Information Ethics and Library Professionals of Bangladesh: Some Observations

Md. Ahiduzzaman Liton
Librarian, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh

Abstract

Information ethics provides an ethical framework for the Library and Information Science (LIS) professionals for carrying out various information related works like acquiring, storing, processing and using of information. In Bangladesh, in spite of the presence of Right to Information Act (passed in 2009) and also a rigorous campaign by the library and information professionals for upholding ethical standards in all spheres of information works, the question of information ethics is not widely recognized. Unprecedented explosion of information in all branches of knowledge and massive proliferation of ICT tools and techniques have raised fundamental questions about privacy, freedom of expression, right to information and accessibility, among other issues. This has made it imperative for library and information professionals of Bangladesh to solve the problems related to ethical use of information and find out ways to serve their clients in a just and ethical manner. This paper explores the ethical dilemmas faced by the LIS professionals of Bangladesh and also gives possible indication about the way forward. Based on the consultation of secondary sources and also a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) involving LIS professionals, the paper attempts to provide a guideline for ethical practices by LIS professionals. In spite of new initiatives by the Government of Bangladesh and also non-government organizations to make information, especially development information available at the doorstep of common people, the question of freedom of expression, privacy, right and wrong information, morality, etc. causes regular public debate. Against this backdrop, this paper might prove an eye-opener for LIS professionals and others concerned for practicing and upholding information ethics in Bangladesh and beyond.
Introduction

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that is concerned with human conduct, more specifically the behavior of individuals in society. Ethics examines the rational justification for our moral judgments; it studies what is morally right or wrong, just or unjust. Ethics leads to a set of rules of conduct for specific situations; basic ethical principles guide the development of standards for specific professions and groups (Kaddu 2007). Froehlich (1992) observes that, there are two aspects in the definition of ethics: being able to determine what is right or wrong, good or bad and a commitment to doing what is right and good. Ethics are a subset of values: a value applies to things that are desired as well as what one ought to do, and can include such concepts as wealth, happiness, success, and fulfillment. Ethics define how a moral person should behave; values include other beliefs and attitudes that guide behavior.

With increasing recognition of information as one of the most important ingredients of development, recently, the term ‘information ethics’ has drawn attention from various quarters. Chuang and Chen (1999) views information ethics is one aspect of a much larger philosophy known as social ethics. They said that, information ethics ‘deals with the moral conduct of information-users based on their responsibility and their accountability. Free moral agents, individuals, organizations, and societies ought to be responsible for the actions they take. Individuals, organizations, and societies should also be held accountable to others for the consequences of their actions. In most countries, a system of laws codifies and regulates the most important and significant ethical standards, and provides a mechanism for holding people, organizations, and even governments accountable for unethical activity.’

Information ethics is a complex proposition. Although it is generally agreed that, we have an indelible right to receive information, it is also true that, under certain circumstances, people’s right to receive information come into conflict with the duties of another person (such as a government employee) of protecting vital or sensitive information. This creates a unique dilemma for library professionals, because they have found themselves at a loss to decide whether to give information or suppress it. In recent times, unprecedented explosion of information in all branches of knowledge and massive proliferation of ICT tools and techniques have raised fundamental
questions about privacy, freedom of expression, right to information and accessibility, among other issues. As a result, library and information professionals are struggling to solve the problems related to ethical use of information.

**The changing landscape of information ethics**

Ethics examines the rational justification for our moral judgments; it studies what is morally right and wrong, just or unjust. It leads to a set of rules of conduct for specific situations; basic ethical principles guide the development of standards for specific professions and groups (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2013). In today’s world, information plays a critical role in our everyday decision making as well as the progress and development of the society. Many countries have passed the Right to Information Law which guarantees people’s right to receive information from government and non-government sources which have a direct bearing on their life and livelihood. Masmoudi (1979) wrote a very important paper entitled “The New World Information Order”, in which he drew attention to the growing inequalities across the world in terms of information access, control and dissemination. He cited seven significant forms of inequalities existing in the world in terms of information:

1. A flagrant quantitative imbalance between North and South;
2. An inequality in information resources;
3. A de facto hegemony and a will to dominate;
4. A lack of information on developing countries;
5. Survival of the colonial era; an alienating influence in the economic, social, and cultural spheres;
6. Messages ill-suited to the areas in which they are disseminated.

