of ethical dilemmas and dissonance. An ethical dilemma occurs when a professional is trapped between the options of doing what is right but ethically wrong or doing what is wrong but ethically right. Examples of ethical dilemmas that librarians frequently face have been listed by some scholars and professional associations to include these questions: should a book donated by a racist organization be added to the library collection? (ALA, 2017), should a homeless person that smells very bad be allowed access and use of the library? (Leeder, 2010) and should requests to access specialized information services attract special charges in a public library? (Okafor, 2020). These issues cut across matters of rights of users in relation to its limitations or bounds sandwiched in the trappings of the overall good and moral demands of what should be done in the library.

On the other hand, ethical dissonance occurs when there is conflict or disagreement between one's professional interest and the organization's interest. Rubin & Froehlich (2012) gives an analogy and scenarios of ethical dissonance when someone is deprived of information or ideas by censoring or restricting library materials, withholding information from a fellow employee to ensure his or her failure, or by withholding information about the inadequacies of an information source or database. His second example is when we are asked by someone in authority to act in an unlawful or unethical fashion by falsifying or backdating a record to conceal an unlawful activity or being encouraged to misrepresent

oneself to get information from an unknown source, by being requested to deceive others in the "best interest" of the organization.

Librarians, most especially, are often at risk of losing their jobs when confronted with ethical dilemmas or ethical dissonance. They are drawn into the wedge and put under the pressure to take certain decisions that are ethically right to protect themselves, their clients, or their organization. Unfortunately, information professionals may at times demonstrate more loyalty to their organization than their profession (Ferguson, Thornley & Gibb, 2016) due to primordial influences of favouritism, nepotism, politics, and selfish ambition among others. Their decision to act under these influences subsequently undermines the ethical standards of their profession and consequently amounts to professional misconduct.

Core Ethical Concerns in Library and Information Science Profession

Core ethical principles are applicable to Library and information science professionals due to the need to guide behaviour and code of conduct. Core ethical principles for librarians and information scientists include among others universal access to information, intellectual freedom, intellectual property rights, copyright/fair use, censorship, use and misuse of information, and information security:

Universal access to information is one of the core values in librarianship and the information science profession. Information is a free resource that should be made available and accessible to everyone irrespective of ethnicity, race, belief, and religious differences. However, in the Nigerian environment, universal access to information has not been achieved due to digital gaps warranted by varying indices seen in disability, technological barriers, inability to read and write, religious factors, poverty, and deficit of public infrastructure among others. These barriers that hinder access to information in the Nigerian environment, have been identified by scholars such as Gbenge-Ilori & Ibiyemi (2010), Akanbi & Akanbi, (2012), among others. In spite of these challenges, however, the librarian has the ethical responsibility of providing unlimited access to information for a different set of people- young, old, poor, and the rich without any form of discrimination or prejudice.

There is also the concern with privacy or confidentiality. The need to protect library users' right to privacy and confidentiality has made privacy and confidentiality one of the key factors of ethics in librarianship. On the surface, privacy can be defined as the right to be left alone to carry out an activity or task without any external interference. However, according to the American Library Association (2006) privacy is conceived to mean the right to open inquiry without having the subject of one's interest examined or scrutinized by others. In other words, library users have the right to request information on any subject matter, and the library staff is bound to enhance access to such information seamlessly. In another perspective, Britz (n.d.) defined privacy as the right of an individual to be left alone, to experience freedom or autonomy or free from surveillance or interference by other individuals. Therefore, an individual's Privacy in any democratic society is seen as a fundamental human right that should be respected (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2021). On the other hand, confidentiality is the ability of a librarian to protect users' personal identifiable information (PII) in their possession such as circulation records, website visited reserve notices, and patrons' records among others (ALA, 2006). For example, it is the responsibility of the librarian to keep all records of library users and their transactions secret and confidential. This means that information of users should not be divulged to third parties or used for unintended purposes unless with the consent of users. This code of ethics, therefore, makes it mandatory for librarians to protect the privacy and confidential records of library users.

