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Week 14: Information Ethics and Intellectual Freedom

Discussion Post & Annotated Citations

Information ethics and Intellectual Freedom are two incredibly broad topics of discourse that nevertheless yield real influence on the everyday practices of information professionals. In his discussion of information ethics, Martin Garnar applies the following definition as "Information ethics is a 'field of applied ethics that addresses the uses and abuses of information, information technology, and information systems for personal, professional, and public decision making'" (Garnar, 2015, p. 289; Elrod & Smith, 2005). He goes on to provide a comparison between the various ethical codes of the Society of American Archivists, the American Library Association, the Association of Independent Information Professionals, and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions and in his discussion, identifies the core shared principles among the organizations as informative of their respective approaches to ethical practices. These principles include: access, confidentiality and privacy, democracy, diversity, education and lifelong learning, intellectual freedom, preservation, professionalism, public good, service, and social responsibility. All the principles evidenced here have served as key topics of our study throughout the semester further highlighting how essential they are to the best practices of an information professional. In his column for the *Journal of Information Ethics*, Juris Dilevko looks at "The Politics of Trigger Warnings", to query if trigger warnings as a means of providing as much information as possible serve an ethical imperative and determines that it's politics and not ethics that motivates most people's position on trigger warnings including information professionals.

Intellectual Freedom is closely aligned with the discussion on information ethics in that it too is informed by principles of democracy, access, and privacy. Barbara Jones points out that "the digital delivery of content in the twenty-first century has only made intellectual freedom more important and complex for information professionals, who are charged with providing users with access to a broad range of resources, in a variety of evolving formats, along with opportunities for users to engage with that content" (Jones, 2015, p. 357). In the look at the IF practices of public librarians, Oltmann writes that "IF is a clear and simple principle that all librarians should embrace: defend individuals' right to freely access information and resist efforts to censor or restrict access" (Oltmann, 2016, p. 292). Interestingly, Oltmann notes that within the literature, there is little discussion of community because of the assumption that IF principles are universal and therefore, can be applied consistently but this reading misses the significance of community as it applies context to how public librarians practice intellectual freedom within their organizations (Oltmann, 2016, p. 293). In the study, each librarian provides his or her own definition of intellectual freedom and articulates it as a fundamental factor of the library as they see it (one participant effectively stated that "the library is not here to govern…"). Further most participants' definitions of IF specifically invoked the notion of community in that they practice intellectual freedom to best serve their community. Additionally, the librarians discuss how though they are adamant advocates of intellectual freedom, they differ in opinion and practice of

internet filters in their respective libraries (some apply them and some don't) because of how the use of filtering (or not) is received within the community.

References:

Elrod, E.M. and Smith, M.M. (2005). Information ethics. *Encyclopedia of Science, Technology, and Ethics*. Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA.

Garnar, M.L. (2015). Information ethics. In S. Hirsch (Ed.), *Information services today: An introduction,* (pp. 298-299). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Jones, B.M. (2015). Intellectual freedom. In S. Hirsch (Ed.), *Information services today: An introduction,* (pp. 357-364). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Annotated Citations:

Dilevko, J. j. (2015). The politics of trigger warnings. *Journal of Information Ethics*, *24*(2), 9-12.

A fascinating article that looks at three U.S. universities (Oberlin, Wellesley, and UC Santa Barbara) who sanctioned the inclusion of trigger warnings at the top of class syllabi as necessary information provision (i.e. Mrs. Dalloway features content about suicide) as they felt it was ethically responsible. Dilevko juxtaposes these decisions made by fairly progressive academic institutions with the example of a religious couple in Texas who advocated for a revised classification system and subject headings for children's and YA literature through their creation of the Library Patrons of Texas, Inc. Denying that they were in favor of censorship, the organization argued for a ratings system for these books similar to the MPAA's ratings for feature films that explicates the content included as justification of the rating. However, like the MPAA, the books that they identified as problematic or warranting "higher ratings" featured same sex relationships and partnerships revealing their concern as coded bigotry and thus, many in the community including librarians, were outraged at the prospect. Dilevko wonders though if the organization's argument aligns with the colleges' decision to include trigger warnings with certain material as an ethical imperative to provide as much information as possible.

Oltmann, S. s. (2016). "For all the people": Public library directors interpret Intellectual Freedom. *Library Quarterly*, *86*(3), 290-312.

In a survey of public librarians in Kentucky and their interpretation of intellectual freedom, Oltmann includes information on their personal feelings about IF, certain controversial practices in their own libraries including those related to internet filtering, and how they've handled various complaints from patrons regarding the library's provision of access to certain material or organizations considered offensive to patron lodging the complaint. In nearly all instances, from the presence of *Fifty Shades of Grey* in the collection to the Tea Party organizing out of a meeting room at a local library, the librarians have upheld the principles of access, democracy, and privacy as they inform intellectual freedom.