

A Survey of Information Ethics Evolution at the University of Ibadan

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Abstract

This article describes the evolution of information ethics among information professionals at the University of Ibadan. It also raises more awareness about the topic and encourages attention to, reflection on, and action about ethical issues in the information professions. To this end, the level of awareness, prospects, and challenges of information ethics education at the University of Ibadan was investigated. This study was carried out using only the qualitative method through a survey. The University of Ibadan was used as a case study. Stakeholders in all information disciplines, as well as ethics-related departments, were purposively selected and interviewed for the study. The investigation shows clearly the evidence of unawareness and/or unpreparedness status of some lecturers and other stakeholders in the information profession about the subject. But the viability of integrating information ethics as part of the training of information professionals is undeniable. In order to deal effectively with the ethical issues, information professionals must have a good working knowledge of information ethics. Codes of professional ethics can help to provide such knowledge, but they are not sufficient. Courses on information ethics must be part of the education of information professionals. Such courses should provide information professionals with an understanding of ethical theories and how they apply to concrete practical cases. Such courses should also make explicit the connection between information ethics and the mission of the information professional.

Keywords: *Information ethics, Ethics education; University of Ibadan; Applied ethics; Ethics*

Introduction

In our increasingly evolving, multicultural, and information-intensive society, many critical issues related to information access and use are misunderstood, inadequately considered, or even ignored. These issues may involve balancing individual and societal needs (such as in protecting both an individual's privacy and the public's right to know); resolving conflicting views about library collection policies between librarians and parents of schoolchildren;

resolving disagreements between individual archivists and retention policies concerning electronic records; understanding one's own view of what is ethical; or many other topics. In a growing number of instances, decisions concerning information access and use are placing information professionals in sensitive, and sometimes, vulnerable positions. This makes it imperative for individuals seeking to become professional librarians or archivists, or seeking to work in other types of cultural heritage institutions or information-related organizations to first learn how to develop and hone their own individual sense of ethics, live an ethical life, and be educated about ethical issues in their professional lives. In addition, the information professionals must learn how-and be ready-to make ethical decisions and take ethical actions (Adebayo and Mabawonku, 2017).

Furthermore, knowing how to create, find, manage, access, preserve, and use information effectively provides a form of power to information professionals and any professional of sort, whether it is through speed of access to needed sources, the ability to hack into a system, or complex skills to find and create new multimedia information resources. Information professionals, as well as those who rely on them to provide a wide array of services to help people work more efficiently, compete with others, or improve the quality of their lives, must recognize and understand that with power comes responsibility. Like those who acquired power from their knowledge of how to split the atom, librarians, archivists, and other information professionals must learn to understand the possible and real consequences of their actions, reflect on the alternative choices they may make, and determine how best to use their power and act responsibly. More reason why questions concerning ethics and how an individual can act ethically when confronted with issues related to libraries, archives, and, more broadly, information, remain persistent in our daily as well as professional lives whenever individuals considered their own principles and actions as related to creating, organizing, managing, using, disseminating, preserving, and providing access to information and documents in all forms.

In the twenty-first century, all sorts of people face ethical dilemmas that fall within the scope of information ethics. For example, music fans have to decide whether to download music files from the internet without paying. Also, just like the library professional, the bookseller may have to decide whether to tell law enforcement officers what books her patrons are reading. All of these people would benefit from a good working knowledge of information ethics. However, there is a reason why it is especially important for librarians and other information professionals to have an understanding of information ethics. How information professionals respond to their ethical dilemmas directly affects their ability to carry out their mission. A

number of other authors (e.g., Wengert, 2001) have subsequently offered somewhat different views about what the mission of the information professional is. But, while there is disagreement over the details, everyone seems to agree that the mission is essentially to provide people with access to the information that they need (Moran, 2011).

