

Imperatives for a Code of Conduct and Ethics for Librarians in Nigeria

By

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Abstract

This paper discusses the imperatives for a code of conduct and ethics for librarians in Nigeria. It observes that librarians need it for professional growth and development, as well as personal well being. The specific areas that a code of conduct and ethics can help the profession, library users, practitioners, the entire Nigerian society and humanity were identified. It assists in facilitating unhindered access to information, makes librarians responsible to users and the society; guarantees privacy and secrecy of users' data while encouraging transparent services; promotes open access while also protecting intellectual property rights; encourages neutrality, personal integrity and acquisition of professional skills; and makes librarians responsible to their colleagues, employers and the profession.

Introduction

The Librarians Registration Council of Nigeria was established by an act of Government in 1995 (LRCN, 1995). The Council is charged with the following functions:

1. Determining who is a librarian,
2. Determining the standard of knowledge and skills that are required to be attained by those seeking to become registered as librarians,
3. Reviewing standards from time to time as circumstances may require,
4. Securing the establishment and maintenance of a register of persons entitled to practice librarianship, and the publication, from time to time, of the lists of such persons,
5. Maintaining discipline within the profession, and
6. Performing such other functions as may be conferred upon the Council.

The LRCN Act (1995) also provides for the establishment of a disciplinary committee and an investigating panel. From the foregoing, it is proper that the LRCN should put in place a code of conduct and ethics for librarians in Nigeria, and true to its billings, the final copy is being presented to the public at this induction ceremony by the Honourable Minister of Education.

At this point, it is necessary to mention briefly some of the achievements of LRCN, which include:

1. Registration of four sets of librarians thus: 538 in 2005, 1,177 in 2011, 948 in 2012, and 603 in 2013. To date, therefore, 3266 librarians have been registered in Nigeria.
2. Training and retraining of library and information practitioners in Nigeria. This the LRCN has done through organizing workshops and production of manuals for different categories of librarians, e.g. the *Manual for School Librarians* (2013). This year alone, LRCN plans to hold four workshops in different parts of the country.

3. Partnering with the National Universities Commission (NUC), National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) and National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) to review LIS curriculum in Nigeria. This, in the word of the Registrar, is to bring it in line with global best practices and to equip graduates with the requisite skills to function in the 21st century.
4. On-going advocacy for librarianship.
5. Production of Code of Conduct and Ethics for Librarians in Nigeria.

Codes of Conduct and Ethics for Professional Bodies

Codes of conduct and ethics exist for virtually every professional group, and they date back a long time in history. For example, the Hippocratic oath, which is the promise medical doctors make to uphold the principles of medical practice has its origin in Socrates, who was a Greek physician in the 5th century A.D. The American Medical Association came up with its first code of ethics in 1847. The American Library Association's Code of Ethics for Librarians came into existence in 1939.

A search through the literature indicates that Library associations in over sixty countries of the world have developed codes of conduct and ethics for librarians (IFLA, 2012). A run down of these countries, which include Armenia, Belgium, China, Israel, Malaysia, Poland, Russian Federation, United Kingdom, United States of America, etc unfortunately reveals that none of them is from Africa. It is interesting to know that while the ALA's *Code of Ethics for Librarians* was developed in 1939, IFLA developed its own in August 2012 (IFLA, 2012). Nigeria is unarguably the first country in Africa to come up with a code of conduct for librarians. This feat has been accomplished by the LRCN.

Understanding the Key Concepts in Code of Conduct and Ethics

Before proceeding further, it is important to have an understanding of key concepts in code of conduct and Ethics. These are code, conduct and ethics. According

to the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1995:254), a code is “a set of rules which are accepted as general principles, or a set of written rules which states how people in a particular country should behave.” From the definition, a code can be written or unwritten rules and general principles which have been accepted as binding on those they are intended for and these can be professional bodies, nations, clubs, societies, etc.

The same *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1995:283) defined conduct as “to cause...to behave in a particular way, especially in a public or formal situation...” Conduct, therefore, is the acceptable ways which members of an organization, professional body, society, etc are expected to conform with in the discharge of their responsibilities. Zwas (2010:1758) defined ethics as the “study of the principles of right and wrong that ought to guide human conduct. Ethics concerns itself with what values are worth pursuing in life and what acts are right. Therefore, ethics is a study of morality.” What can be deduced from this definition is that ethics is a system of acceptable ways that regulate behaviours in an organization, professional body, etc. Such system must of necessity be rooted in morality.

