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A critical examination of the Librarians Registration Council of Nigeria Code of Ethics in the Light of International best practices in Library and Information Science Professions

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ABSTRACT

This paper took a critical reflection on the Librarian Registration Council of Nigeria Code of Ethics vis-à-vis international standards. The paper explained that since information professionals play an extremely important role in society by linking society with information heritage, it is critical that they carry out this mission in an ethical manner. The paper noted that towards this end many organizations of information professionals led by the International Federation of Library Association and related institutions (IFLA) including the Librarians Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN) have adopted codes of professional ethics. The paper analyzed these IFLA and related codes and the LRCN codes and discovered that there are grounds of commonality and singularly. Based on these discoveries the paper concluded that the LRCN and international codes were crafted to address same issues, but the LRCN is bounded with peculiar realities.

Keywords: Professions, Ethics, IFLA, LRCN

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INTRODUCTION

Professions are described as having characteristics such as mastery of esoteric skills. A profession is a calling, admission to which special training, education and character is required. An individual and collective concern for the common good is often included in this list of professional attributes. A profession is not deemed a profession without a set of basic or fundamental principles or ethics. In other words, all real professions are rooted in an ethical concern for some fundamental good. Ethical considerations are significant to the library and Information Science Professions (LIS) (Singh 2014, Bayles, 1989, Bayles, 1989, Bowie, 2006 as cited by Smith, 2009). There are defined goals, values, principles, attributes, rules, regulations, laws and the likes for a profession. These core values are related and the purpose is to give a standard direction towards the inculcation and attainment of the ideals of the profession. For this unique reasons, it is generally known that come what may medical doctors are sworn to saving lives, lawyers are sworn to defending a client. The client-customer relationship is paramount in today's business world in the hospitality, banking and such industry customers they believe are King. LIS professionals are sworn to providing needed information to the general public as much and as timely as possible without recourse to any form of prejudice or bias. LIS professionals have a special obligation to support and promote the acquisition

and equitable dissemination of quality information and ideas to present and future generations.

In Book's review of Buchanan and Henderson (2009)'s "Case Studies in LIS Ethics" the author avers that "ethics in LIS is significant to the extent of the ever-increasing global responsibilities information professionals face. It allows individuals and organizations the opportunity to explore the personal, professional, local and global realms involved in LIS work and brings about understanding of a respect for ethical issues". LIS professionals are expected to follow ethical standards typically prescribed by a recognized body whether local, (Librarians Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN), American Library Association (ALA) etc or international (International Federation of Library Association and Institutions (IFLA), Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) etc). Such standards are usually codified in documents known as "Codes of Ethics". It is generally known that these codes offer a basis for making decisions and applying solutions to ethical problems and dilemmas in the profession. Buchanan and Henderson (2009) insist that there still exist a host of traditional and emerging ethical problems, conundrums and sometimes insoluble dilemmas, including protection of physical and intellectual property, conflict of interest, censorship, over bearing peers, personnel and administrators who sometimes become bullies anomalous rules and agreements that delimit access, research misconduct, judicious collection development etc. The scholars stressed that technologies, laws, policies and practices have changed dramatically with sometimes dire, sometimes positive consequences for the field of LIS. They

emphasized that many of these core principles remain intact and continue to be relevant, but many additional changes including legal, technological, social, political and cultural face the field in significant flux. As such LIS professionals work in increasingly complex matrix of such changes.

To this extent, it is generally believed that professions need codes of ethics to thrive. These codes determine the limits of acceptable conduct and point out actions regarded as right and wrong in the occupation (Odero, 2012). According to Finks (1991) as cited by Vaagan (2002) such a code provide members with not only a sense of identity but also with a basis for consistent ethical behaviour, thus serving as a frame of reference for decision making which is impersonal and objective. Matters related to ethical issues have long been a concern for librarians”. “Its relevance is gaining more significance. The information industry presently is confronted with issues of copyright, privacy, freedom of expression, equal rights, digital divide and a host of other ethical concerns characteristic of a digital environment” (Kochler and Pamberton, 1999). “A profession maintains society’s support through a good reputation built on reliability, integrity and competency among its members. Professional codes of ethics go a long way in shielding members from malpractices” (Odero, 2002). Such codes of professional ethics provide information professionals, with guiding principles. It is towards this end that the LIS professional have adopted codes of professional ethics.

