

## Report on Information Ethics Town Hall Meeting July 28, 2008

Sixteen Chapter members attended the Information Ethics Town Hall meeting on Monday, July 28. Before introducing the evening's speaker, Wynne Dobyns, the Chapter's Ethics Ambassador, summarized an explanation of ethics as standards of behavior that tell us how we ought to act in the many situations in which we find ourselves. These are well-based standards of right and wrong that prescribe what we ought to do. They are the rules you follow even when no one is looking, the sum of your guiding values. This requires, of course, that you have consciously thought about and identified most, if not all, of the values by which you live. That may be our first challenge. Acting ethically requires consistency between our ethical standards and our actions. It also requires that we continually strive to ensure that we, and the institutions we serve, live up to standards that are reasonably solidly based on standards of right and wrong and rules derived from those standards.

What do we do, though, when there is pressure from colleagues, our users or our managers to do something we feel may not be right or we think is downright wrong? These situations provide the challenges we face in striving to act ethically. If doing something, or even not doing something, doesn't "feel right" by our own standards, it probably isn't. The only thing one cannot do when aware of an ethics problem is to do nothing. After getting the facts and evaluating options from an ethical perspective, one must intervene or one becomes part of the problem and bears some of the culpability for the consequences.

The evening's speaker, Geoffrey C. Bowker, is the Executive Director, Regis and Dianne McKenna Professor, Center for Science, Technology and Society, Santa Clara University. The Center's mission is to research and promote the use of science and technology for the common good. Geof's main current research interests are in the fields of classification and standardization: in particular asking how these play into the development of scientific cyberinfrastructure. His book, *Memory Practices in the Sciences*, published by MIT Press in 2006, was awarded the prestigious 2006 ASIS&T Award for "Best Information Science Book" of the year, judged to have made the most outstanding contribution in the field of information science.

Geof focused on three main points of discussion: releasing information, massaging the truth and librarians as ethics ambassadors. He began by stating that we often no longer know who knows what information or what they are doing with it, since information is no longer stored in archival boxes and cross-correlated by those who knew something about the subject matter at the time it was stored or by studying it afterwards. Instead, surveillance is being used to gather data that is mined in many ways. There is increasing pressure for primarily public and academic librarians to release information about their users, the users' records and the print and digital material they have used. He referred to the report, "American Library Association (ALA) Announces Preliminary Findings of

Study Measuring Law Enforcement Activity in Libraries," American Library Association, June 20, 2005

<http://www.ala.org/ala/pressreleases2005/june2004abc/lawenforcementstudy.cfm> (Document ID: 159984). Gathering this information is legal but unethical by professional standards. Fighting this kind of information gathering is made easier by the presence of the profession's strong ethical standards.

Geof also explained how marketers trace a user's search path on the Internet and use that information to extrapolate the user's interests so that goods and services can be marketed more efficiently; however, users are not usually aware of this kind of "surveillance." It is not obvious to the majority of users that their search engine and browser histories can be used to create very personal, "eerily intimate portraits" of their interests. These are ethical issues that are not being addressed.

TrackMeNot is a browser extension that works with Firefox to help protect web searchers from surveillance and data-profiling by popular search engines such as Google and Yahoo! It hides a user's actual search trails among several "ghost" queries so that it is much more difficult for third parties to mine search data accurately. (See the explanation of TrackMeNot at <http://mrl.nyu.edu/~dhowe/trackmenot/>.) Although very helpful for the individual who doesn't want his search history to be data-mined, TrackMeNot has been criticized for the frequency with which it sends bursts of fake search queries, using valuable computer time and energy while creating them. He asked what the ethical issues are for both sides of such data mining and its attempted prevention?