In many instances, conduct and ethics are used interchangeably. For our purpose too, we will take the two words to mean one and the same, but for academic purpose, a distinction can be made. A code of conduct articulates the specific behaviours expected of professionals or groups they are intended for, while a code of ethics outlines the broad principles and aspirations.

From the foregoing, therefore, a code of conduct and ethics for librarians is a set of rules and regulations, do's and don'ts expectations, etc that should guide librarians in the discharge of their responsibilities to customers, employers, colleagues, the profession and society at large.

Need for Code of Conduct and Ethics

Every professional body requires a code of conduct and ethics because of its significance. This is because it articulates and promotes acceptable standards of behaviours and practice that ought to be met by the practitioners. It also provides guidance and control for acceptable standards of behaviours and practice. Professional codes of conduct and ethics create a set of benchmarks within which to practice and evaluate performance, which are good for enhancement and strengthening of professional images. With regard to librarianship, the ALA Code (2013) states that:

Those who enter the library profession assume an obligation to maintain ethical standards of behavior in relation to the governing authority under which they work, to the library constituency, to the library as an institution and to fellow workers on the staff,

to other members of the library profession, and to society in general.

Thus, a code of conduct and ethics moderates our behaviours and practices with regard to our employers, the library profession and colleagues, users, society and the entire humanity.

Conduct and Ethics Expected of Practising Librarians in Nigeria

A look at a number of codes of conduct and ethics for librarians would reveal that they are packaged to address more or less the same core issues, with variations only in response to peculiar realities or situations in the climes or groups they are meant to serve as guides for their practitioners. This much is acknowledged by IFLA (2012:2), which “recognizes that while (the) core principles should remain at the heart of any such, the specifics of codes will necessarily, vary according to the particular society.”

More or less the core issues which codes of conduct and ethics for librarians address are access to information; privacy (including secrecy and transparency); obligations towards individuals and society; open access and intellectual property; neutrality, personal integrity and professional skills; and responsibility towards colleagues and employers (IFLA, 2012; LRCN, 2012; Rubin, 2011; Zwas, 2011; and ALA, 2013). It is from the above perspectives that this paper seeks to address conduct and ethics expected of practising librarians in Nigeria.

1. Access to Information

As practitioners, the summit of our practice is facilitating access to information, for we feel fulfilled when information is available and put to use by our customers. In doing this, we are also fulfilling the injunction in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) whose Article 19 recognises the rights of freedom of opinion, expression and access to information for all human beings. It, therefore, means that access to information is a fundamental human right. In facilitating access to information, practitioners are, however, faced with a number of challenges, which we ought to guard against. One such challenge is censorship, which could come from the state (i.e. government), religious bodies, pressure groups, employers, colleagues, or even from ourselves. In the face of censorship, librarians must act with tact. For example, if it is a state ban as happened with **The Man Died** by Wole Soyinka during the administration of General Yakubu Gowon, we have no option but to accept that we do not stock the title, and if already in stock, we keep it out of circulation. If again, it is as a result of opposition by religious or pressure groups that can compromise the cohesion of the community, we have no option than to remove such publication(s) from circulation until tensions die down. Censorship can even come from our employers, bosses,

colleagues and even ourselves, in which case we have to handle the situation carefully. Other than these situations, we have an obligation to make all information accessible to our users even when the opinions or ideas they espouse are unpopular or contrary to ours.

Poor reading culture is also a serious challenge, which we should confront by engaging in readership promotion to dispose our potential users to make use of the information and the resources and services that the library makes available. This also calls for publicity of our collections and services generally so that users and potential users are aware of their existence and availability. One of the most effective ways of publicity for our resources and services in this digital age is ownership of a website and its constant up-dating. For our resources and services to be available and accessible, they should ideally be offered for free. However, where it is inevitable to charge membership and administrative fees, they must be kept minimal in order not to disadvantage people on account of poverty or any other social handicap.

