
CODE OF ETHICS FOR LIBRARIANS: THE NIGERIAN SITUATION

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Abstract

This article gives an overview of ethics, code and discussion in greater detail the American Library Association (ALA) Code of Ethics for Librarians. It shows the 1938 version of the code and the reviewed version of 1998. The article also gives the contributions of Nigerian writers to the discussions on ethics for librarians. It is shown that there is no local code of ethics for Nigeria librarians. The writer recommends that the Nigerian Library Association should as a matter of urgency draft the Nigerians Library Code of Ethics.

Keywords: Ethics, Code of Ethics, ALA Code of Ethics, Nigerian Library.

Introduction

One of the basic requirements of any responsible profession is a code of ethics to regulate the activities of its members and bring honour to the profession. The most popular code of ethics so far is that of the medical profession. It is called the Hippocratic Oath. It is commonly believed that it was drafted by a famous Greek medical practitioner of the ancient time called *Hippocrates (Circa. 460-380BC)*.

The modernized version of the Hippocratic Oath was presented in the Geneva Convention of 1948. Another expanded version was presented in the World Medical Assembly at Helsinki in 1964 (Umerah, 1989). Many other professions have their own codes of ethics. The questions that logically follow is: What about librarian? This paper is aimed at providing answer to this question by first giving a brief background information on ethics, ethical code, and then finding out about librarians code of ethics, and the ethnical codes for librarians in Nigeria.

Ethics and Ethical Codes

The New Webster's Dictionary of the English language defines ethics as the acceptable standard of good behavior for Umerah (1989) the word ethics is derived from the Greek word *ethos* which means *customs and habits*.;the writer believes the word relates to the precepts which control moral behaviours. Ethics also points to what members of a profession ought to have as their focus. In the medical

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profession, this is captured succulently by a quotation on the wall of the lecture theatre in Leiden University which states: The patient is the centre of the medial universe around which all our world revolves and towards which all our efforts tend (Mabayole, 1982).

According to Naidu (1985) the code of ethics of a profession is a statement of ideas principles, and standard of professional conduct approved by the professional board and voluntarily adhered to by its members. For the librarians, the ethical's code is the statement drafted by the professional body of librarians that involves relationship with the people (i.e library users); other librarian; and the public in general. Naidu (1995) believes that in so far as the field of librarianship is a profession, it has ethical values higher than the selfish interest of librarians. By establishing a code of ethics, the library profession fulfills the following:

1. Derives a set of rules under which members will be able to provide better services to the society and better protection to its members
2. Assumes responsibilities for assuring the competence of its members and prohibiting conduct that will bring the profession to disrepute.

The Code of Ethics for Librarians

Boaz (1975) observed that the quality of library depends largely on the quality of the individuals librarian: individual members by the way they practice reflect the total profession. The author therefore opined that the library profession should, therefore have a greater interest in revising and developing its code of ethics and it should exercise more responsibilities in dealing with individuals and groups whose practices or action reflect unfavourably on the profession as a whole. The subject of ethics as related to librarians and library work appears in various issues of the Bulletin of the American Library Association and the Library Journal (Boaz, 1975). The librarians Cannon of Ethics by K. C Bolton appeared first in public libraries in 1909 and later in revised edition in book form.

A proposed code of ethics embracing thirty sections was printed in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, May, 1922. The code was eventually accepted by the *ALA Council in December, 1938*. The text of the code appeared in full in the February 1939 issue of the *ALA Bulletins* (Boaz, 1975). The

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five main parts of the code deal with the relation of the librarian to the governing authority, to his constituency, with his library, to his profession and to society.

The writer will like to present the 1983 version and the latest revised edition which has greatly reduced the content of the earlier edition.