Supporting intellectual freedom and resisting censorship clearly further this mission. But it might seem that other principles of information ethics, such as protecting privacy rights and intellectual property rights, do not really have much to do with improving access to information. If anything, they seem to involve restricting access to information. However, as Garoogian (2019) points out, a failure to keep patron records confidential can have a potentially “unsettling effect” on people’s use of the library and, thus, restrict their access to information (McDowell, 2002). For example, a library patron might not be willing to check out a book on a sensitive subject if she knew that the FBI, or even just her friends and family, could easily find out about it. Also, as noted above, protecting intellectual property rights helps to ensure that authors will continue to supply libraries with information that their patrons can access. Thus, these principles as well further the mission of the library professional.

Information professionals (including Librarians, School Librarians, Archivists, Computer and Communication/Information Scientists) regularly face ethical dilemmas that fall within the scope of information ethics. In order to deal effectively with these ethical dilemmas, these professionals need to have a good working knowledge of information ethics. Codes of professional ethics can help to provide such knowledge, but they are not sufficient.

The availability of helpful technology in the information age implies that more people are using information and communication technologies such as computer networks, telecom systems and the likes to communicate. Obviously, the use of these technologies has created new problems involving hardware theft, infringement of software copyright laws, and so on (Chuang and Chen, 2019). For the aforementioned reason, there is need to educate information users on how to tackle various problems facing information users; inculcating the attitude of using, creating and disseminating information ethically in them in the present information age.

In the present society where information is the currency on which all daily activities are conducted, it is very important to review ethical issues in information and social responsibilities. For the proper use of information in the information society, ethical concerns relating to the use of information are of great importance. This study was, therefore, carried out to find out the progress of information ethics education at the University of Ibadan in order to

ascertain the position of the professionals within information discipline and ethics-related departments in terms of the level of awareness, prospects and challenges of information ethics education at the University.

Objectives of the study

The broad objective of the study was to assess the level of awareness and the extent to which information ethics (IE) is being promoted within the university by the information professionals.

Research questions

The research questions that guided the study were:

1. What ethical issues arising from the life-cycle (creation, collection, recording, distribution, processing, etc.) of information are the respondents familiar with?
2. To what extent is IE necessary?
3. Who should offer IE and why?
4. Who should be taught IE (and at what level); and
5. What should be included in an IE course?

Literature Review

The emergence of the information society has further expanded the scope of information ethics. Persons who used the phrase, information ethics included Robert Hauptman, who started the Journal of information ethics in 1992 and Rafael Capurro who wrote an article in German in 1988 in "Information ethos and Information ethik" (Information Ethos and Information Ethics). However, some of the issues in information ethics were raised as early as 1980. Barbara and Charles (1980) wrote an article, "Ethics in Information Science" for the Journal of information science where they discussed such issues as the confidentiality of information, bias in information provided to clients or consumers, the quality of data supplied by online vendors, the use of work facilities, etc.

The more people have become accustomed to living and working immersed within digital environments, the easier it has become to unveil new ethical issues involving informational realities (Floridi, 2018). Information ethics as a field of study has grown rapidly and seen the publication of a number of articles in various scholarly journals and databases such as LISA, ISA, LISTA and the Web of Science since the concept was re-conceived in the 90s via the sterling work done towards the development of IE education by the University of Pittsburgh through the initiative of Toni Carbo.

The epistemology of information ethics largely resides in applied ethics, which provides the basic theoretical framework on which the pedagogical foundation and practice of IE can be constructed and applied. Ethical theories that define what right actions and wrong actions people may take under different circumstances (also reflected in teleology and deontology) are generally accommodated under four widely known theories: *consequence-based theories*, *duty-based theories*, *rights-based theories* and *virtue-based theories*. These theories demonstrate the difficulties and contradictions that arise in the conceptualization and contextualization of ethics.

Fallis' (2007) article reminds us that consequence-based theories are founded on utilitarianism and built on the premise that "what distinguishes right actions from wrong actions is that they (actions) have better consequences". Although Fallis feels that the consequence-based theory is the most applicable to the "ethical dilemmas faced by information professionals", in actual fact, all four ethical theories bear weight in information practice. A notable example is right-based theories. Rights-based theories work according to the premise that "the right thing to do is determined by the rights that human beings have", for example, the rights agreed on in 1948's United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNUDHR). UDHR provides common standards for understanding the rights of all nations and information workers from all corners of the world. Article 19 from the declaration stipulates that: "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 information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (United Nations, 1948).