It is evident from authors perspectives that there is a common ground for the values and principles stated in the codes of ethics

document in the LIS profession worldwide. But “a comparative analysis of code of ethics for librarians shows disparities in approach” (Kochler and Pemberton, 2002; Vaaghan, 2002, Shachaf, 2005 as cited by Odero, 2012). Those that provide broad general clauses and those that address specific activities individually” (Blair, 2005 as cited by Odero, 2012). Shanchaf (2005) as cited by Smith (2009) examined librarians 13 codes of Ethics from twenty-eight countries and compared the frequency with which particular principles appear, including professional development (89%), integrity (89%), confidentiality and privacy (85%), free and equal access to information (82%), conflict of interest and personal gain (71%), responsibilities toward profession (67%), responsibilities toward colleagues (64%), censorship (64%), collection development (53%), competency (50%). Sturges (2009) maintain that:

The code in virtually every other case in aspirational Inspirational and a basis for ethical reflection. In a code, the profession tells its members what they should consider when faced with an ethical dilemma, whilst demonstrating to a wider audience that the profession does not leave its members devoid of good guidance. As short statements of principle, codes can seldom provide everything that is needed to cope with the moral ambiguities that are the stuff of professional life... a brief look at a sample will indicate that there is a commonality as well as singularity

Buchanan and Henderson (2009) sums it up thus “ethics is not a one-size-fits-all concept, but a multifaceted one. Sometimes ethics encompasses a large universe in which general principles must not be compromised, at other times, ethics operates in a

micro-climate where it is a matter of seeing on what level we can achieve fairness and consistency”. This leads to such pertinent questions as what actually is ethics? What makes an information professional? How can we live our professional values in this disruptive times? How does the code of ethics in Nigeria compare with or differ from international standards?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

From the above discussion, we can only begin to conjecture the meaning of ethics. But to help our understanding it is imperative to properly situate the concept. Gert (2004) as cited by Smith (2009) opines that “the term ethics has several meanings. The most widespread and primary meaning of ethics is common morality, a set of everyday ground-rules for living”. Smith (2009) is of the view that “these ground-rules are understood to apply to everyone, everywhere at all times. Ethics refers to the ethical requirements over and above those of common morality, applying specifically to professionals in the conduct of their professions”. Singh (2014) is of the notion that “professional ethics is the science of right conduct and character. Ethical issues are based on certain moral values which are considered to be good and worthwhile for the well-being of the society in general”. The author explained that ethnics of librarianship an essential element of library profession, denotes the conduct and behaviour of those who adopt the profession. A library professional owes certain obligations to the library’s public and its books, the library professional organizations and to himself. The exalted profession of librarianship being a

learned profession has public service as its ideal. To maintain this high ideal, a librarian should cultivate professional habits.

Buchanan and Henderson (2009) has a broader perspective to the concept of ethics. The scholars concur that to understand the complexities of LIS professional ethics it is important to go to the foundation of ethics in general. According to them ethics is related to morals, moral systems, and human conduct. As a branch of philosophy, it systematically examines and studies such concept as “right” and “wrong”. Ethics deals with what we should and should not do, what acts are “good” and “evil”. It examines such concepts and constructs as responsibility and rights. As a basis for ethics, morality is a set or system of rules, principles, or values (cultural, professional, religious etc) that prescribe behaviour and how we evaluate those behaviours. Buchanan (2004) cited in Buchanan and Henderson (2009) posits that ethics is notably distinct from law, religion and policy. Law provides a structured context to which we look for reasonable decisions, the law does not necessarily tell us what is inherently good or bad. It prescribes behaviour not for the purpose of morality but for satisfying a societal requirement or rule, rules are dictated by authority, not necessarily morality.