ALA Code of Ethics for Librarians (1938 VERSION)

1. Relations of the Librarians to the Governing Authority

- a. The librarians should perform his duties with realization of the fact that final jurisdiction over the administration of library rests in the officially constituted governing authority. This authority may be vested in a designated individual, or in a group such as committee or board.
- b. The chief librarian should keep the governing authority informed on professional standards and progressive action. Each librarians should be responsible for carrying out the policies of the governing authority and itsappointed executives with a spirit ofloyalty to the library
- c. The chief librarian should interpret decisions of the governing authority to the staff, and should act as liaison officer in maintaining friendly relations between staff members and those in authority
- d. Recommendations to the governing authority for the appointment of staff members should be made by the chief librarians solely upon the basis of the candidate professional and personal qualifications for the position. Continuance in service and promotion should depend upon the quality of performance, following a definite and known policy. Whenever the good of the service requires a change in personnel, timely warning should be given. If desirable adjustment cannot be made, unsatisfactory service should be terminated in accordance with the policy of the library and the rules of tenure.
- e. Resolutions, petitions and request of a staff, organization or group should be submitted through a duly appointed representatives to the chief librarian. If a mutually satisfactory solution cannot be reached, the chief librarian on request of the staff should transmit the matter to the governing authority. The staff may further request that they may

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be allowed to send a representative to the governing authority, in order to present their opinion in person.

2. Relations of the Librarian to his Constituency

- I. The chief librarian, aided by staff members in touch with the constituency, should study the present and future needs of the library, and should acquire materials on basis of those needs. Provision should be made for as a wide a range of publication and as varied a representation of viewpoint as is consistent with the policy of the library with the fund available.
- II. It is the librarian's responsibility to make the resources and service of the library known to its potential users. Impartial service should be rendered to all who are entitled to use the library.
- III. It is the librarian's obligation to treat as confidential any private information through contact with library patrons.
- IV. The librarians should try to protect library property and to inculcate in users a sense of their responsibility for its preservation.

3. Relationship of the Librarian within his Library

- a. The chief librarian should delegate authority, encourage a sense of responsibility and initiative on the part of staff members, provide for their professional development and appreciate good work. Staff members should be informed of the duties of their positions and policies and problems.
- b. Loyalty to fellow workers and a spirit of courteous cooperation, whether between individuals or between departments, are essentials to effective library service.
- c. Criticism of library policies, services and personnel should be offered only to the proper authority for the sole purpose of improvement of the library.
- d. Acceptance of a position in a library incurs an obligation to remain long enough to repay the library for the expense incident to adjustment. A contract signed or agreement made should adhere to faithfully until it expires or is dissolve by mutual consent.
- e. Resignations should be made long enough before they are to take effect to allow adequate time for the work to be put in shape and a successor appointed.

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- f. A librarian should never turn the library's resources to personal use, to the detriment of service which the library renders to its patrons.

4. Relation of the Librarian to his Profession

- i. Librarian should recognize librarianship as an educational profession and realize that the growing effectiveness of their service is dependent upon their own development.
- ii. In view of the important of ability and personality traits in library work a librarian should encourage only those persons with suitable aptitudes to enter the library profession and should discourage the continuance in service of the unfit.
- iii. Recommendations should be confidential and should be fair to the candidate and the prospective employers by presenting an unbiased statement of strong and weak points.
- iv. Librarians should have a sincere belief and a critical interests in the library profession. They should endeavour to achieve and maintain adequate salaries and proper working conditions.
- v. Formal appraisal of the policies or practices of another library should be given only upon the invitation of that library governing authority or chief librarian.
- vi. Librarians, in recognizing the essential unity of their profession, should have membership in library organization and should be ready to attend and participate in library meetings and conferences.

5. Relation of the Librarian to Society

- a. Librarians should encourage a general realization of the value of library service and be informed concerning movements, organization and institutions whose aims are compatible with those of the library
- b. Librarians should participate in public and community affairs and so represents the library that it will take its place among educational, social and cultural agencies.
- c. A librarian's conduct should be such as to maintain public esteem of the library and for library work.

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ALA Code of Ethics for Librarians (1998 Abridged Edition)

According to Rubin (1998), the revised ALA Code of Ethics has eight provisions as follows:

1. The librarian provides the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and useful organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access, and accurate, unbiased and courteous response to all request.
2. The librarian upholds the principles of intellectual freedom and resists all efforts to censor library resources.
3. The librarian protects each library users right of privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted
4. The librarian reconciles and respects intellectual property rights.
5. The librarians treats co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness and good faith and advocates conditions of employment that safeguard the right and welfare of all the employees of the institution (library) where he or she is serving.
6. The librarians distinguishes between personal contributions and professional duties and does not allow his or her belief to interfere with fair presentation of aims of his/her library or the provision of assets to his/her information resources.
7. The librarian does not advance private interest at the expense of library users, colleagues or his/her employing institution.
8. The librarian strives for excellence in the profession by maintain and enhancing his/her knowledge and skills, by encouraging the professional development of co-workers, and by fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession.

the eight points focus on three general areas which are asset, issues, right of authors and creators and employee issues.

