

Ethics in Librarianship:  
An Evaluation of the *ALA Code of Ethics*

A code of ethics allows members of a profession to have something to look upon for guidance when facing difficult decisions; it also ensures the clients of those professionals that they are receiving high service that is aligned with the prevailing ethical opinions in that field. To keep a high level of professionalism, the code of ethics developed should take “the course of action that leads to the greatest benefit for the client” (Oppenheim 188). As in other professions library workers have a code of ethics to guide their decisions. Because the American Library Association (ALA) is the major professional organization in the field of librarianship, it is logical that it is the entity that has developed a code of ethics for library workers to follow. The first code of ethics related to libraries was created in 1938 and adopted the following year.

This code of ethics was titled *Code of Ethics for Librarians* and divided into a preamble and five sections that discuss how a librarian should relate to the different groups that he must be in contact with. While the last section of the preamble states that the code does not venture into the specifics of recommended practices, there is a lot of description for each statement and this code is a considerable amount longer than the subsequent revisions. The first section, “Relation of the Librarian to the Governing Authority,” stresses the proper relationship between the librarian, the chief librarian and the “officially constituted governing authority.” The second section, “Relation of the Librarian to His Constituency,” puts forth the notion that everyone should be given impartial service and that the librarian should treat patron information with confidentiality. These principles are still found in the current code of ethics.

“Relations of the Librarian within His Library,” the third section, discusses employee issues that are also in the current code; however, it also touches on seemingly trivial things such as the proper procedure for resignations. The fourth section, “Relation of the Librarian to His Profession,” includes tenets about continuing education, not doing things for personal gain and encouraging potential librarians, ideas that are similar to statements found in the current code. The 1939 *Code of Ethics for Librarians*, however, stresses that only “persons with suitable aptitudes to enter the library profession” should be encouraged and the “unfit” should be discouraged. This type of exclusive language is found in none of the subsequent codes. The final section shares the stance on the “Relation of the Librarian to Society.” Interestingly, the three points in this section are similar to language found in current literature on how to make libraries more visible in society. This type of language is absent in the later codes, possibly because they are related to codes of conduct rather than ethics (*Code of Ethics for Librarians*).

Almost ten years after the *Code of Ethics for Librarians* was created, a document related to the code—and central to the mission of the ALA—was published. The *Library Bill of Rights* outlines the basic philosophy of First Amendment freedoms as they relate to the library. It guides library workers when they have to deal with issues that fall under the First Amendment (*For Freedom’s Sake*). It intentionally echoes the First Amendment because most people are familiar with it and they value it “when defending their political freedoms” (Oppenheim 190). Every revision of the code of ethics that guides the actions of library workers (we will see four more documents in the course of this essay), is coupled with the *Library Bill of Rights* to form the ethical basis of the field of librarianship.

The *Library Bill of Rights* provides the basic policies and principles that libraries and library workers should follow when performing their duties. As with the ethics codes, the *Library Bill of Rights* changes as the world around it changes. The ALA has a variety of material available to help interpret the commitments that the *Library Bill of Rights* demands of library workers, such as the *Freedom to Read Statement* and the *Intellectual Freedom Manual*. The *Library Bill of Rights* and current code of ethics give library workers have a firm basis on which to base their actions.

The next revision of the code of ethics gave us the 1981 *Statement on Professional Ethics*. The introduction of this and the current code touch on the history of codifying the basic principles that guide the work of librarians and emphasize the importance of libraries in the flow of information in a free society. The 1981 code states that the code will have to continue to be revised as necessary. There are only six general statements in the “Code of Ethics” section of the 1981 *Statement on Professional Ethics*, which makes its interpretation much more broad than the 1939 version. Because the 1981 ethics code and the current *ALA Code of Ethics* are so similar in some respects but so different in others, it is best to examine them together and note the changes.

The current ALA code of ethics, adopted in 1995, is simply called the *ALA Code of Ethics*. The language in this code is much more inclusive than any other version. Instead of a *Code of Ethics for Librarians* or a *Statement on Professional Ethics* where each statement includes the word “librarian” or “professional,” the current code uses the word “we.” Those who revised the code wanted to emphasize that “the statement includes trustees and other library staffers and is therefore ‘a statement for library and information services but not of ‘professional’ ethics’” (“Council Approves” 676). Also, the current

code's introduction stresses that the statements that follow are just a framework to guide decision making.