Buchanan and Henderson (2009) further considered deep ethical issues in practice and offer that ethics is divided into such areas as descriptive, normative, applied and meta-ethics. The authors claim that theories of ethical thinking include utility-based (utilitarianism which is a general philosophy holding that we should act in the way that maximizes happiness for the greatest number of people), duty-based (deontological, which stresses

adherence to a set of principles as opposed to a strict consideration of consequences and is typically aligned with Immanuel Kant), justice-based (most recently associated with the theories of justice and rights of John Rawls), and character-based (associated with Aristotle models). Hauptman (2002) clarifies that “more specifically, information ethics concerns itself with the production, storage, retrieval, security and application of information within ethical context”. Capuro (2006) more broadly points to the fact that information ethics explores and evaluates some fundamental issues including the development of moral values in the information field (Hauptman 2002, Capuro, 2006 as cited by Buchanan and Henderson, 2009).

These perspectives have thrown more light on understanding the concept of ethics, more so as it relates to the LIS profession. The general notion is that ethics includes moral standards ideals or behaviour prescribed in the codes. The ideals represent core values or principles which should be inculcated and exhibited by the professional. These ideals are expected to model the character and disposition of the professional in the discharge of his duty at all times. Ethics is therefore sacrosanct. From the point of view of the authors ethics is meant for the common good of society. It then means that it is meant not only to appeal to individual conscience but also to guard against malpractice. Therefore it is understood that ethics especially in LIS professions prescribes responsibilities to the individual, the information resources and the public.

INTERNATIONAL CODES OF ETHICS

There has been a lot of international activities undertaken in the recent past particularly under the patronage of the United Nations (UN) and specifically the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1997)'s order to develop a code of ethics for the information society. Since the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS, 2003/2005) the urgency for such code has become manifest. Subsequently several regional conferences and declarations in Africa, Asia-pacific, Latin America and Europe have taken place in line with the plan of action of the WSIS on a global information ethics. In all these emphasis is on respect for human dignity, information based rights, freedom of expression, freedom of access to information, global security, human security, privacy, transparency and related topics (Capuro and Britz, 2010). It should be noted that librarians all over the world are well aware of their profession's ethical implications. More than 60 countries library associations including the LRCN have developed and approved a national code of ethics for librarians. IFLA has adopted these codes on an international level. The IFLA code of Ethics for librarians and other information workers came into existence in August, 2012. Many national and international organizations across world have concurred with and endorsed the IFLA document. They include the International Centre for Information Ethics (ICIE), the Information Ethics Special Interest group, the American Library Association (ALA), the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) etc.

According to the IFLA document the function of codes of ethics can be described as encouraging reflection on principles on which librarians and other information workers can form policies and handle dilemmas, improving professional self-awareness, providing transparency to users and society in general. IFLA makes it abundantly clear that it has offered this code in belief that librarianship is in its very essence, an ethical activity embodying a value-rich approach to professional work with information. The need to share ideas and information has grown more important with the increasing complexity of society in recent centuries and this provides a rationale for libraries and the practice of librarianship. IFLA makes it explicit that, the role of information institutions and professionals, including libraries and librarians, in modern society is to support the optimization of the recording and representation of information and to provide access to it. Information service in the interests of social, cultural and economic well-being is at the heart of librarianship and therefore librarians have social responsibility (IFLA, 2012). Deriving from this document is the summary of the ethics presented hereunder: therefore librarians and other information workers are to uphold:

1. Access to information: to this end the core mission of librarians and other information workers is to ensure access to information for all personal and societal development.
2. Responsibilities towards individuals and society: provision of equitable services, promote social inclusion and eradicate discrimination.