Over time, recognizing such fundamental rights has meant defining information ethics and creating an inclusive paradigm with an emphasis on benefits and shared values and understanding. The problem with these theories is the difficulties faced in their application, particularly because of the contradictions one encounters when attempting comparisons, both within and without. For example, some of the most virile conflicts in family units, workplaces, governments and international relationships have largely arisen from conflicts in the interpretation and application of ethical values. Furthermore, the interpretation and implementation of rights across communities around the world is not uniform.

From these definitions, ethics seems to primarily focus on the norms and standards of behavior of individuals or groups within a society based on normative conduct and moral judgment: principles of wrong and right; "moral consequences of human action" (Wojtzak, 2012); and responsibility and accountability (Sembok, 2014). Gleaning from these definitions,

the role or purpose of ethics in society is to promote what is good in people, avert chaos, and provide norms and standards of behavior based on morals and values that are unifying, as opposed to dividing.

Information ethics is seen to provide “a critical framework for considering moral issues concerning informational privacy, moral agency (e.g. whether artificial agents may be moral), new environmental issues (especially how should one behave in the infosphere), problems arising from the life-cycle (creation, collection, recording, distribution, processing, etc.) of information (especially ownership and copyright, digital divide)” (Ocholla, 2009). Similarly, Adam (2005) defines information ethics as the field that investigates the ethical issues arising from the development and application of information technologies. It basically relates to questions of ethics in terms of information or an information-oriented society. According to Fallis (2006), information ethics is majorly concerned with the question of who should have access to what information. Mabawonku (2010), posits that information ethics refers to the responsible creation and use of information in a variety of formats.

In other words, information ethics is all about the content of data or information and how it is to be used ethically. Information ethics, therefore, is seen as a commitment to do right and uphold the good in handling information. Information ethics is an important aspect of the information science discipline. It serves as a moral standard that guides actions and choices in the creation, processing, retrieval, dissemination, and use of information. It broadly examines issues relating to ownership, access, privacy, information protection and security, cyber/internet ethics, email spam, etc., and copyright protection, intellectual propriety rights, intellectual freedom, and accountability. Lee et al (2015) listed the leading schools offering information ethics as a stand-alone course. These schools include MIT, Harvard, Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Arizona, and Mississippi State University. These courses may come from different departments such as Computer Science/MIS, Law, or Philosophy.

According to Capurro (2016), information ethics in Africa is a young academic field, and a long history of information ethics in Africa is concerned with Africa’s rich oral and written traditions throughout many centuries about different kinds of information and communication practices using different moral codes and media based on dynamic and complex processes of cultural hybridisation. Mabawonku (2010) reported that out of 25 Library and Information Science (LIS) institutions in Nigeria, as at July 2010, only 11 indicated that information ethics was taught. But none of the 25 LIS institutions indicated that it was taught as a separate course. It was either “mentioned” or taught in a few lecture hours as part of a course or some courses taught.

According to the Tshwane declaration which was adopted by the participants of the African Information Ethics Conference: Ethical Challenges in the Information Age on February 7, 2007. Tshwane declaration (2007) states that “Information Ethics in Africa is crucial for sustainable social, economic, technical, cultural and political development; acknowledging the need to improve and foster greater participation of African scholars in the field of information ethics within the international scholarly community recognizing the distinctive contribution to be made by African thinkers and intellectual traditions to the global information ethics community”. It is believed, in line with Tshwane declaration, that Information Ethics should play a crucial role in Nigerian education and policy in order to foster social, cultural and economic development by promoting the worth and dignity of individual and social life, and thus there is need to develop norms and values for the Nigerian Information Society and Africa at large.

In order to establish a reference standard of morality in the information society, there is need for Nigerians to be aware of the rules and principles guiding the use of and access to information and this can only be achieved when information ethics is introduced as a course offered by students in Nigerian higher institutions. This is supported by Carbo (2014)’s definition of information ethics as a course that provides a background to applied ethics as a prelude to learning the skills of ethical decision-making and, then, to applying those skills to the real and current challenges of the Information professionals. Furthermore, Information ethics education is very essential in universities in order to produce information professionals that are well familiar with ethical issues in information provision as well as the principles guiding freedom of access to information.