The issue of Intellectual freedom is another ethical matter which takes care of the right of users to freedom of opinion and expression. For instance, the author of a book has the right to use the library as a viable channel for distributing his books. However, if the author of a book is denied intellectual freedom by the government's legislation to remove such books from circulation, then it becomes an ethical clash of interest for the librarian who is expected to provide free access to information in his or her custody. Although it is the responsibility of the librarian to ensure that library users access information, the librarian also must comply with the government's orders. In Nigeria, this situation has played out mostly as the library and information science professionals in Nigeria are frequently faced with ethical dilemmas of this nature. Although Nigeria has no record yet of a book being proscribed, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) has proscribed some intellectual properties in songs rendered by some Nigerian artists.

Intellectual property refers to creations of the mind such as inventions, literary and artistic works, symbols, names, images, and designs (World Intellectual Property Organization [WIPO], 2015). Intellectual property rights can be described as a broad term that encompasses patents, plant breeds, copyrights, trade secrets and other types of rights granted as a way of protecting creators' efforts and knowledge creation (WIPO, 2015). These rights are granted to safeguard creators' and inventor's interest and regulate the use of their products. By the granting of these rights, a balance is struck between the creators' right and the right of the public in accessing the intellectual work. These rights are always granted for a limited period of years depending on the type of intellectual property. It is the duty of librarians to protect intellectual property rights by ensuring that copyrighted materials are protected from infringements by library users. Apart from this, librarians are expected to ensure 'fair use' of copyrighted works, which is an exception to the rule of copyright infringements. Under this principle, the law permits the use of some portion of the copyrighted works for purposes such as criticism, public commentaries, teaching and research without seeking permission from the copyright holders. In determining the extent of fair use of copyrighted materials, the court of law considers four factors which are: the purpose of use, nature of use, amount of the work taken, and the effect it will have on the value of the original work (Fabunmi, 2007). Due to the non-enforcement of copyright laws, most Nigerian librarians and library workers violate the protection of the intellectual property rights of authors, thereby acting unethically.

The use and misuse of information are two sides of a coin. Librarians may either use information correctly or use the information wrongly depending on the experience on the job. Use and misuse of information is one of the professional ethics that librarians uphold in high esteem in the discharge of their duties. This professional ethics is an umbrella term which encompasses the following confidentiality, secrecy, availability, security and privacy among others. Librarians should be concerned with the information in their custody especially users' records. These records must be protected from being accessed by third parties, thereby preventing misuse. In order to use information correctly and appropriately, and at the same time preventing misuse, librarians are expected to follow strictly certain ethical standards in handling information and preventing misuse. However, Nigerian librarians can be said to misuse information due to non- conformance to the ethical standards at times on copyright/ fair use, information security, confidentiality, privacy and a whole lot more.

Information security issues also constitute another ethical challenge for librarians. For instance, the challenge of safeguarding electronic resources in the library has now made information security one of the ethical issues for librarians. This is because where information security is not in place library resources are exposed to disasters that are natural and unnatural which may compromise information management, information privacy and data integrity. Information security is an important concept in the life span of a library due to the need to ensure adequate protection of information resources.

Information resources comprise of electronic databases, software, computer systems, internet, intranet, networking systems and all sort of technologies. Therefore, in the proper management of these resources, the need for an information security plan or policy cannot be overemphasized. An information security plan or policy is equally essential for libraries due to the need to protect information resources in their custody. Information security policies are sets of guidelines or procedures to be followed in detecting security lapses and risks (Newby, n.d). Information security ethics is expected to be imbibed by librarians due to the need to keep them abreast of current security issues in the library. Library resources need to be protected from theft, privacy intrusion, damage and undue access. Information security ethics include: assigning staff to information security tasks, training all library staff on information security issues and procedures, physical security of equipment and computer related technologies, physical security plan, specific policies on information privacy, data integrity measures, levels of access to data or equipment and monitoring for different types of access (Newby, n.d). Therefore, in the protection of users' privacy and confidentiality rights, information security ethics is essential for both electronic and non-electronic resources. In spite of the usefulness of an information security plan, most of the Nigerian libraries lack an information security policy which accounts for a low information security ethics among librarians.

The provision of equitable services to the library users is another ethical principle that are upheld by librarians. Librarians are expected to show fairness and justice in rendering library services. It is unethical when a librarian treats library users unjustly by exhibiting favouritism, prejudice or bias towards a particular person or group of persons. The highest level of service should be rendered through ways such as appropriate and useful organized resources, equitable service policies, equitable service and unbiased and courteous responses to all enquiries (ALA, 2009).

