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Toward a Code of Ethics for Cataloging
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Abstract. Cataloging is the foundation of librarianship, and catalogers are professionals with special skills that set them apart from the profession in general and give them unique ethical responsibilities. They have power to help or harm on an increasingly global scale, yet very little has been written about the ethical issues faced by catalogers. This paper explores the ethics of cataloging, including encoding, subject analysis, authority control, and copy-cataloging, and examines descriptive and normative aspects in view of James Moor's just-consequentialist theory and J.J. Britz's ideas on ethical issues relating to intellectual freedom. A code of ethics for cataloging is offered.

Keywords. cataloging, ethics, code of ethics, professional, librarianship, access, subject analysis, authority control, copy-cataloging

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Introduction

The primary role and duty of the librarian is to connect relevant, appropriate information to the people who need it. The ALA Task Force on Core Competencies (2002) states, “the ability to organize collections of informational materials in order that desired items can be retrieved quickly and easily is a librarian’s unique competency. Well-organized collections are the foundation for all library service.” This would put catalogers at the foundation of all library service, as they are the ones who organize information in such a way as to make it easily accessible. Janet Swan Hill (2004, 12) maintains that “bibliographic control is at the heart of librarianship” and that it “forms the core of our discipline.” Michael Gorman (2002, 11) calls cataloging “the intellectual foundation of librarianship.” Yet, in spite of this importance, very little has been written about the ethics of cataloging. Instead, all areas of librarianship have been lumped together under the very broad statements of the ALA Code of Ethics (2002), much of which does not speak to the specific and important ethical challenges faced by catalogers. This paper shows that catalogers are professionals who are experts in their field, have a calling to serve society and the potential, by their actions, for great harm or good. Their special skills and knowledge sets them apart from the profession of librarianship in general. And, as Esther Bierbaum (1994, 16) has shown, “there are circumstances inherent to technical services that give rise to ethical issues that need to be addressed with

more specific guidance than the ALA Code of Ethics for Librarians offers.” James Moor’s just-consequentialist theory and J.J. Britz’s ideas on ethical issues relating to intellectual freedom will be examined as an approach to making ethical cataloging decisions, and the descriptive and normative aspects of issues relating to the ethics of cataloging will be reviewed. Finally, the first steps toward a code of ethics for cataloging will be offered.

Catalogers as Professionals

Herman Tavani (2004, 89) has defined a profession as “having a calling,” “possessing special knowledge and skill,” and “providing a service.” The Engineers’ Council for Professional Development (in Tavani 2004, 89) defines a professional as someone who “recognizes his or her obligation to society by living up to established and accepted codes of conduct.” According to Elizabeth Buchanan (2004a, 620), professionals are “experts in a field which provides them an advantage over the lay person and [whose] work has the potential to impact—either positively or negatively—the general public at large.” She identifies information professionals in particular as having the “potential to adversely affect our increasingly large and diverse clientele by failing to act responsively, fairly, timely, and appropriately.” All of these qualities apply to catalogers and imply ethical responsibilities. Kate Bowers of the Harvard University Archives (1997) has written, “Let us remember that we are experts. We have become very skilled at deriving meaningful data from efficient inspection of an item. The records we create adhere not only to rigid standards of encoding, but also to intelligent rules for

content. International standards for library cataloging have been in place since 1908. Professional ethics require that catalogers remain impartial.”

Access and Naming

Catalogers are responsible for two powerful areas—access and naming. They analyze content for “aboutness,” including explicit and implicit subject content, and translate this into a surrogate—a representation of the information—in the form of a database record. They thus create the “access points” or gates by which the information can be entered. As gatekeepers of information, catalogers have special moral obligations to their local clientele, but, increasingly to a global clientele as well. Catalogers build the structure of access and control of information with the use of encoding, hierarchies, and classifications. Julie Moore Iliff (2003, 15) calls catalogers “the architects, construction workers, and maintenance workers of the information infrastructure that we call our library catalogs.” She says that this role is “vital, since many of our ‘patrons’ never enter the brick-and-mortar library buildings to obtain face-to-face assistance.” Hope A. Olson (1999, 66) maintains “as classificationists and classifiers we shape the ideas that transform knowledge by organizing it into a particular structure.”

