LIS professionals supporting women living in conflict situations
https://www.ifla.org/node/11319

Ethical Considerations Revisited

Carolyn Caizzi
Repository and Digital Curation, Northwestern University Libraries, Evanston, USA.
E-mail address: carolyn.caizzi@northwestern.edu

Abstract:

In the past few years at digital library conferences, there have been more sessions and presentations devoted to librarians and technologists taking more critical approaches to their job responsibilities and activities. A shared understanding that the technology libraries use to present collections online is not neutral or passive and easily hides all the decisions that go into selection, digitization, and presenting collections online, has surfaced. Given that the presentation of cultural heritage content online inevitably displays bias, how to present it without being exploitative is a fine line and requires librarians to be arbiters of ethical considerations. Although this theme of ethical considerations has emerged as a focus in digital library conferences fairly recently, the theme of ethical considerations as part of the profession is not new as evidenced in library science literature, especially in the archives and preservation literature of the past 30 years. This paper will give a brief overview of the literature and examples of projects where digital librarians have considered the ethics surrounding access to and preservation of cultural heritage content.

Keywords: ethics, digitization, preservation, access, archives.

In the past few years at digital library conferences, there have been more sessions and presentations devoted to librarians and technologists taking more critical approaches to their job responsibilities and activities. One example is the Digital Library Federation Forum in 2016, which featured a keynote by Stacie Williams about ethical labor practices in libraries. Another example is the 2015 Association of College and Research Libraries conference that featured Professor Safiya Umoja Noble, who spoke about how search engine biases negatively impacts women. A shared understanding within the profession that the technology libraries use to present collections online is not neutral or passive and easily hides all the decisions that go into selection, digitization, and presenting collections online, has surfaced. This emergence of critical thinking around the digital librarian profession roughly correlated to the advent of the specialized academic sub-discipline of critical code studies in the first decade of the 2000s, where computer science and cultural studies meet (Kirschenbaum, 2009). Critical code studies

focus on how software privileges certain information and is not neutral in the discovery and presentation of information; this sub-discipline is where digital librarians are delving into with their scholarly work. In this paper, examples of the tension between the mission of libraries to preserve and facilitate access to cultural heritage content through digital projects, while being respectful of the culture, people, and themes that the content represents will be explored. Given that the presentation of cultural heritage content online inevitably displays bias, how to present it without being exploitative is a fine line and requires the digital librarian and technologist to be an arbiter of ethical consideration. This paper will explore three examples, two of which have been analyzed and written on by other researchers, and one is from the Northwestern University Libraries' collections.

Although the theme of ethics and value of digital projects has become a trending topic in digital library circles, the theme of ethics as part of the information profession and the tensions surrounding ethics and access are not new to library science literature, especially in the archival science and preservation literature. According to Danielson (1989), who used examples about access to the papers of Sigmund Freud and Ludwig Wittgenstein, archivists are "cast in the role of arbiters of ethical considerations...to be put in the position of carefully mediating disputes in order to avoid the ultimate threat: the destruction of embarrassing but historically important documentation" (p. 59). Additionally, Houston in his 1999 dissertation, argued that the designation of librarian as a professional means taking an ethical position that does not allow for betraying the public trust. In his 2013 article, Houston further explores how the archival profession could become a "trust profession" through abiding by a moral grounding of confidentiality, dissociation, veracity, and avoidance of the irreversible as opposed to blindly following a code of ethics. Dinghall (2004) describes the role of archivists as guardians because the "records we care for have the potential to do great good if put to proper use. They also have the potential to lead to tremendous harm if used improperly, or if left unused and neglected" (p.11-12). Smith (2007), in her widely-cited article about the value of preservation, makes the argument that preservation is a public policy matter, that the choices about what to preserve are constitutive, and that the largest societal benefit of those choices ensures "the well-being of the population and the survival of our society" (p. 17). Berger (2009) discusses the many definitions of preservation ethics and recognizes that "the ethics of preservation, therefore, is intrinsically related to the process of selection" (p. 60). She focuses on how the digital world complicates the ethics of selection (what), reformatting and migration (how), and responsibility (who) and the examples described below illustrate these ethical considerations in digital projects that aim to make content accessible. All of these resources dissect the meaning of ethics, describe concerns that archivists and the preservationists address in their daily work, and call for a greater interest in professionalization and public policy advocacy. Digital librarians should look to these resources cited as a guide for thinking through the issue of ethics with digital projects.