Morehouse (1981), Haywood (1995) and Buchannan (1999) have also voiced similar concerns. Diverse cultures of different societies affect our ethics and value systems. Sometimes, the norms and practices accepted in a society are shunned as unacceptable in another society. Therefore, library professionals sometimes grapple with the problems of acceptable and unacceptable. For example, societies in western countries are considered as more open and permissible than those in the East. Information professionals of western countries tend to consider many practices as ethical and normal, which may seem completely against the ethical viewpoints and norms of Eastern
librarians. There is a growing need for readdressing these conflicting view-points because, in today’s globalized world, information professionals of different countries have to frequently come into contact with their counterparts in other countries. That is why the question of ethics must be given due consideration by library and information professionals worldwide.

**Information ethics: a changing landscape**

Information ethics has been hugely affected by globalization, which is characterized by extensive use of information and communication technologies, an increasingly open society, greater sharing of information and also greater conflict among individuals and societies in asserting their dominance over others. This has posed new questions to the information professionals of today, because they have to serve an increasingly diverse group of clientele. Today’s information professionals do not cater to the need of only one group of people belonging to a single culture. They have to meet the demands of a diverse group of information seekers representing various cultures and backgrounds. These people have varying degrees of expectations and demands from information professionals. How would an information professional would deal with this new scenario where he or she has to take instant decisions on a whole plethora of information requests coming from completely different kinds of information seekers from around the globe? Besides, since today’s people tend to be more individualistic, there has been an increased demand for individualized and customized services from the library and information centres. The question of privacy has also been seen in a new light. In today’s open society, People have become more worried about their privacy and libraries, as preservers and providers of sensitive information have to deal with this concern. A number of countries around the world have laws ensuring people’s right to receiving and using information (Bangladesh passed ‘Right to Information Act in 2009). However, there are certain information which cannot be accessed by general people for security or other reasons. In many instances, library and information professionals find themselves in tricky situations where they have to strike a balance between ‘restricted use of information’ and ‘right to information’.

Richard Mason (1986), an important authority on information ethics, has identified four ethical problems of the information age, which are:
1. **Privacy:** Mason predicted two threats to privacy: the growth of information technology and the increased value of information in decision making. Library and information professionals are now being increasingly concerned about protecting privacy of the personal and other information of people held in databases and in other sources. Besides, personal information of library users also need to be protected from outside threats.

2. **Accuracy:** Mason maintained that when designing information systems, it is the designer's responsibility to be "vigilant in the pursuit of accuracy of information" because people might be harmed by inaccurate data. The problem of inaccuracy becomes quite grave when deliberate falsification of information such as identity theft happens. This has direct bearing on information ethics and has been a major cause for concern.

3. **Property:** The growing threat to intellectual property is manifested by plagiarism, making illegal copies of books and other materials and illegal downloading of software, music, and movies. Because of low level of awareness about intellectual property rights in third world countries like Bangladesh, many libraries keep photocopies of books and other reading materials without bothering about the violation of copyright. This is in direct violation of information ethics.

4. **Accessibility:** Mason maintained that, in order to access information, literacy is the most important tool. Besides, in today’s world, various forms of information literacy, like digital literacy, media literacy, etc. have become quite important. Without these literacies, we cannot ensure universal access to knowledge. So library and information centres need to play an increasingly dominant role to ensure people’s access to information. That’s why they are arranging programs like literacy campaigns, book reading competitions, study circles, training, orientation, etc.

### Information professionals and information ethics

Leading international and national Library and Information Associations like International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), Association of Independent Information Professionals (AIIP) and Special Libraries Association (SLA), American Library Association (ALA) and Library Association of UK (LA) – all have long standing code of ethics for guiding the information professionals in discharging their professional duties in a just and ethical way. These codes more or less focus on upholding the
principles of intellectual freedom, individual privacy and confidentiality, intellectual property rights, fair and ethical use information resources, etc. However, sometime the information professionals are faced with conflicting codes, which create another dilemma for them. According to Fallis (2007), ‘Whenever we are guided by more than one ethical principle, there is a possibility that these principles will give us conflicting advice in certain cases. ‘For example, it has been suggested that the duty to protect the privacy of library patrons (e.g., by maintaining the confidentiality of their circulation records) conflicts with the duty to protect our society from terrorists … respecting intellectual property rights can often get in the way of providing better access to information.’