This information infrastructure is an increasingly global one. Olson (1998) has written of the worldwide influence of cataloging through the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), Library of Congress Subject Headings, and IFLA. Catalogers also have what Olson (2002, 4) calls the “power to name,” that is, the power to choose a name for the “aboutness” of a resource. “[Catalogers] decide how to represent subjects and, thus, affect access to and use of information contained in and knowledge derived from the

documents we catalogue.” As the surrogates created by catalogers are used and shared in an increasingly multicultural and global scale, the ethical responsibility for this naming increases. Olson (1998, 210) maintains that “as we name information for individual libraries, we also name it for the whole world.”

Ethical Implications

Because catalogers are professionals and experts in a field that impacts society for good or harm, they must be aware of the ethical implications and responsibilities of what they do. In considering an ethics for catalogers, it is helpful to look at James Moor’s just-consequentialist theory of ethics and J.J. Britz’s ideas on ethical issues related to intellectual freedom and intellectual property. Moor (in Tavani 2004) has set forth a theory of ethics that combines a consequentialist approach, that considers the consequences of our actions, with a deontological approach that is concerned with duties, rights, and justice. J.J. Britz (1999) has defined three ethical norms that should be considered in the area of intellectual freedom and intellectual property: justice (commutative, distributive, contributive, and retributive), freedom, and truth. Britz states that, “Commutative justice calls for fundamental fairness in all agreements and exchanges between individuals or social groups” (1999, 20) and explains that it refers to the “quality of the information products and services that are rendered.” Applying this concept to cataloging, the cataloger has a duty to supply thorough, accurate, high-quality surrogate records to databases. Distributive justice “is concerned with the fair allocation of the benefits of a particular society” and “pertains to the fair distribution of information that people require to satisfy basic needs.” Catalogers, therefore, should be concerned

with how they contribute to the fair and equitable access to information. Contributive justice “implies that an individual has an obligation to be active in society” and that “generators and distributors of knowledge have an ethical responsibility to add value to, and maintain the accessibility of, information that benefits society.” Catalogers should actively participate in the development, reform, and fair application of cataloging rules, standards, and classifications, as well as information-storage and retrieval systems. They should also be aware of how their activities add value to information packages and provide or deny access to, or “findability” of information, and why these activities are vital to a free society. Retributive justice “refers to the fair and just punishment of the guilty,” and regarding access to information, “is an important guideline for the protection of intellectual property and judging the misuse and distortion of information” (1999, 22). Catalogers should be careful not to contribute to the misuse or distortion of information through inaccurate, careless, or minimal cataloging, and they should report and correct errors in the shared databases.

Freedom, in this context, is what Britz sees as the freedom from censorship and the freedom to access information, noting that, “a person has the right (freedom) of access to all necessary, relevant, and correct information” (1999, 23). Catalogers should be vigilant in ensuring that they do not purposely or inadvertently “censor” or “lose” information through inaccuracy and the use, misuse, or nonuse of encoding, subject headings, classification schemes, and authority control. Truth is defined as “conformity with facts, agreement with reality,” notes Britz, who maintains that “this definition suggests an important norm for information-related occupations (such as librarians, journalists, and information managers) as regards the content and quality of information.”

He adds that “truth as a norm is applicable not only to the content of information, but also to the ethical character (virtue) of those whose professional responsibility entails the management of information” (1999, 24). Catalogers should work with honesty and integrity to represent the truth about each resource in regard to its subject area, or “aboutness,” the identity of those responsible for the content, and accurate description.

Unfortunately, the decisions that catalogers have to make are not always so clear. As Tavani (2004, 59), describing Moor’s theory, points out, “the ethical life is not nearly so simple” and “often actions involve a mixture of goods and evils as well as conflicts among duties.” Many external and internal pressures, including those of finances, personalities, pressure from donors, and simple logistics create ethical dilemmas. Bierbaum (1994, 12) has listed many of these ethical considerations for catalogers, including, decisions made by administrators that affect access, decisions made by bibliographic utilities and networks, computer storage and power, local telecommunications, building configuration, cuts in staff and budget, backlog management, use of copy-cataloging, outsourcing, and what she calls “the librarian/support staff caste system.”

