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## AFTER THE CODE

### Actions to put a code of ethics into real practice

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▪ De ethische code moet enkel gezien worden als een eerste stap in de Ethica van een professionele organisatie. Het zet het kader voor de ethische beslissingen. Maar de code alleen kan de ethische dilemma's niet oplossen, noch kan het aan professionelen gegeven worden zonder voorafgaande duiding betreffende haar filosofie en gebruik. Verdere actie brengt met zich mee het beschikbaar stellen en bruikbaar maken voor de leden. Vier hoofdacties (met hun voors en tegens) worden voorgesteld in dit artikel: het aanmaken van richtlijnen voor het gebruik en de interpretatie van de code, het instellen van een expertgroep om de leden te adviseren, het vaststellen van antwoordregels op onethisch gedrag en het promoten van de code. Het streefdoel is om een geheel ethisch corpus uit te bouwen voor de professionele organisatie klaar om antwoord te bieden op de ethische dilemma's die het beroep en de individuen onder ogen krijgen.

▪ Le code de déontologie ne peut être perçu que comme la première étape des démarches éthiques d'une association professionnelle. Il définit le cadre des décisions éthiques, mais il ne permet pas, à lui seul, de résoudre les dilemmes éthiques, et ne peut pas être donné aux praticiens sans précautions concernant son esprit et son utilisation. Il doit aussi être mis à disposition des membres et être fonctionnel. Quatre actions principales (avec leurs avantages et inconvénients) sont proposées dans cet article : la création de lignes directrices pour l'utilisation et l'interprétation du code, l'établissement d'un groupe d'experts chargé de conseiller les membres, l'élaboration de réponse aux comportements non éthiques et la promotion du code. L'objectif est de constituer les fondements de la déontologie de l'association professionnelle, prêts à l'emploi pour résoudre les dilemmes éthiques qui se posent à la profession et aux praticiens.

**T**he making of the code of Ethics is a milestone for a profession (and for a professional association). It symbolizes the maturity of self-reflection, and consciousness of one's obligations towards society and towards the profession. But a code alone is not enough to solve all the ethical issues that a professional faces.

A profession cannot settle for a code that merely collects a set of duties and regulations, even if the code is only a purely formal operation, aimed at promoting the image of the profession rather than ensuring good service to customers. If librarianship (like any other profession) wants to be taken into consideration as a professional group, its codes must be more than wishlists, they must be more than a group of aspirations shared by the group<sup>1</sup>. So one of the main objections to codes is the pointlessness or impossibility of putting the code into practice. If the code reflects a set of rules too general and widely accepted, it is useless. And

if malpractice is common in the profession, the code itself won't be able to correct it.

These objections can be made to most codes, even to those with a disciplinary approach. Even so we must consider that codes should be enforceable, and the profession must be able to apply them<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, the making of the code of ethics must be seen as just the end of the first round for a professional association. Once it's done, it's time to use it and make it enforceable.

In order to ensure that the code is useful, four main tasks are proposed:

- Make guidelines to support and explain the code.
- Establish a group of experts to update and interpret the code and the manual, who should also offer ethical guidance for the professionals.

- In the case of a disciplinary code, establish the set of rules to judge unethical behavior and its consequences.
- Promote the code as behavioral guidelines of the profession.

## Guidelines

In professional ethics, codes are the most prominent feature, as the evidence of moral discourse of the profession. But codes are not sufficient to understand and study the professional ethics<sup>3</sup>. The code should be viewed only as a part of a broader system designed to promote professional ethics<sup>4</sup>.

It is increasingly common that ethical codes are short and establish only general principles. These codes neither describe specific cases nor do they define processes for the resolution of ethical dilemmas. In this way the texts are more stable and more easily accepted by the profession, although, it is necessary to have documents to aid their interpretation.

In fact, many researchers consider that ethical codes are insufficient to ensure ethical behavior. Codes are usually limited to general issues which do not offer details about how to act in specific situations. In response, one can choose to create a code of conduct or guidelines. Thus, while ethical codes devoted to general issues are the responsibility of professional associations as a whole; a separate and identifiable group is entrusted with the development and maintenance of these guidelines. They would explain more in detail how to act when faced with specific problems. They should be based on real cases, and offer clear solutions to typical issues that can be used as examples.

These guidelines may be an addition to ethical codes<sup>5</sup>, and would allow the defining of practices in terms of quality<sup>6</sup> so as to make a code usable by clarifying the application of ethical concepts in daily practice. They would set out "how to be a professional"<sup>7</sup>, by providing the necessary information and tools to help interpret the code<sup>8</sup>. The guidelines explain how to achieve the statement made in the code.

The aim must be to place these guidelines on the desk of every librarian, next to the Universal Decimal Classification, the International Standard Bibliographic Description and MARC21.

