

ALA's Committee on Professional Ethics: An Insider's View

by Gene D. Lanier

Having served the past biennium on the American Library Association's Committee on Professional Ethics, I have discovered once again that few librarians consider professional ethics an important issue in their daily job-related activities. We assume that all professionals automatically operate with acceptable ethical behaviors because of their upbringing, their personal morals and values, and their commitment to perform at a high level at all times.

This is not necessarily true. It distresses me that ethics rarely enter the conversation when library policies and procedures are discussed. Many librarians have indicated to me that the subject never really was covered in their preparation programs. Even though ethics should permeate all of librarianship, library schools have not done a very good job in bringing this extremely important subject into classroom discussions. Last year, however, several members of the committee were asked to formulate a syllabus for the teaching of ethics. After several attempts, the group decided that the subject is too all-encompassing to complete the task.

The American Library Association has expressed an interest in a code of ethics for many years. Special attention was given to this topic in 1903, 1929, 1938, 1975, and 1981. The Code of Ethics Committee was first noted in 1928 and finally firmly established as an ALA Council standing committee in 1975 with Judith F. Krug as ALA staff liaison.

After many years of work and various drafts, the current ALA *Code of Ethics* was adopted in 1981. The committee solicited input from the membership through *American Libraries*, from all units within ALA, and in open hearings held at midwinter and annual meetings. Jonathan Lindsey and Ann Prentice's book, *Professional Ethics and Librarians*,¹ provides the best history of the Committee on Professional

Ethics and the development of the code. The 1981 version of the code identifies the "musts" necessary for librarians to operate ethically. Its six tenets are grounded in the *Library Bill of Rights* and the *Freedom to Read Statement* originally adopted in 1948 and 1953 respectively, and amended through the years. According to the Office for Intellectual Freedom, the Code of Ethics has now been endorsed by all of the state library associations.

The Lindsey and Prentice book defines ethics as "a system of values and rules that spell out what is right and what is good."² Through the years, the Committee on Professional Ethics has attempted to make librarians aware of what is important and current in this area. For instance, at the committee's suggestion, since 1983, *American Libraries* has attempted to raise awareness of the subject by including sample ethical dilemmas in most issues of the journal. This gives the membership an opportunity to respond in the next issue as to how they would handle the previous month's ethical problem. Many have indicated that these problems and comments are very helpful in formulating their personal philosophies of ethical behavior in the library setting. Favorable comments also have been received on the *Ethics Sin List*,³ published by the committee in 1987, which outlines library situations that might be considered unethical.

For several years the Committee on Professional Ethics also has sponsored at the ALA summer conferences "The Not-Quite-Ready-for-Prime-Time-Players," a role-play approach originally conceived by Gerald Shields. The committee chooses examples of current ethical dilemmas. Topics for the scenarios have included such problem areas as personnel, management, fees, censorship, confidentiality, and librarian/vendor relationships. Audiences of several hundred people have been quite receptive to the format of a series of role plays followed by a group attempt to solve the featured ethical issue.

Most professions have developed a code of conduct, many of them dating from the middle of the nineteenth century. Professional associations have codes because of their responsibility to the people they serve. It is assumed that members of a profession should bring their honor and integrity as well as their competencies to their jobs. Many dilemmas arise, however, in determining how far professional librarians can go in giving advice, making recommendations, or practicing bibliotherapy. Many people believe each individual faces a strong conflict between professional ethics and personal ethics.

One big question has always been the means by which a profession can enforce its code. Only a few organizations, such as the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association, have been successful in enforcement; however unlike most professional organizations, including the American Library Association, membership in both of these associations is limited. Many librarians feel that our *Code of Ethics* is so broadly written that the tenets are unenforceable. We have attempted many times, often without success, to apply our code to everyone connected with the library operation—professionals, paraprofessionals, friends, trustees, and governing boards—while referring to our code as the *Statement on Professional Ethics*. In reality it is very much like parenting: we only can set examples for those people other than professional librarians involved in the operation of our institutions.

As is true of any professional statement, implementation is dependent on individual interpretation, and issues involving professional ethics are more complicated than they first seem. Ethical according to whom? Are our rules of conduct based on tribal custom; dictated by a supreme being; prescribed by society; identified by our employing institution; or based on personal, convenient value systems? Do our ethical codes get in the way

of practice? According to some, the librarian's responsibility is to help users find whatever information they need and not to judge how they use it. Other librarians believe in their professional responsibilities so strongly that they feel that they must judge and control their users. Most of us, however, assume that libraries do indeed make a difference and that what people read, listen to, and view has a definite impact on their lives.

In connection with the Committee on Professional Ethics' discussions on revision of the code, this writer compared some forty-two codes of ethics of other professional organizations with some rather interesting results. Included were codes for accountants, anesthetists, anthropologists, architects, attorneys, dentists, engineers, genealogists, hospital administrators, museum workers, pharmacists, physicians, psychologists, school administrators, sociologists, and teachers. One of the questions had been whether other professions direct their codes to professionals only or to all staff members. Of the forty-two codes examined, thirty-one confined their codes of conduct solely to professional members.