One very pointed example in which digital librarians within Western cultural heritage institutions must be fastidious in subscribing to an ethical framework around access deals with the archival collections that represent Indigenous communities and knowledge. Since the very act of collecting these materials is commonly associated with the process of colonization and the ways libraries and museums organize and classify information are largely based on Western systems of classifications, it is imperative, as IFLA recognizes in their "Statement on Indigenous Traditional Knowledge," that the librarian and archival profession work with Indigenous communities to organize and disseminate information that represent their culture in ways that they find relevant and respectful (Whaanga et al., 521-522). One example of where ethical questions was privileged and applied to the processes surrounding the organization and

dissemination of an archival collection, is the digital library of the late Pei Te Hurinui Jones, who was a New Zealand tribal leader, interpreter, land officer, writer, translator and genealogist and identified with the Ngāti Maniapoto iwi. In terms of how this collection was processed, preserved, and made available "...a small research team from the University of Waikato, in collaboration with whānau (family) members and an advisory group consisting of key stakeholders, applied tikanga (cultural protocols) as a guiding principle during the archiving, cataloging, and development of both the physical and digital layouts" (Whaanga et al., 523). Another exemplary digital project of a different kind with regards to Indigenous knowledge is the open source software, Murkutu. It was developed with the Warumungu Aboriginal community so they could share stories, knowledge, and cultural materials properly using their own protocols. Later, Murkutu grew into a platform and explains on its website that it aims to "empower communities to manage, share, preserve, and exchange their digital heritage in culturally relevant and ethically-minded ways." Both of these examples untangled the complicated ethical issues that Berger (2009) described as libraries in the position to make choices about what should be saved, how it should be done, and who is responsible, by empowering the communities represented to make these decisions instead of furthering libraries as complicit in the history of colonization.

A third example that recently emerged and is analyzed extensively by Tara Robertson on her blog is about the digitization and creation of an open access collection of alternative press publications from the U.S. and Canada and managed by Reveal Digital. Robertson works as an accessibility librarian and writes about access, intellectual freedom and open source software. Reveal Digital is a company that works with libraries to scope a potential open access digital collection, uses a crowd-funding model by asking libraries to commit acquisitions dollars to the proposed collection, and then if cost threshold is met, manages the project and hosts the collection. Source libraries and rights holders receive a copy of the content and libraries who committed funds get extra perks like access to the collection before the general public. Robertson (2016) noticed that there was a title called *On Our Backs* included in Reveal Digital's project, called Independent Voices, that was making the alternative press publications accessible. *On Our Backs* was a sexually explicit magazine made by and for the lesbian community that contained multiple photography spreads per issue and ran from 1984-2004. Although Reveal Digital got permissions from copyright holders to make the publications available, Robertson (2016) points out that there are considerable ethical concerns with making a publication like *On Our Backs* freely accessible on the web. Some of the concerns are that this publication is different because of its sexually explicit nature, the fact that some of this publication was produced before the Internet existed and meant for a small and specific audience. Robertson (2016) researched some of the original contributor agreements held in an archive of Susie Bright at Cornell University and it clearly showed that some contributors did not sign over all their rights to the magazine. She further reached out to some of the women who posed in the magazine and they were all frustrated and angry their images were online without their permission. It appeared as though Reveal Digital did not receive or ask about consent from contributors for this publication. Since consent is such a key part of feminist identities, Robertson (2016) argues that digitizing and making available sexual imagery of people, who posed for a feminist magazine, and are most likely still living and could give their consent to this project or refuse, is unethical. For example, consider if a homophobic employer ran across one of the images and realizes it is one of their employees; creating access to this collection online could have serious impact on people's lives. In summer of 2016 Reveal Digital came to the conclusion that they would indeed remove access to the publication, at least temporarily. One of the key points in this example is that consulting the marginalized community that this digital collection would represent online did not occur at the start of the

project to digitize and make accessible this publication. The libraries supplying *On Our Backs* and Reveal Digital as the producer of the digital collection did not immediately see that they have a role as guardian of certain content and there was not an explicit ethics framework to inform decision-making. Dinghall (2004) describes that ethics codes are necessary and that archivists must create them and revise them in order to serve the public and gain trust as a profession. It would make sense that the digital library profession follows a similar path in order to gain trust, especially since some of the work, like this *On Our Backs* example illustrates, does have the potential for "harm to the body or rights of the individual" (Dinghall,19).