There is also the challenge with non-advancement of private interest. It is ethically wrong for librarians to advocate for their own personal interest over and above library users, colleagues or the employing institution (ALA, 2009). In essence, the librarian's interest should not override the interest of users in rendering of services. The interest of users should be paramount to the librarian in spite of the challenges he or she may encounter in the course of discharging professional duties.

The fairness in the treatment of co-workers and colleagues is also an ethical issue, that is, co-workers and colleagues should be treated with respect, good faith and their individual right must be safeguarded (ALA, 2009). A librarian who treats his or colleagues with contempt or disrespect is not acting ethically. All library staff should be treated equally irrespective of cadre. When there is equity, fairness and justice in the work place, library staff are motivated to contribute positively to the growth of the organization. In all, the quest for professional excellence should be prioritized by promoting the development of knowledge and skills of all library staff. In fulfilling this ethical issue, the responsibility is on library staff to improve their knowledge by enrolling in library schools in order to be more efficient and advance their careers. Library staff are classified along three continuums based on their professional qualifications: professional librarian, para-professional and support staff (Yaya & Adeeko, 2015). This is a way of motivating librarians to improve themselves career-wise.

Library and Information Science Professionals and Ethical Challenges

The ethical issues that have been isolated thus far are prevalent in all professional bodies, although the manner of manifestations may not be totally identical. However, in developing countries like Nigeria, some of these ethical issues have peculiar challenges which need to be examined in order to build capacity and improve service delivery in our libraries. As pointed out earlier, the global practice in information management is to make it available to everybody irrespective of age, sex, ethnic group,

or socioeconomic status. One of the turning points, that has facilitated quicker dissemination of information, is the adoption of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) by libraries in the digital age which has made it possible to dispense information with ease. However, in the Nigerian environment, due to the problem of the digital divide, universal access to information has always been impeded due to factors such as illiteracy, poverty, lack of ICT infrastructures in libraries, lack of stable power supply and telecommunication infrastructure (Gbenge-Ilori & Ibiyemi, 2010; Akanbi & Akanbi, 2012).

Again, there is obvious non-protection of users' privacy and lack of confidentiality in the sense that the privacy and confidentiality of most library users in Nigeria are not adequately protected due to the lack of a useful information security policy. Based on these lapses, privacy and confidential records of library users are found littered around some Nigerian libraries. There is no doubt that this situation has made record keeping porous, and can always be misused or abused by users and librarians themselves. This makes apposite the thought of Onoyeyan et al., (2014) that affirmed that the abuse of confidential information is rampant among librarians in Nigeria.

There is also what is called copyright infringement or misuse of fair use. Copyright infringement has been very rampant today among library users and librarians in Nigerian libraries. The root cause of copyright infringements has been traced to illiteracy on the part of the public and the librarians themselves (Fabunmi, 2007). For instance, most libraries allow users to make photocopy of an original portion of a book or other materials as a means of generating revenue for the library. This practice contravenes the principle of fair use. Although fair use entails that a certain percentage of any copyrighted materials may be photocopied, however, most Nigerian librarians have become equally perpetrators of copyright infringements due to inadequate copyright education (Fabunmi, 2007). It is even worse in the cases of electronic materials. Electronic products, such as library software, are being downloaded or copied carefree due to non-availability in the market or the high cost of developing one, thereby contravening copyright law. This condition of unavailability of electronic materials causes a challenge and an attempt to navigate the challenge causes negation of the ethical principle of protecting intellectual property rights of authors and enforcement of copyright.

Also, there is a lack of a robust information security framework for libraries. It is important to explain that, due to the lack of a standard information security policy in most Nigerian libraries, information security ethics is still at a very low ebb. This is a peculiar challenge in almost Nigerian libraries aggravated due to lack of funds, lack of trained personnel on information security issues, and most importantly the lack of a standard information security policy. (Newby, n.d). Another challenge of ethics confronting library and information science professionals in Nigeria is unprofessionalism. At times, some librarians exhibit unprofessional attitudes and behaviour due to non-familiarisation with the professional code of ethics. Unprofessionalism is one of the biggest challenges confronting librarianship in Nigeria due to the fact that librarians are unschooled on the professional ethics guiding librarians' conduct. This challenge is compounded by the fact that the schools that are supposed to impart the training now pay less attention to the impartation of ethical knowledge and focus more on the theoretical demands of librarianship.