The first statement in both codes states that patrons should receive the "highest level of service through appropriate" collections (in the 1981 version) or resources (in the 1995 version). Changing that one word is significant because it shows the effect that technology has had in the library world. Instead of stopping with the word "censor" in the 1995 revision, the idea of intellectual freedom has been added to statement two. This reiterates the stance taken by the ALA of freedom of access for everyone. While statement three has only added two words, "confidentiality" and "transmitted," they make a world of difference. Privacy maintains that library workers will not pry into your personal records or spy on your reading habits while confidentiality asserts that library records are not readily available for public viewing. The addition of transmitted to the list is a reaction to the increase of technological resources in libraries.

The fourth statement found in the 1995 *ALA Code of Ethics*, which deals with intellectual property, is not found in the 1981 *Statement on Professional Ethics*. This addition is due to the confusion that the Internet has brought to society; today's society is a virtual world and laws are still being made to decide how information shared through web sites should be dealt with. The final statement in the *ALA Code of Ethics* is not found in the *Statement on Professional Ethics* either, but it does echo points made in the original *Code of Ethics for Librarians* about continuing education, encouraging people to pursue their own professional development and also encouraging them to enter the field of librarianship. This professional development and encouraging others is part of a profession, and it was a needed addition to the *ALA Code of Ethics*.

The three statements not yet mentioned put forth proper employee relations and personal behaviors and are found in both codes. One statement states that library workers should not use their positions to advance private interests at the expense of others. Another statement maintains that library workers need to treat their co-workers with respect and strive for a safe and inviting working environment. This statement is much more detailed in the 1995 version than it was in the 1981 version, perhaps because of the increasing emphasis on human relations in the workplace. The last statement on personal behaviors asserts that there needs to be a clear line between personal philosophies and professional duties. The *ALA Code of Ethics* adds that this is necessary so that library workers' personal convictions will not interfere with the free access of information (*Statement on Professional Ethics* and *ALA Code of Ethics*).

The current code can be divided into three parts: the first three statements deal with access of resources by the public, the fourth statement focuses on the authors and creators of those resources and the final four statements handle employment issues. To better understand the dilemmas for which the *ALA Code of Ethics* can be looked to for guidance, I will examine each of its eight points as it relates to current topics in the field of librarianship and library literature. I will quote each statement, provide more analysis of its meaning and then use current issues found in library literature to examine it more fully.

**Statement I:** “We 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.”

Equality is a huge issue for libraries of any type. Obviously public libraries, which are supported by public tax dollars, must allow access to all who want to use the library; however, all types of libraries have a responsibility to provide a collection of resources that is diverse, organized and current. Equitable access focuses on providing differing viewpoints to give users a variety of resources to consult while doing their research and also prohibiting preventing access to these resources because of a person's "age, ethnicity, physical ability, income, language, geographic location, or the type of library they are using" (Hayden "Equity" 5). Orange proposes that library workers ask themselves three things when deciding to embrace the idea of equitable service: one, if the diversity of staff and service populations are recognized and opinions valued; two, if collections are evaluated with fair and balanced criteria; three, if collaboration occurs with colleagues and members of service populations when deciding whether our services are effective (47). This type of questioning and evaluation will lead to more equitable policies and ultimately better serve all populations, whether they are regular library users or a segment of the community that is not being adequately served by the library and its current systems.

Equity of access is one of the core values of libraries, but it is a hard concept to understand because it is so broad and affects everything that library workers do and everything that libraries aim to provide. There are a number of organizations under the umbrella of the ALA that are working to explain and promote equity of access. For example, Reforma works to promote library services to Latino and Spanish-speaking communities; the Chinese-American Librarians Association offers educational programs and lists of resources to fulfill its goals; the Association for Library Service to Children

focuses on maintaining a positive library environment for today's children and the children of the future; the Young Adult Library Services Association makes sure that young adults have proper access to all resources available, no matter the subject; and the Association of College and Research Libraries has formed groups to ensure that users of libraries are getting information in the best way possible (Hayden "Something" 5).