Ki and Ahn (2016) in their work “A study of the methodology of information ethics education in youth” stated that information ethics education should exhibit the following functions:

Prescriptive ethics: Information ethics must clearly prescribe what to do and what not to do in information society.

Preventive ethics: Information ethics must help students to give careful consideration on all types of ethical problems the development of information and communications technology produces;

Transformative ethics: Information Ethics must put emphasis on the necessity of human experience and the transformation of the system and policy. This is because it appears as a reaction against the dysfunction of large amounts of information, especially, the disorder and chaos in cyberspace;

Global ethics: Information ethics must consist of both global and local disciplines;

Responsibility ethics: It must promote behavior as a sense of responsibility, considering the possibility of an action according to the view of a means and a method, while comparing a purpose to incidental results, and

Comprehensive ethics: It must synthesize and utilize various ethical theories that are useful in solving ethical problems in both direct and indirect ways.

Methodology

The survey was designed to investigate the level of awareness, prospects and challenges of information ethics education at the University of Ibadan. The population comprised lecturers in Information disciplines, Philosophy and Law. A non-probabilistic sampling technique, purposive sampling, was used to select respondents from the study population. A structured interview guide was used to collect the required data from some lecturers and/or Heads of Department of Computer Science; Library, Archival and Information Studies; Data and Information Science; School Library and Media Technology; Communication and Language Arts; Philosophy and Law, all of which are from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The design of the instrument draws from the work of Ocholla (2009) who examined information ethics (IE) education within Library and Information Studies/Science schools in Africa and Agbedejobi (Unpublished M.Sc. Thesis) who investigated assessment of awareness about information ethics at the University of Ibadan.

The interview was conducted through face-to-face contact with purposively selected faculty members from some departments in the premier university. This was informed by previous studies which identified some disciplines where ethical issues on information life-cycle are mentioned or taught. Fourteen (14) lecturers from such departments mentioned above were interviewed due to their involvement in teaching either related courses information disciplines or ethics in order to investigate their level of awareness and activities in promoting information ethics education in the University. The interview was conducted individually at different times and was recorded with the full consent of the interviewees and notes were as well taken. This was later transcribed, and responses were reviewed for detailed analysis. Thus, after collecting the data, the key information was summarised by the interviewer, and the information was transcribed by arranging the different responses in a tabular form. The information displayed in the table conveyed the information gathered about the different opinions of the respondents.

The faculty members were asked to comment on the following seven items:

1. Are you conversant with a field bordering on ethical issues arising from information creation, collection, recording, and dissemination, and to what extent?
2. To what extent is information ethics education necessary in the University?
3. Should it be taught as a stand-alone course or integrated into another course and where (department) should it be domiciled?
4. Are there up-to-date resources on information ethics education in Nigeria?
5. Who should learn information ethics?
6. What should be taught in an information ethics course?
7. What are the challenges and prospects of information ethics education in the University?

Presentation and Interpretation of Results

The faculty members in the seven departments surveyed expressed diverse views on the present status, the challenges, and the feasibility of integrating information ethics as part of the training of the Nigerian tertiary institution students. Their various views are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Report of the Interview