In many societies, it is believed that, receiving information is a fundamental human rights and therefore providing them with their desired information is the foremost duty of the information professionals. Library and information professionals need to vigilant against misinformation and conflicting theories. They must find a way to follow a code which is borne of universal ideas of rights and fairness. The issue of ethics must not be made unnecessarily complex by importing a lot of ambiguity and double-talk. What is fair and just must be fair and just to most people, except those who are intentionally trying to complicate the matter. For example, everybody knows that, an author has certain rights over his her creative ideas which are contained in books and other reading materials. So ignoring those rights by arguing that keeping unauthorized photocopied versions of books in a library would help libraries minimize their costs would not be an ethical argument. Likewise, imposing arbitrary censorship on reading materials which somebody thinks could be unethical for some people is also not advisable, unless that material propagates anti-state or anti-humanity messages. The important point here is that, information professionals need to maintain highest level of ethical standard so that they can serve their clientele in the most fair and just manner. Devising a code of their own by studying and exploring all the existing codes also is advisable. But whatever is done, it must be done in conformity with the existing laws of the land. Besides, the universal ideas of humanity, justice, equality, indiscrimination, etc. should be also be kept in mind all the time.

**Focus Group Discussion on Information Ethics**
The purpose of focus group discussions is to gain knowledge about a particular topic or need by interviewing a group of people directly affected by the issue. As opposed to individual interview, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) allows to observe participants engaging in dialogue, sharing ideas, opinions, and experiences, and debating with each other to find out and identify the various dimensions of the issue at hand. FGDs are unique in that, they bring out the participants’ spontaneous reactions and ideas and let the researcher observe group dynamics and organizational issues. An FGD was organized with the participation of nine library and information professionals whose ranks ranged from Chief Librarian to Assistant Librarians and all were working for various libraries and information centres of Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. The libraries they represented were mainly academic and special libraries which included university libraries, medical libraries, government libraries and research libraries. Two issues were raised before the participants to discuss, which were:

a. How much importance should Bangladeshi LIS professionals attach to the question of information ethics?

b. What should be an ideal ethical guideline for Bangladeshi information professionals?

The participants took part in constrictive discussion during the FGD which was moderated by the author. They seem to very keen on the question on information ethics and all participants unanimously opined that the question of information ethics is indeed quite important to them. The highlights of the FGD are as summarized below:

1. Information ethics holds great significance for LIS professionals in the changing scenario of the 21st century. No LIS professional could ignore this issue and everybody should first and foremost accept its significance.

2. Since the Library Association of Bangladesh (LAB) and Bangladesh Association of Librarians, Information Scientists and Documentalists (BALID) – the two premier associations of LIS professionals do not have any written code of ethics, they should formulate Code of Ethics for LIS professionals either jointly or separately.
3. In absence of a code of ethics for LIS professionals at the national level, the LIS professionals should be guided by their moral judgment, the rules of their parent organizations and the laws of the land.

4. To the best of their ability they must serve their clientele with utmost fairness and equality. They must not discriminate among the library users on the basis of class, creed, race or religion.

5. The LIS professionals must not encourage or connive at any kind of violation of copyrights and intellectual property rights and plagiarism.

6. The privacy of the library users must be protected at any cost. Key information like users’ preference of books and library materials, their personal information, reading habit, etc. should not be divulged to any authority unless in matters of national interest.

7. The censorship applied by the Government or concerned authorities must be obeyed. However, the LIS professionals should neither impose any kind of censorship themselves nor encourage any authority to do so which may limit one’s right to receive information.

8. The users should be educated by the LIS professionals on ethical use of information. The ethical guidelines to be followed while using library materials should be displayed inside the library so that the user could practice ethical use of information.

9. LIS professionals should, among themselves and with government and non-government authorities, discuss about various issues relating to information ethics, so that an atmosphere of transparency and fairness could be maintained under all circumstances.

10. The issue of information ethics should be incorporated in textbooks and other literature so that larger cross sections of people, especially children and adolescents could learn about information ethics and apply it in their real life.

The above points indicate that, LIS professionals of Bangladesh are well aware of the importance of information ethics and they are fully prepared to practice information ethics in their workplace. Therefore, the professional bodies should take necessary measures to make sure that an ethical guideline and code of ethics for LIS professionals of Bangladesh is formulated in line with the global practices in information ethics. The exiting standards and codes should be explored and
analyzed and, based on them, a standard or code suitable for Bangladeshi LIS professionals should be formulated without any delay.

**Conclusion**

Information explosion, proliferation of information and communication technologies and an increasing awareness among LIS professionals as well as information users about the importance of information in various fields, the issue of information ethics should be given due emphasis. LIS professionals of Bangladesh are standing at a crossroad. They have huge potential to contribute in national development by providing right information to the right users in the right manner. But for that, they must practice information ethics so that they can uphold the principles of fairness and equality and provide information to people from all cross-sections of the society without any prejudice or fear. A continuous debate on information ethics among the LIS professionals and the policy makers is quite important at this moment. This debate may usher in a new era of self-awareness and development for the LIS professionals of Bangladesh.

**References**