2. Responsibility Towards Individuals and Society

As information providers we must show impartiality to those we offer services, thus ensuring that all those for whom our services are meant for are served. There should be impartial treatment to all, their demographic differences, social status, physical conditions, etc notwithstanding in terms of race, religion, education, age, citizenship, political and ideological leaning, physical or mental ability, gender, marital status, etc. for example, librarians should ensure that library entrances and exits be such that the physically challenged can enter and go out with their wheel chairs. For the visually impaired, libraries should stock large print books (for the partially visually impaired), audio books, talking books and magazines, talking book machines, braille facilities, etc; for those with hearing challenges, libraries should ensure the provision of assistive devices like listenaiders, telephone relay systems and visual display facilities. In the case of the mentally retarded and the emotionally disturbed, librarians will require a lot of patience and time to guide them closely. In offering services, librarians must ensure that languages are not a barrier, especially if such services are offered in the local environment of the users. The general complaint of librarians will be that there are no materials available in most indigenous languages. The way around this problem is for librarians to develop our indigenous knowledge system (IKS) to complement western knowledge system (WKS). This can be done using ICTs to capture indigenous knowledge as is the case with the Ulwazi Programme in the eThekweni Municipal Library in Durban, South Africa (Greyling and McNulty, 2012).

Related to the above is the orality of Nigerian society, which makes it incumbent on librarians to make accessible information that matches the oral proclivity of Nigerians. We can thus document happenings in our society using multimedia, the products of which can be beamed in our libraries. As information providers, we should also be in the vanguard of promoting that which is on the national agenda, by providing information that addresses the core values of our national life. For example, now that the government is concerned with the transformation of the nation, we ought to stock and make available materials that support the agenda. We also have an obligation to protect the interest and image of our country as it relates to our profession. If, for example, our country is being unjustly maligned in another country, we should rise to the defence of our fatherland. We must be ambassadors of our country in the librarianship profession.

3. Privacy, Secrecy and Transparency

“Privacy”, according to Zwas (2011:1761) “is the right of individuals to retain certain information about themselves without disclosure and to have any information collected about them with their consent protected against unauthorized access.” It is agreed among authorities that the right to privacy is a basic individual right, which Justice Louis Brandeis touted as “the most valued by the civilized man (Zwas, 2011:1761). It is the duty of the librarian to protect the privacy of the users of the library, to ensure confidentiality in the transaction between him and the users. A third party, therefore, has no right to know what material a user has consulted. The data about a user should not be divulged by the librarian. The librarian has the moral obligation to protect the personal data of users. Even as librarians must ensure secrecy in our transactions with users, we must, as a social responsibility, be in the vanguard of ensuring that transparency is entrenched in public and private conduct. Therefore, we have the responsibility to stock and disseminate materials that expose misconduct, corruption and other social ills in public and private affairs of the country.

4. Open Access and Intellectual Property

By open access is to make available scholarly and other publications (e.g. journals, research findings, etc) online to which access is free, but requiring that the author(s) of the work(s) is (are) acknowledged (i.e. author attribution). The principle behind open access, according to Suber (n.d.), is the removal of “price barriers” (e.g. subscription fees) and “permission barriers” (e.g., copyright and licensing restriction) to royalty – free literature” (i.e. scholarly works created for free by authors), making them available with “minimal use restrictions” (e.g., attribution).

The Berlin Declaration (2005) on open access implores institutions to implement a policy that:

1. Requires their institutions to deposit a copy of all their published articles in an open access repository.
2. Encourages their researchers to publish their articles in open access Journals where a suitable journal exists (and provide the support to enable that to happen).

Intellectual property means creative works of the mind, which include literary and artistic works, images, designs, patents, etc which by right belong to the individuals responsible for their creation. According to Reitz (2004:366), intellectual property refers to:

Tangible products of the human mind and intelligence entitled to the legal status of personal property, especially works protected by copyright, inventions that have been patented, and registered trademarks. An idea is considered the intellectual property of its creator only after it has been recorded or made manifest in specific form.