Interviewee	Awareness and preparedness	Availability of up-to-date information materials and Methods of teaching	Feasibility of integrating IE in the curriculum
<i>Prof. Sunday O. Popoola (HOD, Library, Archival and Information Studies Dept. (LARIS), U.I)</i>	Fully prepared to integrate the course in the curriculum but traditional courses are still in operation.	Access to current information materials. Combined with other courses: Computer Application; Health Records Management; Records Maintenance; Publishing and Copyright studies; IKS and Oral Archives;	Yes
<i>Dr Airen E. Adetimirin (Lecturer, Dept. of Library, Archival and Information Studies (LARIS), U.I)</i>	Fully aware of information ethics education but not yet as a course.	Materials abound to teach it as a separate course but there are challenges of man power to take the course because he/she must well-grounded in ethical issues arising from the development and application of information technologies.	Yes, but there must be a designated department that will see to its implementation. It should also be taught as a standalone and compulsory course for all students in the university because its importance in the present information age.
<i>Dr Ibiyinka T. Ayorinde (HOD, Computer Science Dept. U.I)</i>	Partially aware of it as they are more interested in ethical issues in IT.	Not yet available. Subsumed in other courses.	It just needs to be mentioned in some courses.
<i>Dr Angela U. Makolo (Lecturer, Computer Science Dept., U.I)</i>	Fully aware of information ethics but not taught. Similar subject is taught. Not yet integrated in the curriculum.	Current information materials on IE are not available. Only ethical issues about computing are taught.	Only feasible at the M.Sc. level.
<i>Dr Kolawole A. Aramide (Acting Head, Department of School Library and Media Technology)</i>	Fully aware of information ethics but not yet taught as a course. It should be well embraced by all information	There are materials that can be used but there may be challenges of manpower to take the course because he/she must have a philosophy background and be well-	Yes, but it should be domiciled in a department that has adequate resources (both human and material) to handle it as a full-fledged course

	professionals and fully integrated in the curriculum.	grounded in the code of conduct. It should be made practical when being taught.	within LIS because it is among the pillars of the information profession.
Dr Alice A. Bamigbola (Lecturer, Department of School Library and Media Technology)	Aware of information ethics. Similar subject is taught. Not adequately integrated in the curriculum.	It is partially included in MSM 715: Copyright and Intellectual Property Rights but it can be a separate course. It should be hands-on.	Yes, it can be integrated in the curriculum.
Dr Adeola O. Opesade (Lecturer, Department of Data and Information Science (DDIS), U.I)	Fully aware of information ethics but not sure if the course is ever being perceived to be accorded a standalone course status.	Current materials are available. It should be handled separately. It is being taught in the courses that has to do with information product.	Yes.
Prof. M. A. Tiamiyu (HOD, Department of Data and Information Science (DDIS), U.I)	Fully aware of information ethics and already teaching it as part of a course.	Availability of and access to current information materials. Combined with Designing and Marketing of Information Products. It should be taught using case study approach.	Yes, but not as a separate course.
Prof. Oyeyinka Olusola Oyewo (HOD, Communication and Language Arts Dept, U.I)	Fully aware of ethics of communication which is an off-shoot of Information ethics.	Availability of current information materials. Mainstreamed into every other course but with a different name. It is being taught as Ethics of Communication (CLA 319).	Yes, but not as a stand-alone Course.
Dr Babatunde Ojebuyi (Lecturer, Dept. of Communication and Language Art, U.I)	Aware of information ethics but not sure if there is any formal educational curriculum for it.	There are availabilities of relevant materials that can cater to the teaching of the course. But relevant Departments (like DDIS, LARIS, DSLMT) should develop the way it should be taught.	Yes, but should be integrated into appropriate curricula and should be a standalone course.
Prof. Bolatito A. Lanre-Abass (HOD, Philosophy,	Little awareness about information ethics. The focus	Non-availability of up-to-date information materials for the IE but it's being	Yes and IE should be a separate course, for it to be taught in-depth.

U.I)	is more on Applied ethics such as Normative ethics, Business ethics, and Bio-ethics.	incorporated in some courses.	
Prof. Christopher O. Agulanna (Philosophy Dept., U.I)	Unaware of information ethics. The focus is more on Theoretical ethics and lately on Applied ethics (Business ethics, Bio-ethics)	Non-availability of current information materials on IE. IE could be taught through workshops, seminars, power-point presentations, etc.	Yes, especially at the M.A. level in conjunction with information professionals.
Dr Ajagunna F. Olabisi (Lecturer, Dept. of Private and Property Law, U.I)	Unaware of the subject.	Not available.	It could be feasible if concerted efforts are made by the relevant stakeholders.
Dr Bukola O. Ochei (Lecturer, Dept. of Public Law, U.I)	Unaware of information ethics. The focus is more on Internet/Cyber-crime.	Not yet available. IE should be made practical when being taught.	It is feasible, especially at the Master's level.

