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Ethical Dilemmas in the Information Society

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ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY: HOW CODES OF ETHICS HELP TO FIND ETHICAL SOLUTIONS

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Librarians, archivists and other information workers had to face ethical conflicts and ethical dilemmas long before digital media and the Internet started to reshape the whole information sphere. Francis Bacon's aphorism knowledge is power (*scientia potentia est*) refers to the fact that limited access to information and restricted education were and are prerequisites of ruling elites in pre- and non-democratic societies.

Freedom from censorship, access to information, equal treatment, freedom of expression and so forth have been important issues in the past and still are vulnerable values.

Free access to information and freedom of expression are requirements and achievements of the enlightenment and acknowledged as basic human rights meanwhile as Art. 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights¹ gives proof:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart

¹ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. United Nations 1948.
<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml#a19> (22.9.2014).

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information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Despite this, ethical conflicts and ethical dilemmas appear wherever information is generated, organized, stored, distributed and consumed. Challenges arise of course due to ideological dogmatism, totalitarian attitudes and religious fundamentalism. Beyond that individual benefits, economical interests or striving for power lead people into temptation to censor or to manipulate and hinder the free flow of information. Political interests, an exaggerated claim for security on a national level and the prevention of organized crime e.g. determine democratic governments as well to question and to limit free access to information and to establish or intensify forms of control, surveillance or even censorship. It is quite complicated and not always possible to identify the difference between justifiable restrictions and an unacceptable violation of fundamental ethical values. Librarians in the US e.g. had to deal with these issues after their government had enacted the PATRIOT Act in 2001 in response to the terrorist attacks on the USA of September 11 2001. The FBI was empowered to access library usage records and to take records related to Internet usage without a warrant. These prevailing legal norms conflicted “with the existing ALA professional ethics in a number of ways, but most importantly with the protection of user privacy”².

Dilemmas and conflicts sometimes appear because ethical values conflict among themselves. Here are some examples:

- Unrestricted access to information is not compatible with privacy and data protection.

² *Barbara Jones: "Librarians shushed no more." The USA PATRIOT Act, the "Connecticut Four, " and professional ethics. World Library and Information Congress: 75th IFLA General Conference and Assembly. Milan 2009. <http://conference.ifla.org/past-wlic/2009/117-jones-en.pdf> (24.9.2014)*

- Unlimited freedom of expression collides with protection from defamation.
- Protection of minors requires the curtailing of accessible information this clientele and leads to a breach of the equal treatment commandment (“...equitable services for everyone whatever their age...”)

This gives proof of the need to balance conflicting values in a careful and sensitive way. Ethical reflection based on the related code of ethics is the appropriate means to find suitable balances and to solve conflicts and dilemmas.

Anyway ethical conflicts and dilemmas are not a new phenomenon of the information society. But information technology based on computers, digital media and the Internet has escalated the potential to violate the fundamental values related to library and information ethics enormously. Quasi-monopoly Internet companies like Google, Bing or Yahoo have the power to manipulate their user’s search results without running the risk of being detected in each case.³ Social networks like Facebook, Whatsapp etc. are able to collect and sell personal data.⁴ Anonymous companies or institutions violate privacy by collecting, compiling and analyzing data tracks and by generating and retailing extensive personal information profiles.

Libraries not infrequently equip all their public computers with filter software as a means of minor protection. But at the same time adult library users are subject to filtered access to the Internet too because there is no distinction between computers for minors and computers for adults. At libraries and many other public spaces surveillance via video cameras is in practice for security reasons. But there is no transparency

³ Cf. Eli Pariser: *The Filter Bubble. What the Internet is hiding from you.* London: Penguin books 2012.

⁴ Cf. Sascha Adamek: *Die Facebook-Falle: Wie das soziale Netzwerk unser Leben verkauft.* Heyne, München 2011.

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with regard to questions like who has access to the material, how long the pictures will be kept, and so forth. Concerning copyright the information society is facing completely new and intensified challenges. Sharing networks, pirate copies as well as plagiarism via copy and paste in the digital world set the copyright system of the Gutenberg era under pressure (as well as good scientific practice). Open access is told to be a contemporary answer.⁵ On the other hand publishers try to take advantage of current debates about copyright.⁶ Libraries are involved in licensing regulations that sometimes hinder them to make e-books and other material available for all their users regardless of income and social status. Many publishers even try to exclude libraries from acquiring e-books.⁷

Despite the enormous challenges librarians, archivists and other information workers of course embrace the digital era as a chance to facilitate life and to improve the conditions of mankind worldwide. As information professionals they have experienced as early as possible that information is at the centre of society in the 21st century. And they are aware that their profession's ethical implications are key to build a better future for the global information society. The idea of organizing a conference on ethical dilemmas in the information society and on the role of codes of ethics for librarians and archivists is closely linked to these conclusions.