Garcia (2010:1185) grouped intellectual property into four for the purpose of protection, and these groups are copyright, patents, trademarks and trade secrets. For us as librarians, our concern is the protection of copyright provisions. Thus we have an obligation to ensure that intellectual property rights of authors are protected in terms of reproduction rights, distribution rights, moral rights (such as the right of authors to have their work properly attributed), to preserve the integrity of copyrighted work, etc. Librarians are not only concerned with the protection of the rights of the owners, but are also to remove obstacles (especially technological) to accessing their works within the limits allowed by law. Librarians therefore have an obligation to resist access circumvention as well.

5. Neutrality, Personal Integrity and Professional Skills

Neutrality is the position of not taking any side in an argument, debate, dispute, viewpoints, etc. The library is essentially a public service, which requires that librarians serve all those who constitute the library's public. This should be without prejudice to moral values, political views, religious inclinations, etc (Branum, 2006). To be able to serve all customers equitably to meet their information needs, librarians ought to maintain the position of neutrality and objectivity. This position finds support in Lewis(n.d.) who has observed that: "Historically, libraries have been one of the places where citizens can be exposed to a variety of viewpoints, including unpopular or minority view." Personal integrity presupposes the quality of being honest and possessing strength of character, which is expected of all librarians. Librarians must uphold the truth and shun corrupt tendencies, no matter the temptation in our

relationship with library resources dealers, users of our services, our employers, as well as our colleagues and practitioners of other professions. Our actions, transactions and utterances should evoke credibility. Professional skills are the competencies, expertise, abilities, etc which librarians ought to possess. These skills include sufficient subject knowledge, ability to use ICTs, tact to deal with others (including skills for advocacy, raising funds, etc). In this 21st century, for example, it is professionally unacceptable for a librarian to lack library and ICT literacy. Apart from the above, other higher level competencies recommended by Farkas (2006) for librarians are project management skills, ability to question and evaluate library services, ability to evaluate the needs of all stakeholders, vision to translate traditional library services into the online medium, critical of technologies and ability to compare technologies, and ability to sell ideas and library services.

6. Responsibility Towards Colleagues, Employers and the Profession

Librarians need to have confidence and trust in each other, as well as network to know about developments in the profession to be able to catch up. The senior colleagues ought to take it as their responsibility to mentor their junior colleagues, who should dispose themselves to being mentored. It is important too that junior colleagues respect their senior colleagues, who must equally reciprocate such respect.

In terms of responsibility to their employers, librarians must display absolute loyalty to the organizations they work for and respect constituted authority. This should, however, not be at the expense of compromising standards, values and professional or personal integrity. Librarians must be committed to working to realize the vision, mission and goals of the organizations in which they work. Librarians ought to subscribe to the membership of their professional bodies and seek to fulfill all the requirements that will accord them professional status. They must show loyalty to their professional bodies and adhere to the tenets of their profession, as well as being committed to working towards its growth and development. Librarians should be good ambassadors and advocates for their profession.

Enforceability

The provisions set out in codes of conduct and ethics should normally be subject to enforcement in order that appropriate sanctions are meted out to those who contravene them. Since the LRCN Act provides for a disciplinary committee, the provisions of the code of conduct and ethics it has come up with for librarians in Nigeria should be enforceable. Its investigating panel would normally carry out requisite investigations before

recommending erring members to face disciplinary processes.

Conclusion

A code of conduct and ethics is an invaluable tool for the growth and development of professional bodies, organizations, societies, etc. Professional bodies, for example, use it to provide guidance and regulation of acceptable standards of behaviours and practice. Professional associations have a long history of codes of conduct and ethics. An example is the Hippocratic oath, which guides medical doctors even till date but dates back to the 5th century A.D. In librarianship, one of the earliest codes of conduct is the American Library Association's (ALA) **1939 Code of Ethics for Librarians**. The realization of the invaluable role of codes of conduct and ethics has made library associations in about sixty countries of the world to have developed theirs. Unfortunately, however, none of these sixty countries is in Africa. It is, therefore, a good development that the Librarians Registration Council of Nigeria has packaged a code of conduct and ethics for librarians in Nigeria. This is yet another trail brazer by the LRCN, which is aspiring to put library and information practice in Nigeria at par with what obtains in the developed countries of the world. It is recommended that the provisions in the code of conduct and ethics are put to effect, including enforcing the provisions on erring members using the disciplinary committee of the Council.

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