Source: Field Survey, July, 2021

Discussion of Findings

This study investigated the present status, challenges and prospects of information ethics education at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The investigation reveals some degree of awareness about the subject but not much of preparedness to take up the challenge of propagating the ideals of information ethics within and outside the information discipline. But viability of integrating information ethics as part of the training is undeniable. The findings are further discussed under the following headings: *the Challenges* and *the Prospects*.

The Future Prospects

With the increase in global awareness of the subject, the future prospects are bright. Once the awareness is created among all the stakeholders, there is the likelihood that more, if not all, tertiary institutions will initiate, or be involved in teaching information ethics as a course.

The proliferation of information ethics awareness in Nigeria is now inevitable owing to the fact the country has joined other countries of the world in enacting a law to enforce Freedom of Information (FOI). This implies that the government, policymakers, management of the various institutions and stakeholders would have some roles to play in access control and other ethical issues regarding information provision and dissemination. This would in turn aid the progress of information ethics education in Nigeria.

The Challenges

It was observed in the course of the interaction with some stakeholders in the information profession that the present status is of unawareness on the part of some and unpreparedness on the part of others, as the LIS departments and other information-related departments are concentrating on the traditional courses in their programmes. Some departments that have postgraduate programmes responded that IE could be taught as a course or combined with another course. The courses include: Research Methods, Information Technology, Health Records and Information management, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and Oral archives.

Besides, some interviewees did not consider the teaching of IE to be their primary function, and thus, it could not be included in their curriculums. An obvious challenge is the issue of human and other resources.

Going through the literatures it was found out that there have been very limited research efforts on information ethics (IE) by African scholars, as the awareness among the stakeholders in Africa began in the last few years. It was revealed in Mabawonku's seminar article that the exposure to the subject is limited. Some of her respondents indicated that they were not aware of databases and internet resources on this subject. They had only consulted books and journals on IE. Also, availability and access to up-to-date information materials are invaluable to effective teaching and research. However, there is the prospect that as they become more conscious of the global interest in IE, more lecturers will focus their research efforts in this direction.

Summary and Conclusion

In order to deal effectively with the ethical issues, information professionals must have a good working knowledge of information ethics. Codes of professional ethics can help to provide such knowledge, but they are not sufficient. Courses on information ethics must be part of the education of information professionals. Such courses should provide information professionals with an understanding of ethical theories and how they apply to concrete practical cases. Such courses should also make explicit the connection between information ethics and the mission of the information professional.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proffered on the basis of the findings from the study:

1. According to the statement made by the Information Ethics special interest group of the [Association for Library and Information Science Education](#) which states that "The curriculum should be informed by information ethics through a unit in the required foundations (or equivalent) course. This unit should appropriately include the following student objectives: to be able to recognize and articulate ethical conflicts in the information field, to inculcate a sense of responsibility with regard to the consequences of individual and collective interactions in the information field, to provide the foundations for intercultural dialogue through the recognition of different kinds of information cultures and values, to provide basic knowledge about ethical theories and concepts and about their relevance to everyday information work; and, to learn to reflect ethically and think critically and carry these abilities into their professional life.
2. One or more courses devoted specifically to information ethics should be offered on a periodic basis. To most effectively achieve the desired impact, such courses should be taught by a qualified member of the faculty and be based on international literature from a diversity of viewpoints.
3. Information ethics should be included in the study and discussion across the library and information science curriculum. It should be infused throughout the curriculum in such areas as management, young adult services, information literacy training, and information-technology-related courses.
4. There should be ongoing engagement with information ethics, as challenging questions and issues need to be revisited through the lenses of individuals, institutions, and societies.
5. Ideally, information literacy skills should be integrated into the curriculum across all disciplines. When theoretical concepts related to the development of critical thinking and information literacy skills are implemented within the context of meaningful practice, the result is authentic learning that builds a foundation for lifelong, independent learning related to finding, using, and evaluating information tools, formats, sources, and products.

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