

# **“Discuss the ever-increasing global responsibilities information professionals face”**

by

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*Elizabeth A. Buchanan and Kathrine A. Henderson: Case studies in library and information science ethics. McFarland & Company, Jefferson, NC, 2009, 175 pp, ISBN: 978-0-7864-3367-4.*

While I was browsing and reading Elizabeth A. Buchanan's and Kathrine A. Henderson's textbook on information ethics, I found (somewhere near the end of the book) this call to the readers: "Discuss the ever-increasing global responsibilities information professionals face".

The sentence describes well the form and content of this book, and summarizes much of its message. In order to explain the ethics of the library profession, the authors, a professor from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (Buchanan) and a research librarian at the State of Arizona office of the Auditor General (Henderson), have produced a sample of cases. In their introduction, they make clear that they consider these cases to be the core of the book, the objective of which is

“to allow individuals and organizations the opportunity to explore the personal, the professional, the local and the global realms involved in LIS work and come, hopefully, to a place of understanding of and respect for ethical debate”

The cases are distributed through the book as follows:

Intellectual Freedom - 25 cases

Privacy - 25 cases

Intellectual Property - 25 cases

Professional Ethics - 25 cases (plus quotations from various codes)

Intercultural Ethics - 25 cases.

Thus, over a hundred cases are included in the work. The authors aptly call the cases "smooth on the outside, juicy on the inside". Many cases (such as the case of the intelligence-agent scheme to reclassify NARA documents) refer to very "real" events and controversies while others are more "fictional", although close to the specific realities of the working, professional librarian. (But we must not always imagine her/him to work in the library building; she/he may also be at a conference of the ALA or the IFLA, or at home, perhaps spending a sleepless night in his/her bed...).

Each case is followed by a series of three, four, or five questions; thus the total number of proposed questions for ethical debate amounts to something like four or five hundred. As the questions are not answered, one is tempted to ask if it is in the nature of ethical debate in LIS that the questions be left open, or without any precise answer. Would so many questions have been left open in a casebook on professional ethics for nurses or doctors? Or lawyers? Or engineers? Or shoemakers?

Yes and no. Yes, because modern man and woman, regardless of his or her profession, is supposed to be ultracrepidarian<sup>1</sup>, to make many judgments which

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1 'Ultracrepidarian' is defined by Michael Quinion as a word to denote 'somebody who gives opinions on matters beyond his knowledge'. According to Quinion, the word was used by the British essayist William Hazlitt in a famous letter to William Gifford in 1819 (<http://www.worldwidewords.org/weirdwords/ww-ult1.htm> - retrieved July 2010). Ultracrepidarian is based on the proverb *ne sutor supra crepidam* ("the cobbler should stick to his last") which, in turn, comes from an anecdote told by Plinius, the Roman writer.

may not be covered by the accepted professional codes. The shoemaker may no longer be a very good example, as this profession has become a rarity. However, PFOA (a global contaminant which is used to make, for instance Teflon pans and Gore-Tex shoes), is, or should be, a matter of ethical concern of his/her modern successors in the footwear industry.<sup>2</sup>

And no, unless we think that the ethics of the library profession can be reduced to best practices. Neither the individual librarian, nor the library profession (like the professions of the journalist and the teacher), can be completely *neutral*, politically. The authors avoid explicit discussion of the general neutrality issue of the profession.<sup>3</sup> However, "As a profession, do we consider how ethics *should* be taught?, they ask. Their answer: through case studies.

Explaining their casuistic approach to the professional ethics of the librarians, Buchanan & Henderson note that

"[w]e often act from a place of fear, of reaction, or of convenience. Ethical decision-making removes us from those places and gives us appropriate license to decide and act. Using cases as a means to explore and to ask important questions moves us from the realm of the symbolic into the realm of action. *Action expresses priorities.*" (The authors ascribe the emphasized sentence to Mohandas Gandhi)

Certainly, "action expresses priorities". Like that other famous saying by Gandhi, '*be the change you want to see in the world*', it is a wonderful criterion for evaluating actions and actors. And case studies can undoubtedly bring the student *closer* to the actual praxis. Hence, their educational value. But education

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2 Thus The Environmental Group, introducing (in 2003), a report on global contaminants, wrote: "... in the past five years, the multi-billion dollar "perfluorochemical" (PFC) industry, which underpins such world-famous brands as Teflon, Stainmaster, Scotchgard and Gore-Tex, has emerged as a regulatory priority for scientists and officials at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) [...]" (Source: <http://www.ewg.org/reports/pfcworld> Retrieved July 2010). The text 'Gore-tex: time for alternatives'tex here <http://www.desolation.be/fluorocarbonalternatives>

3 For some recent discussion about the general neutrality issue of the profession, see Lewis, Alison (ed): *Questioning Library Neutrality. Essays from Progressive Librarian*. Library Juice Press 2008.

and action continue to be separate realms. The question is what the coursework on ethics in a LIS education requires *in addition to* case studies. For instance, how much social and political theory would be needed, besides the practical examples?

Buchanan and Henderson have included an essay by the Germany-based (originally from Uruguay) philosopher and information ethicist Raphael Capurro to introduce the cases which relate to intercultural ethics. Capurro broadens the discussion of the ethics of information in various directions from the professional to the general context, including the circumstance of globalisation.

For Capurro, as for Aristotle and Spinoza, ethics and politics seem to be closely related. Capurro underlines the importance of the intercultural (philosophy, ethics, communication) including, notably, the intercultural communication on (about) the internet. His starting point in this writing is the question: "Is there a European philosophy?", which begs the question whether philosophy is European, and the more fundamental question "What is philosophy?" I think it is fortunate that these questions have found a place in a textbook for LIS education.

"The ongoing debate on the impact of the Internet is at the core of today's and tomorrow's global and political decision-making in a world that turns more and more unified -- and divided. Manuel Castells puts it this way: "It is not as activists used to say, 'Think globally, act locally'. No, no, think locally - link to your interest environment - and act globally - because if you don't act globally in a system in which the powers are global, you make no difference in the power system" (Capurro, p 135)

All librarians will probably not like to become moral philosophers and global political actors. As many as possible ought to try, though. However, there might be a problem. Not long ago, a Finnish millionaire promised to donate money to

the universities, *but only on the condition that his money would not be spent on training or research in philosophy.*<sup>4</sup>

Buchanan & Henderson's casuistic textbook gives the information worker a much needed chance to reflect on what he/she ought to do, or leave undone. In this way, teachers and students will probably like the book and find it useful.

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<sup>4</sup> This case is based on an article in the Finnish newspaper Kauppalehti, 11 December, 2009; <http://bit.ly/8crPP7>.