There is also the problem of what and how much we know about colleagues' personal lives and interests from the web pages they create and the information they post on such sites as Facebook and MySpace. Employers have begun checking social networking sites for whatever information they can find about potential employees. Are people aware of how much information about themselves they are providing in these sites and the potential ways it can be used against them? Geof suggests that the barriers about what kind and how much personal information one's colleagues and employers might need/want to know are falling, and sharing personal information appears to be becoming regarded as the norm.

Massaging the truth of information posted on the Internet is a huge ethical issue in Geof's opinion. For example, who actually edits Wikipedia entries is an ethical issue about which we and our users should be aware. Companies and public figures have been observed removing critical or controversial statements from their entries and changing the descriptions of their activities or the results of their actions even though the critical or controversial statements were accurate. Government agencies, including the CIA, are also major editors of information in Wikipedia entries. Users need to be aware of this, and we librarians need to work with our organizations to inform users and to keep potential editing by our organizations in perspective. One cannot take factual information down just because one doesn't like it.

Geof also sees huge ethical issues in the destruction of information in corporations by means of shredders and data purges in efforts to prevent its retrieval or to prevent possible embarrassment if it were to be retrieved. Depending on circumstances, destruction of unnecessary data is legal and good maintenance; however, inappropriate destruction of data is illegal and unethical. Are corporations making the appropriate legal and ethical decisions about destroying data?

Geof also believes that there are huge ethical issues about the ranking process used for listing sites retrieved in Google search results. He pointed out that the first several pages of results for the query, "Africa," were those for sites produced by U.S. or European sources; African sources were found several pages in. One needs to be a very sophisticated user to know how to move beyond the built-in biases in Google's search retrieval.

He is also concerned about recent situations in which U.S. corporations such as Cisco and Yahoo! have been taken to task by the media for not standing up to requirements for action from a sovereign government such as China. He said it is very hard for an individual company to take a stand by itself against such a government and suggested the need for an international organization that would define strong ethical standards for doing business globally and would assist companies who are challenged by countries that do not want to accept those ethical standards. There was general discussion about what right one country has to impose its ethics and laws on another country and what is the right thing to do to protect the individual's rights in restrictive societies.

Geof posed the question, what does it take to change the level of discourse in corporations around information and libraries? Filtering prevents many useful sites from being retrieved. This is especially significant when researching topics that may include a proscribed word, such as *breast* cancer. What does it take to educate users about what happens to their information? We cannot assume that they know how data can be mined – finger commands (see the use of "finger command" in UNIX at <http://kb.iu.edu/data/aabr.html>), tracking of sites visited, etc. The expectation of privacy today is less than it was 10 or 15 years ago. Is this good? Organizations that are prevented by law or ethics from sharing data are now hiring third party contractors to mine their data and return it to each other. Geof suggests that we need to develop a software design community that is deeply ethically rooted. He mentioned a graduate student workshop, "Values in Computer Information System Design" that the Center for Science, Technology and Society is presenting on August 16. The workshop's culminating event will be a public conference at which the student teams will present their value-centered design projects to a guest panel. See <http://www.scu.edu/sts/VID> for more information.

In closing, Geof stated that information is the root of the society we are forging today. Building strong ethics for how we use and share information is very important. In

response to a question about what he had learned about the profession in preparing for this presentation, he responded that he has worked with libraries and librarians for several years and that he believes not much has changed over that time with respect to the emphasis placed on serving our users.

Following Geof's presentation, Wynne led a general discussion of ethical issues attendees have encountered in their work. Twelve of the attendees indicated that their organizations have ethics policies; however only one person stated that the company's policy directly applied to the library as well as to other departments. The company is a consulting firm and places great importance on honesty, integrity and ethics in all employees' work; those values also form part of employees' performance reviews. Most, however, indicated that the only aspect of the organization's ethics policy that really applied to the library dealt with vendor relations. One attendee asked whether copyright and ethics go hand-in-hand and wondered if copyright is mainly a legal issue rather than an ethics issue as well.