Moor believes that one can best consider the consequences of decisions in the light of ethical duties, and issues such as justice, freedom, and truth by using the two-step approach of deliberation and selection. Tavani summarizes Moor’s ethical framework as first deliberating from an “impartial point of view” to determine if a policy “does not cause any unnecessary harms to individuals and groups, and supports individual rights, the fulfilling of duties, etc.” Second, the best policy should be selected “from the set of just policies arrived at in the deliberation stage by ranking ethical policies in terms of

benefits and (justifiable) harms,” being sure to “weigh carefully between the good consequences in the ethical policies” and “distinguish between disagreements about facts and disagreements about principles and values” (2004, 60-61). In this process, it is helpful to establish clear priorities. Johan Bekker (in Finks, 1991, 85) has concluded that a professional code of ethics should clarify the professional’s obligations in the ranked order of society and state, clients, profession and colleagues, agency, and self-interest, and that it “should be directed externally, and not internally; it should exist for the benefit of society and not for the sake of self-interest; and ethics related to clients must transcend institutional or disciplinary loyalties.” In this context, a situation such as being asked by the administration to allow untrained copy-catalogers to download uncorrected records into the local database because funds are not available for hiring and training becomes an ethical dilemma requiring careful deliberation of benefits and harms. In the next section I will explore in more detail the descriptive and normative aspects of what catalogers do and how it relates to their ethical duties and obligations.

Power to Help or Harm

Catalogers organize information by encoding; describing; analyzing for subject content, or naming; classifying; controlling; and sharing (Taylor 2000). Each of these areas has tremendous power to help or to harm. Rosenfeld and Morville (2002, 312) have described providing intellectual access to information as “no more ethically neutral than designing the first atomic bomb.” The container or carrier of information that allows it to be accessed (either manually or electronically), transported, and exchanged, is the encoding. Encoding includes catalog cards, the MARC-21 format, and more recently,

XML and MARC-XML. The Library of Congress (2003a) calls this encoding “signposts,” and without the signposts, or if the wrong ones are in place, computers and searchers get lost in the information wilderness. David Bade (2002, 4) has described the result of mistakes in encoding, noting “they can seriously disrupt a user’s ability to find and interpret bibliographic information.” Because an error in one number or letter in the encoding can result in the denial of access to information, the cataloger’s skill, knowledge, and accuracy in its application becomes an ethical issue.

Description, subject analysis, classification, and authority control are all part of the powerful naming or labeling process. Peter Morville (in Rosenfeld & Morville, 2002, 312) has stated the “there are few things as quietly powerful as labels. We are completely surrounded by them and for the most part their influence is invisible. They are only seen by the people they hurt.” Bade (2002, 11) has carefully documented the extent and harm in loss of access and misinformation done by inaccurate labeling in classification, subject analysis, and authority files in library catalogs. Bade blames this on catalogers’ lack of linguistic and subject knowledge and on hiring practices that force catalogers to “work in many languages, many formats, and in every subject anyone ever thought of.” As a solution to the problem, Bade suggest that the number and responsibilities of cataloging positions “realistically reflect the needs of the collection in terms of subjects, languages, and quantity of materials to be cataloged,” and that catalogers should be encouraged to “supplement their educational deficiencies” through continuing education. He also encourages catalogers to seek assistance from bibliographers, faculty, and other librarians with subject and language expertise when needed. Berman (1971, 2000), Olson (1999, 2000, 2001), and Olson and Schlegl (2001)

have written extensively on the ethics of using subject headings and classification schemes based on literary warrant and the “authority of the public” (Olson 2000, 56), a majority view which results in a lopsided Western, Christian, white, heterosexual male presumption. Olson maintains that this “fundamental presumption on which our practice rests disproportionately affects access to information outside of the cultural mainstream and about groups marginalized in our society” (2001, 640). Because LC-based records are increasingly being used across the globe, mistakes and biases in cataloging records have great potential for harm. OCLC (2004) reported that 50,000 libraries in 86 countries use World Cat’s more than 54 million records. Olson (2000) lists among the users of Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) not only primarily English-speaking countries, but also countries that use English as a common language, countries that use English for its “practical external value,” and countries that use translations. David Wilk (2001) has documented language, cultural, religious, and political problems associated with translating LCSH into Hebrew. Dick and Burger (1998, 197) have explored the morality of subject access in South African libraries that use tools that “reflect standards and the world views of a small group of the profession’s leaders in the United States.” Beghtol (2002) and Buchanan (1999, 196) have explored the ethical considerations of what Buchanan calls “the often insidious forms of domination embedded in cataloging and classification practices.” Olson (1999, 66) has concluded that “classifications are being used increasingly across cultures, so if there is a systemic basis for bias we have an ethical responsibility to recognize it.”