Finally, just like in other spaces, the Nigerian librarian is faced with an ethical Dilemma. Library and information science professionals in Nigeria face an ethical dilemma in the course of discharging their responsibilities to society. An ethical dilemma occurs when a librarian is faced with the two options of doing what is right but ethically wrong and doing what is wrong, but ethically right (Rubin & Froehlich, 2012). Based on such circumstances, librarians often face dilemmas due to a lack of sound knowledge of information ethics. It had been argued that in order to deal with ethical dilemmas,

library professionals need to engage in ethical reasoning (Fallis, 2005). Ethical reasoning is the ability to identify, assess, and evaluate issues from a variety of ethical positions (Wesleyan University, 2022). For instance, an ethical issue that mostly occurs among librarians in Nigeria is a restriction of library use for certain people that may not qualify to use the library for diverse reasons. Ethically, library users should be given access, however, there is the need to follow library rules and regulations which may override users' interests.

Overcoming Ethical Challenges in Nigeria: The Way Forward

In addressing ethical challenges confronting library and information science professionals in Nigeria, the following policy options should be given priority by the management of Nigerian libraries and the government.

Firstly, NLA should mandate all library schools in Nigeria to introduce courses on information ethics in their various curricula. These courses should aim at inculcating ethical standards and principles, and offer different ways of handling ethical dilemmas and dissonance in practitioners. As a matter of policy, these courses should be taught both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. In doing this, prospective librarians would be better equipped with the ethical principles of librarianship and in resolving ethical dilemmas.

Secondly, the management of Nigerian libraries should organize workshops and seminars on copyright education for librarians and library users based on the need for enforcement of fair use and preventing copyright infringements. Since Nigerian librarians are not left out in the business of contravening copyright laws, which compromises the protection of intellectual works in their custody. Policies on fair use and copyright enforcement for librarians should be enforced by Nigeria Library Association and other professional bodies.

Furthermore, management of libraries should address strictly the barriers hindering access to information by library users taking into cognizance the needs of the physically challenged people. All kinds of barriers such as lack of infrastructures, lack of local content, and lack of telecommunication infrastructure such as broadband satellite, among others should be tackled by the management of libraries and all stakeholders. In tackling these problems, Government and other relevant stakeholders in public and private institutions should regularly make funds available to meet library needs to conform to global practices.

Lastly, in all, designing a standard information security policy for Nigerian libraries should be mandated by NLA. This has become expedient due to the low level of knowledge on information security ethics among librarians in Nigeria. There is a need to review this policy from time to time to conform to best practices. Management of Nigerian libraries should organize seminars and workshops for librarians in order to educate them on information security ethics and to ensure proper management and security of information resources in their custody.

Conclusion

There are diverse challenges that border on ethics and practice of Library and information science in Nigeria. However, practitioners should go back to the basics of the profession by upholding ethical standards. The starting point may be for professional bodies to initiate and encourage conversations on the challenges and some possible ways of navigating these challenges. The professional bodies should also take the lead in resolving cases where ethical matters threaten job security in the industry.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing, it is clear that conformity to core ethical principles by library and information science professionals is of paramount interest to everyone - the public, practitioners, and professional bodies. However, in meeting with this target, ethical challenges confronting library and information professionals in Nigeria should be tackled with all seriousness by all stakeholders -library schools, library associations, and professional bodies both locally and internationally. The following recommendations are made for addressing ethical challenges among library and information professionals in Nigeria.

Firstly, continuous training and re-training on ethical practices in librarianship and allied professions are necessary to avoid unethical behaviour by librarians. Without the required training, librarians will continue to act unethically and unprofessionally.

Secondly, the management of libraries should serve as change agents by organizing enlightenment programmes for librarians and library users on library ethics. Librarians should be educated on the implications of flouting professional ethical rules and spell out appropriate sanctions for would-be violators of ethical rules.

Thirdly, the management of libraries should orientate new librarians and library staff on ethical rules and inculcate in them the culture of ethical behaviour. By this, librarians and library staff would act ethically in every situation they find themselves.

Lastly, professional bodies and library associations in Nigeria should reward ethical behaviour as a way of motivating members and ensuring conformity to ethical standards in various library organizations. In other words, management of libraries should appraise and reward librarians and library workers based on the discharging of their ethical responsibilities and duties to the public.

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