Equitable access to resources has been a hugely discussed topic in recent years, due in part to what has become known as the "digital divide," an idea that the rising dependency on technology will leave those lacking the means to afford the equipment or to receive the instruction required to use the technologies without a way to access the information they require. A 2004 report by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation states that "ninety-five percent of public libraries in the United States offer free access to computers and the Internet, often providing the only Internet access for residents of the nation's poorest areas;" however, the report also states that there needs to be greater funding and more library cooperation with the government, businesses and other organizations so that libraries can continue to offer that service for those who can not access it any other way (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation 1). Thus, libraries are doing well in providing access to those who cannot afford it, but there will always be a struggle for libraries to provide the most current resources for library users, especially when prices continue to escalate.

This is not an issue solely affecting the United States. The Canadian Library Association discussed the digital divide and noted that not everyone can afford the equipment and training needed to correctly use electronic resources. Umbach proposes that libraries can open the virtual doors for this segment of the population by not only

providing the access and equipment needed for working with these resources, but also through offering formal training classes, installing online tutorials or even putting knowledgeable volunteers in charge of helping those who want to know more (44).

While library workers must work to prevent the digital divide from becoming any wider than it already is, the vast changes in technology over the past few years have greatly helped libraries serve an often underserved population—people with physical handicaps that prevent them from handling or reading printed materials. Talking books are nothing new, and were first given to blind adults through federal legislation carried out by the Library of Congress on record albums over 70 years ago; however, there has been a shift to put talking books in a digital audio format while making sure that the service will “remain free and accessible to every eligible user” (Taylor 50). Taylor also touts that other technological advances such as screen readers that will read the content of a web page aloud, digital audio magazines, and the Web-Braille system that allows users to print materials in Braille instead of waiting for the documents to be delivered will help scores of library users to get the resources they need (50).

**Statement II:** “We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources”

Promoting intellectual freedom and resisting all forms of censorship are the main parts of the *Library Bill of Rights* and this second statement of the *ALA Code of Ethics*. Intellectual freedom is a way to promote the rights given to citizens in the First Amendment by allowing people to share their opinions—within legal limits—even though they may be unpopular. The ALA has an Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF), and an offshoot of that group, the Freedom to Read Foundation (FTRF) to ensure that

these freedoms are not being jeopardized. The OIF began in 1967 to provide a clearinghouse of all things concerning censorship, including resources for libraries that found some of their materials challenged. The FTRF was established in 1969 to defend First Amendment rights in libraries, as it is the First Amendment that allows the intellectual freedom that libraries hold as ideal to flourish. The FTRF actively challenges laws and practices when it believes that this central mission of libraries is under attack, such as opposing legislation when it will affect the rights of library users to find resources on topics that may be seen as unpopular by a wider audience (Teepen 54-5).

For some people, such as David Isaacson, the library is today's version of the medieval church; for him, a library is a sanctuary where creative works can flourish without fear of thoughts being restricted because they are unpopular (27). The ALA has annually sponsored Banned Books Week since 1982 to celebrate the freedom to choose and express opinions, even if they are unpopular and to ensure that opinions are represented equally in resources for all who choose to read them (ala website).

Censorship is the antithesis of intellectual freedom. When thinking of censorship, one of the first images that may come to mind is people wanting to pull books off of the shelves at libraries because of their content, and *American Libraries* even has a section in its issues called the "Censorship Watch," which is devoted to reporting on these types of challenges to materials in libraries around the country. Sometimes official groups are the offenders, such as in Ouachita Parish's 1996 case involving librarian Deloris Wilson's legal battle against the school board that wanted books pulled from a school library's shelves because of their subject matter (Kristl 19).

However, there are other forms of censorship that are less visible. Librarians may shy away from purchasing certain categories of books because of the response that may occur when the books reach the shelves. For example, Jenna Jameson's *How to Make Love like a Porn Star* was on a few national best sellers' lists in 2004, but Francine Fialkoff's search of a few major libraries' catalogs at that time found that either there were no copies purchased or the demand for the book far outweighed the supply (8).