Authority control of name headings also has an ethical dimension. The purpose of name authority control is to choose one preferred form of an author’s name in order to

gather together all of the resources by the same author. Catalogers have an ethical responsibility to the user to keep authority files accurate and up to date. Careless or poorly managed authority control can force users to search all possible forms of an author's name in order to retrieve all relevant documents. If all forms are not known by the user, information is lost. If more than one author in the catalog has the same name, users are forced to guess which one they are looking for.

Catalogers also have an ethical responsibility to authors to accurately reflect their intellectual efforts and to “preserve cultural values and specificity” (Buchanan 1999, 199). Author's names that use non-Roman characters have traditionally been Romanized in the Library of Congress Authorities (LCA). In addition, following the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules, 2nd edition (AACR2R), names have been standardized in a Western culture-specific way. Olson notes, “we impose some of our own structure for names onto names from other cultures.” She gives the example of AACR2R rule 22.4B2: “If the first element is a surname, follow it by a comma.” She calls this “culturally inappropriate” because “the comma indicates an inverted form which does not apply to East Asian names” (1998, 212-213). Using Unicode and the Virtual International Authority File, it is now possible to provide access points for authors in their national language character set and be sensitive to cultural name forms. Susan R. Morris (in Library of Congress 2003b, 214) reports that, “this will preserve the cultural, national and regional perspectives of individual users worldwide and will also present the authority information consistently and efficiently.” Olson (2002) also gives the example of the LCA automatically capitalizing names of authors who do not want their names capitalized (such as bell hooks), thus taking away the author's “voice” or self-expression.

Catalogers also share records through cooperative and copy-cataloging. Catalogers always have an ethical responsibility to do accurate, full-level cataloging. Sheila Intner (1993, 5) has questioned the ethics of “doing minimal level cataloging for some materials knowing access to them will be impaired or incomplete,” and Luft (1996, 19), writing of rare book cataloging, maintains that “shortcut cataloging almost always constitutes a disservice to the library user, especially the user of rare books, and thus makes the reference librarian’s task more difficult.” As catalogers contribute records to and copy records from OCLC they have ethical obligations to other catalogers, reference librarians, local library clientele, and global library users--that is, society. Michael Gorman (2002, 2) notes that the original intent of cooperative cataloging was “from each library according to its means, to each according to its needs” and that “even the largest library benefits from the contributions of the smallest and the flow of cataloging copy is dependent on all contributors living up to the implicit agreements that are the basis of all library cooperation.” This “implicit agreement” is the ethical responsibility to contribute accurate and complete records that comply with all bibliographic standards. Unfortunately, this bibliographic utopia has not materialized, and Bade has documented a variety of encoding, access point, subject heading, and typographical errors introduced into the common database. According to Bade, “the initial vision was for a shared database, built from the cooperative labors of thousands of competent well-educated intellectuals and librarians with impressive special abilities and subject expertise among them,” but unfortunately “the number of librarians with the needed languages and subjects has diminished sharply as libraries have chosen to save money by relying on cheap cataloging” (2002, 23-24). Worse, copy-catalogers often copy the mistakes,

verbatim, into local catalogs. Beall and Kafadar (2004), in a study of typographical errors in OCLC WorldCat, found that only 35.8 percent of errors were corrected when brought into local databases. Heidi Hoerman (2002, 34) admits that a shortage of trained catalogers has led to the work “in many cases being done by anyone, and that anyone has very little training. We then take the cataloging done by this untrained person and ‘share’ it, unexamined, into our catalogs.” She adds that this is, in effect, outsourcing our ethical responsibility for the cataloging. Robert Hauptmann (2002) and Sheila Intner (1993, 5) also question the ethics of allowing “copy catalogers without the requisite knowledge and training to create and input bibliographic data into national networks.” Intner believes that catalogers “should lobby hard for adequate pre-job education for copy catalogers as well as in-service training and staff development opportunities” (1993, 8).