The codes varied in length. Twenty-nine were composed of relatively general principles while thirteen included specific guidelines. Some codes specified the professional's duties, responsibilities, and relationships; some included the qualifications and performance standards of the individuals covered; and some mentioned remuneration. Some took the rights and obligations approach. A few were very detailed and organized the rules based on responsibilities to the public, the profession, the employer, and the individual involved along with his associates and clients. Some even mentioned the individual's responsibilities to government and country.

Some professions included in their codes interpretations of the principles involved. For example, the code of the American Bar Association states the principles, called canons, and follows these with interpretations, labeled as formal and informal opinions. Psychologists, on the other hand, identify the principles with interpretations and also include the criteria for a good profession. Some policies even include illustrative examples of application. A number of librarians have indicated that they think interpretation statements such as those accompanying the *Library Bill of Rights* would be helpful in understanding our code.

Responding to comments from the membership, the Committee on Professional Ethics hosted an open hearing at the 1992 ALA midwinter meeting in San Antonio. The hearing focused on whether the *Code of Ethics* needs revision. The session was well attended and a large number of people spoke. Although the approach of the speakers differed, the overall feeling was that revision definitely should be considered.

Some speakers centered their remarks on specific items to include in the code. They recommended terminology for inclusion such as technology, privacy, due process, intellectual freedom, continuing education, confidentiality, competencies necessary for professionals, access, and resource sharing. Other advice included such points as avoiding a "laundry list," not making it "too apple pie," emphasizing quality selection of materials, speaking to the compliance/enforcement structure, keeping it short, including commentary on each item, speaking to the special obligation to serve youth, maintaining relationships with vendors, addressing access to information beyond the library setting, removing all "musts," mentioning personal financial benefits, including an accountability phrase, covering governing boards in the statement, keeping it positive, addressing gifts and electronic communication, and broadening the introduction. The consensus was to move forward with the revision process, but how to go about changing the code was another matter.

Based on this testimony and written statements which were forwarded to the committee, the members decided to sponsor another hearing at the annual meeting in San Francisco to give additional members an opportunity to speak. This hearing,

scheduled on Sunday night, conflicted with a large number of other activities. Due to the small number who appeared, the hearing was canceled. The few members who had signed up for a guaranteed time slot presented their testimonies in writing. The committee also has solicited additional written testimony to help them in their deliberations, and many ALA members are still forwarding their comments, an indication of strong interest in code revision.

The Committee on Professional Ethics continues to focus on whom the code should cover and whether it should be a concise, general statement of moral and ethical principles or a longer and more specific set of guidelines and standards with interpretations. A decision must be made on whether or not to distinguish the philosophies of librarians from those of the communities and/or the institutions they serve. In this writer's opinion, a code of ethics should definitely provide some general rules for professionals to consider when they are faced with moral questions raised by the diverse applications and growing technological sophistication of computers.

Now that some libraries have begun charging fees for services such as the use of computerized databases, the effects of providing misinformation may very well become an issue. In addition, digitized information makes access dependent on specific skills and hardware, and those without both may become a new class of disadvantaged in our information-dependent society. Will access to information be limited to what is free or what is within the library's budget? The new, proposed interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*, called "Economic Barriers to Information Access," which was reconsidered at the 1993 midwinter meeting in Denver, states that "the publicly supported library is established by law to provide free and equal access to information for all persons of the community the library serves." Is the charging of fees for library services an ethics issue?

Another consideration is the whole area of confidentiality of library records. Discovery of the FBI Library Awareness Program opened the eyes of many people both inside and outside the profession to the agency's attempts to circumvent state confidentiality statutes and limit access to unclassified information for some of our library users. As a member of ALA's Intellectual Freedom Committee at the time, and having participated in the FBI's briefing to the IFC, I saw again the serious need for professional librarians to rededicate themselves to adherence to our *Code of Ethics*. There was no neutral ground: one either followed the tenets of the code or buckled to intimidation and the charge of being unpatriotic. It was truly a time of self-examination. The media focused upon the librarian as guardian of the right to privacy in retrieving information from libraries and databases.

The Committee on Professional Ethics also has attempted to reinforce the idea that library directors often set the ethical tone for their organizations. If library administrators practice and demand high standards, other members of the library staff are likely to follow suit. Library directors should communicate the expectation for high ethical behavior. Everyone should realize that if the actions of one employee are questioned, the reputation of the entire organization suffers.

Editor's Note: This biennium the ALA Committee on Professional Ethics will be chaired by one of our own, Jeanne M. Isacco, 5620 Guida Drive, Greensboro, NC 27410. She has given much of her time to this area for many years and would welcome any suggestions or recommendations as the committee continues its deliberations.

References

- ¹Jonathan A. Lindsey and Ann E. Prentice, *Professional Ethics and Librarians* (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1985).
- ²*Ibid.*, 4.
- ³American Library Association. Committee on Professional Ethics, *Ethics Sin List* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1987).