The discussion about specific ethical situations attendees have encountered in their work was quite lively. The situations discussed included the following:

- assigning two users to a single-user password because the actual amount of use the second user would generate did not justify paying for a separate password.
- staff being told to misrepresent themselves when making phone calls requesting information.
- being provided a separate identity and phone number to use when making phone calls requesting information.
- being told by a senior vice president to massage data numbers rather than providing the actual numbers. The librarian ultimately resigned.
- an engineer requesting a book on ILL with no intention of returning it; he saw it as an inexpensive way to obtain the book. The organization paid the lost book fee, the librarian confronted the engineer and his manager and obtained the book, and it was returned to the lending institution without a refund being requested.
- being asked to use a personal public or academic library card to access fee-based databases for their corporate client. This involves differences between academic and for-profit sectors for definitions of rights in contracts. Also, the context of use makes a difference in terms when negotiating with the service provider. How do you get the content provider, the contract and ethical factors to work together for mutual benefit?
- using a browser's built-in feature to send a copy of a webpage that does not have an "email this page" feature to one or more library users. Is sending a webpage found in the Way Back Machine a different issue?

- employees copying and pasting content from web pages into email messages. The librarian was able to convince them to summarize the content and send a link to it instead.
- sending an internal PDF to a colleague outside the organization.
- collaborating with another organization to gain access to resources that organization has.
- copying ads versus buying ads for personal use.
- obtaining an expensive journal by having an employee subscribe at the individual rate so the library doesn't have to pay the institutional rate, or paying for an individual subscription with the understanding that issues will be donated to the library. Some libraries do not accept personal donations of expensive journals in order to discourage this practice. Routing tables of contents is still an option many libraries use.
- photocopying copyrighted material in a for-profit organization. Academics still make photocopies for educational purposes.
- Why are we feeling guilty about not fully protecting publishers' rights? The academic community reviews articles but the authors receive nothing. What to do when prices are out-of-line?

Resources used to help resolve these issues include discussions with colleagues, postings on discussion lists, professional reading on the issues, and asking what peers and colleagues are doing.

One attendee asked whether we really need an SLA set of ethical guidelines when our companies have their own ethical guidelines and we have our own personal set of ethics. If there were a conflict between SLA's ethics guidelines and her company's, she would follow her company's guidelines. Another suggested in response that perhaps librarians should try to show the company why it might be wrong, using professional ethics standards as an example. If one's professional ethics do not align with the organization's, what does that mean? Could this be situational?

One person commented that what she really liked about ALA's Code of Ethics is that it provides a model around which to make ethical determinations rather than covering specific situations. Public libraries have a shared environment that allows a common view. Do special libraries share enough of a common baseline of behavior? Perhaps some divisions might need to "tweak" any ethics code SLA developed. SLA could provide a suggested model for those who need deeper guidelines; it could augment individual organizations' policies. Companies set their own compass. Can information professionals save the company from being sued for intellectual property violations or help manage

such risk? Is this a role that information professionals want to play? Are they more qualified for this than others in the organization?

What do you do when a company or a colleague asks you to do something unethical? How do you respond or try to educate them? There was a question about whether SLA would be in a position to provide back-up support to their members who find themselves in ethical quagmires, much as ALA does for its members. Someone asked whether SLA was influenced in this initiative by its new relationship with SIIA. Ethical behavior is a three-way process: business conduct, legal & the information resource center together. Is the emphasis on ethics meant to protect/support yourself or the organization? There was a general consensus that a professional code of ethics would give us additional credentials and leverage with the association behind us.

In conclusion, the suggested resources SLA should provide include a Community of Practice, a webpage with real life samples of ethical issues and how they were resolved, an ethics discussion list, an FAQ with changing content on an SLA ethics webpage. The general consensus was that ethics should not be added to the professional competencies.

Members who were not able to attend this meeting are invited to submit their answers to the ethics discussion questions that were posted to the Chapter discussion list on July 30.

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