3. Privacy, secrecy and transparency: librarians and other information workers respect personal privacy and the protection of personal data, necessarily shared between individuals and institutions. They are enjoined to deal with corruption and other vices in the public interest.
4. Support for Open Access and Intellectual Property. Librarians and other information workers are to ensure that both users' rights and creators' right are respected. They seek appropriate and necessary limitations and exceptions for libraries and in particular, seek to limit the expansion of copyright terms.
5. Neutrality, personal integrity and professional skills regarding collection access and service. They seek to acquire balanced collections, maintain unbiased stance regarding service and seek the highest standards of professional excellence.
6. Colleague and employer/employee relationship, librarians and other information workers seek to treat each other with fairness and respect. They strive to earn reputation and status based on their professionalism and ethical behaviour.

At this juncture in world history the above statement by IFLA is instructive about the interest of LIS professionals the world over to serve humanity assiduously with fairness and justice irrespective of race, creed or colour. It goes further to reveal that the profession is leaving no stone unturned to ensure that society gets the best of them. By this the LIS profession recognizes its extremely important position in society, that it is critical to carry

out its mission in an ethical manner and as such is prepared to stire humanity to the pinnacle of their advancement. It is clear that the belief in the human necessity of sharing information and ideas without bias implies the recognition of information rights as encapsulated in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR, 1948). This IFLA (2012), ALISE (2007) and related bodies naturally agree and linked to the idea of human rights as vividly and consistently expressed in the United Nations. This declaration according to IFLA “requires US all to recognize and acknowledge the humanity of others and to respect their right” that is freedom of opinion expression and access to information for all human beings. To this extent Article 19 of the UNDHR, (1948) expressly sets out a right to “seek, receive and impart information and ideas in any media and regardless of frontiers”. This provides a clear rationale for libraries and the practice of modern and progressive librarianship.

ALISE (2007) posit that “as suggested by universal core values promoted by the IFLA and other professional organizations and world bodies it is our responsibility to participate critically in the global discourse of information ethic, as it pertains to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”.

THE LIBRARIANS REGISTRATION COUNCIL OF NIGERIA CODES OF ETHICS

In Nigeria professional librarian ethics are codified in the Librarians Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN)’s code of others. In the preamble to the document continuing these codes of professional conduct for librarians in Nigeria as articulated by the

LRCN, it is stated inter-alia “that librarians and information scientists are imbued to serve people through the provision of access to quality information resources in either print or electronic formats through which people’s standard of living are actualized, education sustained, sound decisions are made and executed, freedom of expression is enhanced and information resources are preserved for posterity”. The foregoing statement provides the rationale for library and information service in Nigeria. The LRCN invoked the UNDHR 1948, are indication that it concurs with IFLA’s codes of ethics.

The LRCN document is divided into three chapters. Chapter one entails in the order in which they appear in the document: preamble, the LRCN Act 12, 1995 which created the council, vision and mission statement, objectives of the code of conduct and librarians code of conduct. This chapter spelt out the purpose of the code and sought adherence from librarians in Nigeria. It also spelt out what constitute misconduct (included here are infamous conduct, conviction by a unit, indiscipline etc). This chapter also invoked LRCN Act in section 16, subsection 3 and 2 and section 17 that deal with such matters as librarians/investigating panel, disciplinary committee and penalties for unprofessional conduct respectively. Chapter two spelt out the principles of professionalization of librarianship in Nigeria. The chapter describes whop is a librarian in Nigeria, legal requirements in line with LRCN Act, section 9, it also stated the requirements to include requisite training, licensing, mandatory continuing professional development, amongst others. The chapter also stated obligations of librarians (professional standards, commitment, efficiency ad

effectiveness) and arbitration, rights and privileges of librarians, professional conduct and other relevant laws including IFLA code of ethics (2011); the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS, 2006); organization of African unity (OAU), African Charter on Human and People's Rights, 1981, 2002, African Platform on Access to Information 2011, Nigerian Copyright Law, Act 42 1999. Chapter three spelt out diverse issues relating to relationships emanating from service provision. This include relationship with the user, with the profession, with colleagues, with publishers, library suppliers and software vendors, relationship towards documents and information, with society, general instructions and rules guiding interpretation and review of the code.