The first stimulus for a conference on ethical dilemmas and the role of codes of ethics emerged during the process of drafting an

⁵ *Open Initiatives: Offenheit in der digitalen Welt und Wissenschaft*. Ed: by Ulrich Herb. Saarbrücken: Universaar 2012. http://universaar.uni-saarland.de/monographien/volltexte/2012/87/pdf/Onlineversion_Open_Initiatives_Ulrich_Herb.pdf (24.9.14)

⁶ Cf. Rainer Kuhlen: "Copyright Issues in the European Union – Towards a science- and education-friendly copyright.[Preprint]". <http://www.kuhlen.name/MATERIALIEN/Publikationen2013/RK-copyright-issues-in-the-EU-submitted-preprint05032013-PDF.pdf> (24.9.2014)

⁷ Cf. IFLA Principles for Library eLending.2013. <http://www.ifla.org/node/7418> (24.9.2014)

international code of ethics for librarians and other information workers on behalf of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). Within IFLA's core committee "Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) in 2009 the proposal has been made to draft such an international code of ethics that should be discussed widely.⁸ This proposal was acclaimed not least to the fact that the international associations of archivists and museum professionals had already gained extremely positive experiences with their specific international codes.⁹ In summer 2010 a working group consisting of 5 international experts started to work on the drafting process.¹⁰ Globethics.net Foundation based in Geneva took part in its elaboration thanks to the fact that one member of the FAIFE working group who had worked for and with Globethics.net brought both sides into contact.

Globethics.net is a worldwide network of persons and institutions interested in various fields of applied ethics. It is based in Geneva and offers access to a large number of resources on ethics, especially through its leading global digital ethics library. In addition Globethics.net facilitates collaborative web-based research, conferences, online publishing and information sharing.¹¹

After a long and intensive debate throughout IFLA and the international library community IFLA's Governing Board endorsed the latest version as IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and other

⁸ Cf. Hermann Roesch: Drafting an International Code of Ethics for Librarians: FAIFE working group at work. In: FAIFE Newsletter. Issue 2. February 2011. p. 4-5. <http://www.ifla.org/publications/faife-newsletter?og=30> (18.9.2014).

⁹ Cf. International Council on Archives (ICA): Code of Ethics. 1996. <http://www.ica.org/?lid=5555&bid=225> (18.9.2014); International Council of museums (ICOM): Code of Ethics. 1986. <http://icom.museum/the-vision/code-of-ethics> (18.9.2014).

¹⁰ These were Loida Garcia-Febo, Anne Hustad, Hermann Roesch, Paul Sturges, Amélie Valloton Preisig.

¹¹ Globethics.net. 2014 <http://www.globethics.net/> (24.9.2014).

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Information Workers.¹² Already whilst drafting first thoughts were spent on possible methods how to popularize the code and how to make it come alive. This discussion resulted in a strategy consisting out of four main parts:

- Translate the code in different languages in order to make it available in as many parts of the world as possible.
- Develop and provide training material for workshops raising the awareness of librarians with regard to ethical issues and introducing the code as a means of ethical reflection and standardization.
- Collect case studies from all over the world covering the most important ethical issues and challenges at the library workplace.
- Organize conferences, seminars and workshops.

Most of these proposals have not yet been fully implemented, but work in progress can already be observed. The code has been translated meanwhile (September 2014) into 20 languages.¹³ Further translations will follow. Training material for workshops is in the drafting process. Plans to create a database with case studies are underway. The first and most important event related to part 4 (conferences, seminars, workshops) was realized in August 2014 and consisted in the conference “Ethical Dilemmas in the Information Society” which is documented in the following proceeding.

In continuation of their high-producing cooperation FAIFE members and Globethics.net representatives started to plan and organize the Geneva conference. It was a fortunate coincidence that IFLA’s annual World Library and Information Congress was destined to take place in Lyon, France, in 2014. This is why the decision was taken to have the

¹² IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and other Informations Workers. 2012. <http://www.ifla.org/faife/professional-codes-of-ethics-for-librarians#iflancodeofethics> (18.9.2014).

¹³ *ibidem*

conference on ethical dilemmas as satellite conference just a couple of days in advance of the Lyon event. Geneva as venue was most advantageous due to Globethics.net being situated there.

The organizers agreed to invite not only librarians but archivists and other information workers as well. The conference should provide information professionals from different fields of application an opportunity to share their experiences, to discover similar challenges as well as differing problems. And in fact contributors as well as participants came from library, archive and other information communities. Thanks to Globethics.net' and IFLA's international orientation and their intensive cooperation with colleagues and associations from African countries several participants (and contributors) from African countries had registered. This is why contributions from different African countries enriched the keynotes as well as the discussions during the workshops and the plenary sessions. All in all the conference was attended by almost 30 participants out of 12 countries and three continents.

With regard to the format the organizers decided to shape the event as a mixture of conference and workshop. Four keynotes were intended to make the participants aware of the main issues to be discussed. After the opening plenary session two workshops dedicated to "Codes of Ethics in Practice" on the one hand and "Ethical Values and Dilemmas in the Workplace of Libraries" on the other hand were intended to facilitate intensive discussions in smaller groups. Each workshop consisted of four stimulating presentations with extensive discussions and a conclusive debate. A final plenary session aimed to share and discuss the results of the workshops with intent to come to recommendations and conclusions.

The intention behind the conference was to implement ethics and ethical reflection more deeply in the day-to-day work in libraries, archives and related information institutions. Information professionals

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should be aware of the need to discuss ethical issues and to use their code as a means to master ethical dilemmas and to launch library and information ethics more prominently into professional and public debates. Of course the Geneva conference in August 14-15 2014 is only one step. Others will have to follow.