There is a fine line between censorship and selection. Selection focuses on freedom of thought while censorship practices thought control, but when choosing books for inclusion in a library's collection, it may be easy to pick the "wholesome" book over the book that may be deemed too controversial (Asheim). Other libraries may use their regular collection evaluations as a form of "silent censorship;" while weeding outdated or otherwise unusable resources, they will also pull books that may be deemed controversial by segments of the community (Office for Intellectual Freedom). Having current policies in place that describe the processes of collection development and evaluation are necessary to prevent against this type of institutional censorship.

**Statement III:** "We protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired, or transmitted."

While technology has brought many wonderful things into the world, it has also made it easier for personal information believed to be private to be obtained by a third party. There are laws that govern this, such as the Louisiana statute that states that libraries cannot release the names of adult borrowers in conjunction with what resources they borrowed. Michigan's library-privacy laws recently blocked a law firm intern from

obtaining the names of library users for reported use in a graduate school thesis (Jordan 18).

Recent federal laws such as the USA PATRIOT Act have made it possible for federal entities to obtain previously confidential records. The Federal Bureau of Investigation has broad powers under Section 215 of the Act; they can demand library records, and afterwards library workers must keep these demands secret. These provisions were still included in the recent renewal of the USA PATRIOT Act despite outraged protests by many groups, but most libraries have been protecting themselves in case their patrons' records are ever wanted. Library administrators need to focus on keeping users' records for the shortest amount of time possible, developing guidelines for handling inquiries into users' records by law enforcement and informing users of the library's policies that relate to the confidentiality of their records and electronic activities (Pace "Toward" 19). Systems administrators must research the privacy policies of the vendors their libraries use for Internet and electronic database access because it is a lot easier for inquiries to be made to (and possibly answered by) those vendors than to thousands of individual libraries (Pace "Technology" 58).

By focusing on these efforts to protect patron privacy, it may seem that library workers are not concerned with protecting our country's security, as that is the official reason that the USA PATRIOT Act was passed. Library workers must do their best not to prevent law enforcement officers from doing their jobs; however, they must also do everything within their means to protect the privacy of their library's patrons. Deciding upon the best way of doing that after the USA PATRIOT Act was passed became much harder, since it changed individuals' legal privacy rights (Brey-Casiano 5).

**Statement IV:** “We recognize and respect intellectual property rights.”

Understanding intellectual property rights is important for libraries because they allow libraries to share resources with users that may be under copyright protection. The fair use statute allows individuals to make copies of certain copyrighted materials as long as the four conditions included in the statute are met, the first sale doctrine allows lawful purchasers of certain copyrighted items to let others borrow them without consent of the copyright holder, and there are provisions that allow libraries and archives to make copies of certain documents.

We must remember, though, that the creators of these works need to be given recognition for their work so that libraries will continue to be able to disseminate their creations under the rules of the law. This is important to remember as more people turn to the Internet for information. The reason for this is twofold: it is bad if the public believes that everything can be found online, but it is just as bad if they become so complacent in breaking the laws of copyright that they begin to see libraries, which strive to follow the rules of copyright, “as a barrier to information access” (Tennant 30).

**Statement V:** “We 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.”

Not only do library workers have a responsibility to behave in an ethical manner toward their library’s users, all library workers have a responsibility, as put forth by this statement, to behave in an ethical manner toward their co-workers, which forms the foundation of a good working environment. The employing organization also has an ethical responsibility to treat their employees well. To help library administrators

accomplish this, one of the missions of the ALA Office for Human Resource Development and Recruitment is to communicate “with libraries on issues relating to management and human resources and [act] as an advocate for ‘best practices’ in these areas” (Human Resource Development). The office has provided information and resources when new policies concerning these topics are developed. Another ALA division, the ALA Allied Professional Association, has a Standing Committee on the Salaries and Status of Library Workers, which has developed training resources on workplace relations and publishes *Library Worklife*, which discusses current human resources topics (ALA Allied Professional Association).

Libraries often employ a diverse group of people, and they must learn to work together for the users’ sake: negative comments, disagreements and confrontations between staff at a library is noticeable by users and may create “negative tension and make the desk itself unapproachable” (Pellack 60). It is necessary to have good working relationships so that users will be served in better, quicker ways. Co-workers should feel comfortable enough with each other to collaborate on reference questions and take polite correction by each other with appreciation rather than resentment (Eckwright 44).