Code of Ethics

Buchanan (2004), in considering a code of ethics and what it should include, identifies six obligations owed by a professional: obligations to society, employer, clients, colleagues and other professional organizations, the profession as a whole, and individuals. Tavani (2004, 93) maintains that professional codes “are often designed to motivate members of an association to behave in certain ways; they inspire, guide, educate, and discipline the members.” Gotterbarn agrees that codes of ethics are “aspirational, because they often serve as mission statements for the profession and can thus provide vision and objectives” (in Tavani, 95). Giving professionals a goal is important since “this self-image breeds social responsibility, which, in turn, demands self-imposed ethical understanding and accountability” (Koehler & Pemberton 2000, 30).

Intner (1993) wrote briefly on the very practical aspects of cataloging ethics, Bierbaum (1994) compiled a list of elements that a code should include, Berman (2000) wrote a short cataloging “credo or mission” statement, and the ALA (2002, 48) includes a one-paragraph statement on the “power of subject headings in providing access and index points” in the Intellectual Freedom Manual. Though a code of ethics should be aspirational and broad enough to cover any ethical dilemma faced by catalogers, it also should discuss specific conduct and actions in order to serve as a useful guide in actual situations. As Gotterbarn, Miller, and Rogerson (in Tavani 2004, 97) note, “without the aspirations, the details can become legalistic and tedious, without the details, the aspirations can become high sounding but empty; together, the aspirations and the details form a cohesive code.” In view of these goals and requirements, the following code is offered as a beginning step towards a code of ethics for cataloging.

Cataloging Code of Ethics

Catalogers are information experts, who possess special knowledge and skill, with the potential by our actions to help or harm an increasingly global clientele. Catalogers recognize and accept the privilege and responsibility that is ours as gatekeepers of information and architects of the information infrastructure to provide fair and equitable access to relevant, appropriate, accurate, and uncensored information in a timely manner and free of personal or cultural bias. We recognize our responsibility in these areas to society; the institutions we serve; our global, national, and local clientele; other librarians and information specialists in our home institutions and around the world; the profession of cataloging; and individuals as human beings having and deserving rights.

- I. We organize, add value to, and provide and maintain fair, equitable, and uncensored access to information for all local, national, and global library users, putting the information needs of our clients and the human right to freedom of information before our own needs and convenience.
- II. To ensure that users find the information they need, catalogers gather and organize information and advise users in their choice of information by providing comprehensive, accurate encoding and access points; knowledgeable application and addition of subject headings and classification schemes; and accurate and complete description and notes.
- III. We are vigilant in ensuring that we do not purposely or inadvertently “censor” or deny access to information by allowing cataloging backlogs or through inaccuracy, misuse, or nonuse of encoding, subject headings, classification schemes, and authority control.
- IV. We are honest and truthful in the representation of resources in regards to its subject area, the identity of those responsible for the intellectual content, and its accurate description.
- V. We keep authority files up to date, accurately reflecting the intellectual efforts of authors. We avoid cultural bias and preserve cultural specificity in name headings.
- VI. We contribute to the creation, development, reform, and fair, unbiased application of cataloging rules, standards, classifications, and information storage and retrieval systems. We avoid and work to reform cultural biases in

standards for subject headings, classification schemes, and name authority control.

- VII. We provide accurate, full-level records to the shared databases, following the highest standards and rules for encoding, subject analysis, description, and classification.
- VIII. We are careful not to contribute to the misuse or distortion of information through inaccurate, careless, or minimal cataloging and resist all internal and external pressures to do so. We report and correct errors in the shared cooperative databases.
- IX. We do not blindly contribute original cataloging for resources for which we have no language or subject knowledge, but instead seek assistance. We carefully review copy-cataloging for errors before adding them to the local database.
- X. We commit ourselves to lifelong continuing education for the sake of the profession, our employers and clients, and the society we serve. We provide and seek to promote pre-job and on-the-job training and staff development opportunities for catalogers in languages, subject expertise, special formats and technical skills, and we work for required, comprehensive cataloging education in library schools.

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