Thus, the code and the guidelines would have multiple uses: a declaration of principles of the profession, a statement towards society, a quality control for organizations, a white paper for users, etc.

## Group of experts: judging unethical behavior

Professional associations, as a representative body of members of a profession, have ethical responsibilities towards their members. Particularly evident is their role in the development and maintenance of the code of ethics and in disciplinary control. To ensure criteria continuity (beyond the organization's governing board), it is preferable that these tasks are assigned to a specialized committee on ethics.

After making the code and guidelines, it is necessary to create and consolidate a committee to ensure real and effective implementation. This committee would evaluate the code violations, and establish the relevant countermeasures to unethical behavior. This last factor is even more necessary with disciplinary codes, but *"is not the most effective means of ensuring ethical behavior"*<sup>9</sup>. Also, this committee would be in charge of revising and updating the guidelines, and offering guidance on the interpretation of the code. It could also act as an intermediary in conflicts, supporting association members (and their actions) against outside interferences.

One of the positive aspects of these committees is that they maintain a debate on ethical behavior, and update the ethical criteria of the organization. But as is the case with the codes, their real effectiveness is related to the level of obligation that these statements imply.

In particular, the ability to expel a member of the profession because of unethical performance is unrealistic as it is not necessary to belong to an association or professional body in order to practice. The expulsion from the association does not imply the exclusion of employment opportunities. The problem with this situation with regard to the codes and ethics committees is that without a way to enforce their compliance professional associations have no real power, and cannot publish a list of offenders or suggest that someone is disciplined or fired<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, the actual scope does not

extend beyond the association itself and the actions that the association and its members want to take.

In conclusion, the possibility of setting up disciplinary procedures for unethical behavior is very limited. Therefore, the committee's task will be focused on detecting this sort of behaviors (act before the damage is done), and guiding the resolution of ethical dilemmas. It is, therefore, a task that helps members of the association in ethically questionable situations. The committee offers procedures and decisions based on professional principles.

## Promotion

Members need to be aware of the code and the guidelines, if they are to make use of them. They should know of their existence, their tools, their practices, and their basic philosophy. To achieve this end, the association in charge of the code and the experts committee will have to take action to publicize and promote the code. They will have to inform members of the ethical tools at their disposal and above all the importance of the code to their work.

At this point, the justification and explanation of the code to members is vital for acceptance. Members must see the code as its own discourse, as a set of mandatory rules relevant to their work. If professionals see the code as something foreign, or as part of the "high politics" of the association, the code is useless. The code must be seen as being representative of the whole profession, as a document available to all professionals.

This promotion can be proposed in various ways according to the needs and the profile of the association and its members, e.g., by offering courses that explain the code; by the dissemination of case studies that can serve as reference (protecting the privacy of those involved); by encouraging practitioners to use the code and the committee in their daily work, etc.

It is also important to offer general ethics training, as it is usually absent in training in librarianship. Training in ethics should not be self-training, but shared by schools of librarianship and professional associations, and must be present in the continuing education that professionals should receive.

The difficulty of teaching ethics, and any standard of behavior, lies in the ease of falling into indoctrination, and not maintaining objectivity. Hence, the goal of this training must not be ethical indoctrination, but to provide members with the skills necessary to act when faced with ethical dilemmas. The aim is to present an ethical vision of library work and to make librarians aware of it.

But this promotion of professional ethics has also a place beyond the profession. If society is aware of the ethical principles that govern the profession, the profession grows in esteem; it is an indication of its quality and autonomy. These two values (quality and autonomy) are vital for a service that must be characterized by independence and freedom.

Thus, professionals must make clear to its users and to the general public that, while they are guided by rules, they are not guided by external agents<sup>11</sup>. When dealing with delicate subjects, a library can confront interference by lobbies, political groups or individuals with the objective of banning books, newspapers or restraining policies. Professionals should publicize the code as a guide to services and as a guarantee of library work that users can rely on. Libraries should make clear that they are ruled only by professional criteria, and the code of ethics is the conceptual frame of these criteria.

## Conclusion

For a profession, the work on ethics doesn't end with the code. The ethical code is not enough, it's only the main tool, but there is plenty of work that must be done afterwards.

If a profession wants ethics to be taken seriously and to be part of everyday work, the association responsible for the code must take global action which must include actions inside the association, towards its members and towards society.

This will increase the concern for ethics between the professionals, and it will show the community that the profession acts on the sole basis professional criteria established.

As ethical issues are influenced by society and its changes, the code and its interpretation must be under constant review and analysis. The four actions proposed here (guidelines, group of experts, rules for judging unethical

behavior and promotion), with their pros and cons, are useful to keep the code updated and under revision.

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