The last example is an older digital collection that Northwestern University Libraries created over the span of a multi-year grant project, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (LG-05-06-0153-06) in 2006. The "Humphrey Winterton Collection of East African Photographs: 1860-1960" was assembled by British collector Humphrey Winterton over 30 years, consists of over 7,600 photographs and was acquired by the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies in 2002. According to the website the collection "depicts the breadth of African experience; documents African life; European life in Africa in all its manifestations; and the African landscape, in particular as it changed over time." This digital project did not solely digitize and make accessible this collection, the intention was also to support teaching about Africa, and involved an Advisory Board of experts on African history and culture throughout the project to advise on ethical considerations, including addressing the cultural context of African colonial photographs. There was a decision to suppress 55 photographs from the digital collection website because of cultural sensitivity concerns; however, researchers may request access to them on site. Additionally, there is an acknowledgement on the website that these original artifacts reflect the time and place in which they were created, which may contain offensive images or language reflective of the nature of European colonialism in Africa. Although the website is showing its age, it does reflect that the subject matter experts involved in the creation of this resource were very concerned about the ethics of making a collection like this accessible on the web. Unlike the *On Our Backs* example, these are historical photographs of many different people and places in the large swath of East Africa, but nonetheless, the librarians consulted the community, in this case educators, who teach about Africa and have expertise in understanding colonialism and the photography of the time. Again, this project untangled the complicated ethical issues of balancing access while being respectful of the communities and subject matter represented.

A common theme that emerged from these examples is that consultation with the community and subject matter represented is considered as an ethical best practice for digital projects. Many of these ethical considerations have been discussed in the literature from the archival profession and the preservation profession over the last 30 years. It would behoove the digital librarians and technologists to look towards these resources. A more recent publication specific to the digital, but also specific to the European Union, the Science and Policy Report by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission about Digital Memories and Ethical Perspectives (2014), ends with a set of recommendations for practice to further trust in institutions of memory including promoting collaboration among all parties. The collaboration mentioned in the report correlates to many of the concepts explored in the projects described that privileged or should have privileged empowering the communities represented to make decisions about the selection, organization, and presentation of their digital collections held in cultural heritage institutions. Some argue that the digital complicates matters, but the fundamental issues are very similar to the role that archivists and preservation professionals have been grappling with in terms of physical collections. In sum, these collections and the

decision create access, whether online or in person, has "the potential to lead to tremendous harm if used improperly, or if left unused and neglected" (Dinghall, p.11-12). It is up to the profession to do no harm and contribute to the well-being of society as a whole.

Acknowledgments

References

Aguilar Moreno E.; Ghezzi, A.; Tallacchini, M.; Guimarães Pereia, Ã. (2014). Digital Memories: Ethical Perspectives. Summary report on the workshop held at JRC Ispra, Italy. 16th - 17th January 2014. Retrieved from http://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC90216

Berger, S. (2009). The Evolving Ethics of Preservation: Redefining Practices and Responsibilities in the 21st Century. *The Serials Librarian*, 57(1-2), 57-68, doi:10.1080/03615260802669086

Danielson, E. (1989). The Ethics of Access. *The American Archivist,* 52(1), 52-62. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/40293312

Dingwall, G. (2004). Trusting Archivists: The Role of Archival Ethics Codes in Establishing Public Faith. *The American Archivist*. 67(1), 11-30. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.17723/aarc.67.1.mw0914r2p52xx2t4

Houston, R. (1999). *The Trusts: Librarian Education and the Learned Professions.* (Doctoral Dissertation). doi:10.1.1.42.6101

Houston, R. (2013). Archival Ethics and the Professionalization of Archival Enterprise. *Journal of Information Ethics*, 22(2), 46-60. doi: 10.3172/JIE.22.2.46

Kirschenbaum, M. (2009). Where Computer Science and Cultural Studies Collide. *Chronicle of Higher Education,* 55(20). Retrieved from http://www.chronicle.com/article/where-computer-science-and/14806

Murkutu. (n.d.) Retrieved May 7, 2017, from website http://mukurtu.org/about/

Reveal Digital. (n.d.) Retrieved May 10, 2017, from website http://revealdigital.com/how-it-works/

Robertson, T. (2016, March 20; 2016, August 15; 2016, October 12). Digitization: just because you can doesn't mean you should; Update on On Our Backs and Reveal Digital; Concerns about Reveal Digital's statement about On Our Backs. Blog postings retrieved from http://tararobertson.ca/2016/oob/

Smith, A. (2007) Valuing Preservation. *Library Trends, 56(1),* 4–25. doi:10.1353/lib.2007.0059

Whaanga H., Bainbridge, D., Anderson, M., Scrivener K., Cader P., Roa, T. & Keegan, T. (2015). He Matapihi Mā Mua, Mō Muri: The Ethics, Processes, and Procedures Associated with the Digitization of Indigenous Knowledge—The Pei Jones Collection. *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 53(5-6), 520-547. doi:10.1080/01639374.2015.1009670