ANALYSIS

IFLA in statements, manifestos, policy and technical documents too numerous to list has expanded the understanding of work with information. Implicit in this work is the idea of information rights and their significance for the profession and society generally. The emphasis on information rights in turn obliges librarians and other information workers to develop a principled critique of relevant law and to be prepared to advise and, if appropriate advocate the improvement of both the substance and administration of laws (IFLA, 2012). ALISE (2007) adds that ethical conflicts and responsibilities facing LIS professionals around the world are necessary for examination and can only be understood in the light of their ethical contexts. Related to this, there is a need to consider Capurro and Britz (2010) insightful statement that "code of ethics, practice... have pros and cons. They can inspire ethical

conduct in professionals but they can give them also a sense of complacency". According to Singh (2014) code of ethics focuses on five points. Ethics towards users: to perpetuate the good relationship between the library and its users; ethics towards the profession: to ensure responsibility for the development of the profession and to promote excellence amongst library professionals; ethics towards colleagues: to strengthen the cooperation among library professionals and to increase good relationships with colleagues and other members of the profession; ethics towards the organization: to uphold and give due respect to the library as an integral part of the organization or institution; ethics towards society to affirm the library status and roles in providing information for advancement of society. A close examination of ethics by IFLA and related institutions, including LRCN's encapsulate all these qualities. But there are grounds of communality and singularity.

Given that the LRCN is an affiliate of IFLA and the fact that the code of ethics as prescribed by it (LRCN) is listed by same body (IFLA) which is the umbrella body for its professionals. The world over, and that the code highlights the state of ethical reflection in the profession. The LRCN code could be said to be prima facie similar with regard to the values and principles stated in the IFLA and other international bodies codes. A thorough analysis of the LRCN code reveals that the contents entail similar patterns.

It is evident that there is a common ground for the values and principles stated in the IFLA and LRCN documents. This implicates a common ground for dealing with what is primarily a global issue.

The LRCN reflected the purpose for which the code is designed which in line with universal codes is the development of ethical commitments of professionals without compromising standards meant to ensure common morality in the profession. The LRCN was elaborate in doing this. It described desired professional ideals and dispositions such as integrity, responsibilities and actions guiding ethical principles. Similarly, one of the points of departure from others is the addition of rules, regulations and laws eliciting compliance from professionals. Through the others referred to here also rest on the premise of legal and other statutory frameworks. These elaborations provide for ready solutions to specific ethical challenges. This has spurred a prudent ethical discourse. There is no use for a code that cannot drive a profession and its professionals to the very logic and fulcrum of its application. To this extent the LRCN has adopted an integrated approach combining rules, regulations and laws with prescriptions on conduct in a manner that buttresses the ethical expectations.

In order to elicit the development of ethical commitments to the profession intoto, the LRCN spelt out what constitutes misconduct and infected it into appropriate sections especially in chapter three. Related to this, the LRCN took due cognizance of the issue of corruption. It must have recognized that corruption has become endemic and has eaten deep into the fabric of the nation. As a learned profession, the council must have taught that information professionals should be able to lead by example by using their level of enlightenment or exposure to tackle corruption and sanitize the nation. By so doing the LRCN is driving the profession and professionals towards the fundamental good of all in

line with universal practice. The LRCN has also succeeded in linking Nigeria's interest to the local environment thus thinking globally and acting locally.

CONCLUSION

Code of ethics is intended to elicit the highest standard of professional conduct from LIS professionals. These codes locate librarianship's identity in its historical roots (as a bridge between society and information heritage) and professional philosophy, and motivate them towards excellence. The aim of these codes is to uphold the library profession's the development of the profession in Nigeria. With these codes, librarians in Nigeria are to express their readiness to guarantee to respect the rights of information seekers especially as the country is multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-cultural society. A close examination of the LRCN codes vis-à-vis the international codes reveals that they are crafted to address same issues that can only be excited with variations. But the LRCN's is bounded with peculiar realities. These grounds of communality and singularity are inevitable afterall considering the diversity of the world.

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