Nigerian Situation

There is no exclusive librarians code of ethics in Nigeria neither is it indicated anywhere that Nigerian librarians should adopt the ALA Code of Ethics. There are only occasional comments in articles. For instance, Eboka (1984) observed that a librarian as a service provider should endeavour to do the following things:

1. Have a broad perspective. That is, he should be more outward looking
2. Try to see everything about the library from two angles: that of the patron and that of the library administrations and should be able to interpret one to another. By so doing, he is likely to introduce policies which will benefit both his staff and the public, thereby improving the image of the library and by extension of the profession
3. He should sell the profession to the public, in other words; the librarians should market the profession. This means that he should conduct himself in such a way that he will attract people to the profession and the services that the profession offers
4. The library should not broaden the gap between the older and younger colleagues, in a profession where the older and younger colleagues are at loggerheads, the image of the profession suffers greatly, to avoid this; there should be internal public relation. This contribution more or less supports the ALA Code.

Ezeani (2004) in an article on good public relations believes that librarians are the image workers and indeed, the gateway through which people get in contact with the information rich environment of the library. As such, the author recommends that the librarians should adopt the following things.

A. Behaviour Characteristics

- a. Be approachable: This means that the librarian must be approachable person who can be easily contacted for information. He should also have a willingness to serve patrons and answer all their questions
- b. Should be friendly: A librarian must be warm, friendly and easy to be with. He/she should not have a condescending or dictate personality and must be genial, as a cold personality often put off patrons

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- c. Should possess ability to communicate: A librarian must be able to communicate effectively. He or she must be sophisticated and urbane so much that he or she cannot easily be intimidated by patrons. Must be a positive person: a librarian should always be there to give positive advice and must be able to deal with such insuperable jobs and dealing effectively with problems patrons.
- d. Must have a neat and personable appearance: A librarian must always dress neatly and bear a personable appearance to attract the confidence of users as one who can help them in their quest for information
- e. Must be a gregarious person: a librarian must like people and want to deal with them; must be extroverted and not an introverted person. He must be close enough to the users to be able to speak the mind of the administration
- f. He must be progressive not a conservative person.

B. Professional Characteristic

In term of professional characteristic, the librarian should exhibit the following traits;

- i. He must be intelligent, confident and very capable in the delivery of library services to the public.
- ii. The librarian must have a good knowledge of resources and collections. Resources within the library should be very well known to him. He must not focus on only the section where he belongs alone precluding other sections. A good knowledge of alternative resources can also help readers a great deal
- iii. He should also have knowledge of correctuse of reference resources and tools. He must have an in depth knowledge of reference sources and how to use them
- iv. A librarian should have effectiveness in interviewing. This means that the librarians must know the users real questions through investigation of a problem, and effective analyses of the questions
- v. A librarian must also have the ability to use all resources available, including print, computer, internet, etc to solve problem.
- vi. A good librarian must have a clear thinking and fast question-answering mind in dealing with users

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- vii. He should also possess the special skills in assessing interpreting and modifying public options.

As can be seen above, librarianship as a profession in Nigeria is yet to produce a code of ethics. The profession is still generally guided by the ALA Code of Ethics which fortunately have universal applicability. It is left to all practitioners to take a stand on this issues.

Conclusion

Librarianship as a profession has its “does and don’t”. These are best illustrated in the ALA Codes of Ethics. It is most unfortunate that up till date there is no code of ethics for the profession in Nigeria. The practioners are still guided by the public service rules and the ALA Codes. With the recent enactment of the decree registering the profession- librarian registration, council of Nigeria decree 1995, (Decree 12 of 1995) enacted on the 15th June 1995 the need for an indigenious code of ethics has become pressing. The author recommends that like the medical profession, the library profession in Nigeria should adopt the ALA Code, and make local modification.

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