

Ethics in Indexing and Classification

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Overview

- ❑ Indexing, classification and social responsibility
- ❑ Problem statement
- ❑ What constitutes ethical and unethical behaviour?
- ❑ What forms of unethical behaviour actually occur in the field of indexing and classification?
- ❑ What steps are to be taken by the profession to ensure ethical indexing and classification?

Indexing, classification and social responsibility

- Although indexing and classification involve many technicalities, the basic objective of these activities is to provide access to information-bearing objects, thereby contributing to the social process of **information transfer**.
- The indexer and classifier has a responsibility towards
 - authors and information users
 - communities: scientific, business, society

Problem statement

- *Is there an ethical dimension to indexing and classification, and if so, what should the information profession do to promote ethical conduct and to prevent unethical practices in this field?*

Specific research questions

- ❑ What constitutes ethical and unethical behaviour for indexers and classifiers?
- ❑ What forms of unethical behaviour actually occur in the field of indexing and classification?
- ❑ What steps should be taken by the profession to ensure an ethical approach in indexing and classification?

What constitutes ethical and unethical behaviour?

□ Definitions:

- "A set of **principles of right conduct**"
- "The **rules or standards** governing the conduct of **a person** or the members of a **profession**" (Dictionary.com)
- "ethical behaviour is what is accepted as '**good**' and '**right**' as opposed to 'bad' or 'wrong' in the context of the **governing moral code**" (Du Mont, 1991)

Analysis of definitions

- ❑ A person's conduct is judged to be right (ethical) or wrong (unethical).
- ❑ These judgements should not be subjective perceptions, but should be based on accepted principles or rules.
- ❑ These principles/rules may be codified in a professional code of ethics.

Analysis of definitions (2)

- ❑ Ethical principles/rules are not the same for all people and in all communities.
- ❑ There are ethical principles at various levels, namely the individual, the organization for which he/she works, the profession and social communities.
- ❑ To determine whether a specific action is ethical or unethical one can consider whether the action has a positive or negative effect on the lives and well-being of others.

Universal Declaration on Human Rights

- ❑ Respect for the dignity of human beings (Art.1)
- ❑ Confidentiality (Art. 1, 2, 3, 6)
- ❑ Equality of opportunity (Art. 2, 7)
- ❑ Privacy (Art. 3, 12)
- ❑ Right to freedom of opinion and expression (Art. 19)
- ❑ Right to participate in the cultural life of the community (Art. 27)
- ❑ Right to the protection of the moral and material interests concerning any scientific, literary or artistic production (Art. 27)

Ethical codes of professional bodies

- ❑ ALA & LA
- ❑ “We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and **usefully organized** resources ...”. (ALA)
- ❑ Obligation to facilitate the free flow of information.

What forms of unethical behaviour actually occur?

- Bias
- Use of terms with negative connotations
- Misrepresentation of the subject
- Suppression of undesired information (censorship)

Bias in indexing and classification

- ❑ Fina: “information organized according to LCSH shows a bias that is, for the most part, white, male, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant to the exclusion of other views and other sensitivities”
- ❑ Bias in specific subject fields
- ❑ Forms of bias
- ❑ Olson: bias in LCSH
 - exclusions, marginalizations, distortions
- ❑ Bias in subject analysis

Terms with negative connotations

- disabled
- handicapped
- freak
- cripple
- homeless
- nigger
- leprosy

Misrepresentation of the subject

- ❑ Inappropriate keywords - false representation
- ❑ repetition of the same keyword - spamming

Suppression of undesired information

- John Swan

- Guidoriccio case (Moran and Mallory)
- Miscellanea Moran

- Deletion of records in databases

Steps to be taken by the profession

- Ethical code for indexers and classifiers?
- Sensitise students about ethical issues
- Point out bias and terminology that may offend, and put pressure on compilers of classification schemes and verbal indexing languages to remove

Conclusion

- ❑ There are social responsibility and ethical issues involved in indexing and classification.
- ❑ These issues exist in reality and not just in theory.
- ❑ General guidelines available for ethical conduct: UDHR, ethical codes
- ❑ There may be a need for more specific guidelines to identify the ethical pitfalls for the indexer and classifier.

Thank you, and have a good conference