**Statement VI:** “We do not advance private interests at the expense of library users, colleagues, or our employing institutions.”

Library workers come into contact with a variety of people and information while doing their jobs. There are situations where library workers could benefit from showering certain users or vendors with favoritism, but doing this is clearly goes against the above statement. Similarly, a library worker should not promote for-profit enterprises for

personal gain. When developing policies for the library, the users' best interests should be taken into account over what may make the library workers' jobs a little easier.

Library workers should demand that vendors change their setup of library systems to better help users find what they need when using them rather than demand tweaks that are only helpful for the workers (Tennant "Five" 25). Libraries must also be careful when entering partnerships with other organizations, especially when those other organizations are for-profit; libraries must ensure that their altruistic mission is not being compromised. There was a slight protest in 1995 when Ameritech obtained a sponsorship at the ALA annual conference and received naming rights, but when the ALA partnered with Walgreens to provide information about drug discount cards, many appreciated the effort. ALA councilors were worried, however, that the aims of ALA were being tainted by allowing Walgreens to share its point of view through shared distribution of the information (Kniffel "Thin" 30).

**Statement VII:** "We 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."

One of the hallmarks of a library is providing resources that include differing viewpoints on subjects. This means that there will probably be things in the collection that some library workers do not agree with on a personal level because each worker comes to the job with a different set of beliefs. Those beliefs must be put aside, however, when trying to serve the best interest of the library's users and fulfill the aims of the employing institution.

Everyone goes to his or her workplace with personal beliefs, and it is hard to ignore them. Library workers must remember that the reference desk is not the right place, for example, to force pro-choice materials on a person looking for resources on the Right to Life, and should not use their positions as information providers to promote any “particular cause—unless, of course, that cause is free and open access to information” (Isaacson “Where” 50).

With the ubiquity of the Internet and online social networking services such as blogs and discussion boards, it has become more common for people to forget that their actions can be traced back to them and that their personal beliefs about their employers may be found and disciplinary action could be taken against them. This is especially important for library workers who have grown up with both hands on the keyboard to remember because writing demeaning posts about their employers could affect that same employer’s chances of getting new workers into the library, not to mention costing that employee his or her job (Gordon 58).

**Statement VIII:** “We 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.”

Continuing education and mentoring future information professionals is a widely discussed topic in library literature. It is necessary to continually be educated on improvements in the field of librarianship in order to become more familiar with technological advancements and to learn how to best serve the library’s users. Professional development of one’s co-workers through continuing education programs and the improvement of skills should also be encouraged. The State Library of Louisiana

often offers workshops for library workers so that they may learn more about certain topics such as online databases and Louisiana reference materials. Of course, attending conferences is a great way to stay up-to-date on advancements in one's particular field, and the ALA Conferences have hundreds of workshops for library workers to attend in order to hone their skills in certain areas.

Recruiting future librarians and information professionals is also a widely discussed topic. In 2002, Laura Bush unveiled a \$10-million plan to aid in the recruitment of librarians; the initiative was planned to provide scholarships, support distance learning and recruit a diverse set of workers (Eberhart 18). The Spectrum Initiative began in 1997 as an effort to attract a more diverse workforce to the field of librarianship. Southern University, a historically black college, and Louisiana State University have been working together over the past few years to get many of Southern's paraprofessional library staff enrolled in LSU's Masters of Library and Information Science program. Current librarians should actively recruit potential librarians and provide support to these students while libraries should provide flexibility to students pursuing their degrees in library science. (Perry 36).

The code of ethics prepared by the ALA has gone through many changes over the past 70 years. From a detailed, exclusive 1939 code to the present broad, inclusive code, the reasons why the profession of librarianship needs a code of ethics has stayed the same: libraries play an important role in society and library workers need guidance on how to handle ethical dilemmas in order to best serve their users. As things in society change, the *ALA Code of Ethics* will need to be revised; however, it is helpful that the

most recent codes have remained broad because library workers are able to relate the statements put forth in the code to their current situations.

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