



**Information ethics: towards a communitarian model**

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**Overview of session**

- What LIS ethics have been espoused over the years
- Exploratory journey through the concept of liberalism and liberal neutrality as cornerstone of library and information ethics
- Overview of contemporary critiques of liberalism and what this means for our ethics
- Discussion of misinformation/disinformation/truth values
- What might a communitarian library and information ethics look like?

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**What is in official codes – information/libraries**

Koehler and Pemberton identify six themes that are common across the globe for library/information organisations:

1. Client/patron rights and privileges
2. Selection issues
3. Professional practice
4. Access issues
5. Employer responsibility
6. Social issues (Koehler and Pemberton, 2000, p.34).

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**Some History.....library ethics**

- First code for librarians was introduced in 1938 by the American Library Association (ALA)
  - (it was formed in 1876!)
- In the UK the Library Association (now CILIP) adopted their first code in 1983
  - (it was formed in 1877!)
- Some attempts from outside professional bodies to specify an ethical framework for library/information...

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**Ranganathan's 5 Laws of Library Science**

1. Books are for use
2. Every reader his/her book
3. Every book, its reader
4. Save the time of the reader
5. A library is a growing organism

Ranganathan, S.R. (1931) *Five Laws of Library Science*

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**Gorman's Enduring Values of Librarianship**

1. Stewardship
2. Service
3. Intellectual Freedom
4. Equity of Access
5. Privacy
6. Literacy and Learning
7. Rationalism
8. Democracy

Gorman, Michael (2000) *Our Enduring Values: Librarianship in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Chicago: ALA

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 **The challenge facing us**

- We tend to avoid the fact that there is no universal LIS ethic that can be identified (see Foster and McMenemy, 2012)
- This puts us on backfoot when a major challenge to the overarching political philosophy in the West is currently underway
  - Structures and systems built on liberalism are under pressure from both progressive and regressive criticisms. This has a direct impact on LIS ethics, as it is largely built from this philosophical tradition
- For example, for the majority of librarianship's modern history, neutrality has been a cornerstone of LIS ethics.
- It was so accepted, until recently, it was hardly discussed in the professional literature

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 **Neutrality and LIS ethics**

- Neutrality is a core facet of liberalism, and it is also a "core – yet controversial – value" (Macdonald and Birdi, 2020, p.333)

Decade	Number of references
1980s	14
1990s	127
2000s	487
2010s	755
2020s	187

Table 1. Frequency of term 'neutral' in Library and Information Science Abstracts – 1980s-2020s ('net neutrality' removed) – April 2022

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 **A key criticism of liberal neutrality**

- Can be summed up in the following quote:
- "Universalistic moral theories in the Western tradition from Hobbes to Rawls are substitutionalist, in the sense that the universalism they defend is defined surreptitiously by identifying the experiences of a specific group of subjects as the paradigmatic case of the human as such. These subjects are invariably white, male adults who are propertied or at least professional" (Benhabib, 1987, p.181).

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### Considering the critique...

- The critique is in part true, but important facets of neutrality have importance for LIS ethics
- At its heart, neutrality also reflects the reality that in a complex world, many debates relate to the accommodation and/or toleration of multiple world views, and rights claims, and ensuring that an equilibrium can be achieved between them
- The notion of “public reason” remains an important one for us to reflect on – on what philosophical basis can we support a society that has such competing world views?
- In other words, how does the profession navigate *culture wars*?

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### The liberal approach to ethics

- Liberalism can be defined as an “approach to political power and social justice that determines principles of right (justice) prior to, and largely independent of, determination of conceptions of the good” (Christman, 2020)
- The right comes before the good and “no particular conception of the good may define or take priority over the principles of justice” (Parvin and Chambers, 2012)
- The self is defined as a “chooser of ends”, separated from the conception of the good, and exists as a moral being regardless of the good (Parvin and Chambers, 2012)

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### The development of rights

- First generation consists of the classic liberty rights of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—freedom of expression, of assembly, of worship, and the like.
- Second generation is made up of the welfare rights widely supposed to be of the mid-twentieth century though actually first asserted in the late Middle Ages—positive rights to aid, in contrast.... to the purely negative rights of the first generation.
- Third generation, the rights of our time, of the last twenty-five years or so, consists of ‘solidarity’ rights, including, most prominently, group rights (Griffin, 2008, p. 256)

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### Contemporary clash?

- "Membership of certain groups, especially cultural groups, is of great importance to their members. A good life depends importantly upon the successful pursuit of worthwhile goals and relationships, and they, in turn, are culturally determined" (Griffin, 2008, p.262)
- Current controversies largely to be a clash between those on the right-wing of politics who espouse the first-generation classic liberty rights versus those more left of center who espouse the third-generation solidarity or group rights
- The "fairly recent appearance of group rights is part of a widespread modern movement to make the discourse of rights do most of the important work in ethics, which it neither was designed to do nor... should now be made to do" (Griffin, 2008, p. 256)

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### The Communitarian critique

- Difficult to summarize simply, but is: "the view that, by emphasizing individual freedom, liberalism and libertarianism [liberals] undermine the shared sense of identity which people need in order to function as a society" (Parvin and Chambers, 2012, p. 205)
- Sandel: "At issue is not whether individual or communal claims should carry greater weight but whether the principles of justice that govern the basic structure of society can be neutral with respect to the competing moral and religious convictions its citizens espouse" (Sandel, 1982: 1994, p.x)

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### The communitarian critique expanded

- "I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations, and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its own moral particularity" (Macintyre, 1981: 2007, p. 220)
- Fawcett summarises communitarian critique as thus:
- "Liberals assumed that what people happened to want fixed their values and ideals, whereas in truth, values and ideals fixed what people ought to want. Values and ideals, in addition, grew out of shared practices in society, which alone gave people a purpose in life. Liberal modernity had dislocated society and shattered its practices (Fawcett, 2014, pp. 351-352)

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**The communitarian critique summarised**

- Bell sets out the 3 main communitarian critiques of liberalism that emerged in the 1980s:
- The Liberal Self – the liberal, autonomous individual is defined as overly individualistic
- Liberal Universalism – the liberal, autonomous individual is insufficiently rooted in community and its influences
- Liberal Atomism – the liberal, autonomous individual is a lonely, isolated figure who is unaware of society and the people in it (Bell, 1993, pp. 4–6)

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**Addressing more complexity.....**

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**Fake news/disinformation/misinformation**

- A key challenge for information professionals has always been the concept of combating misinformation and disinformation
- While we must be extremely careful not to overclaim our role in "fixing" this, it is a concern for the core of what we do
- Examining the complexity of different types of truth give us an idea of the scale of the ethical problems facing us

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### Information and truth...the challenges!

- *Post-truth* was named Oxford Dictionaries word of the year in November 2016, a year that had seen the rise of Donald Trump as President of the United States, and the vote for the United Kingdom to leave the EU in June 2016
- *Time* magazine featured in April 2017 a cover page in bold red writing on a black background that simply asked, "*Is Truth Dead?*"
- Frankfurt stated, "we value truth because "being indifferent to truth is an undesirable or even a reprehensible characteristic" [3, p.5].

Frankfurt, H.(2006) *On Truth*. Random House, New York.

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### What is *post-truth*?

- "[R]elating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" Oxford English Dictionary
- In this definition *post* doesn't relate to as being in the past, "it's that truth has been eclipsed—that it is irrelevant" (McIntyre, 2008, p.15)
- McIntyre highlights science denial, cognitive bias, decline in traditional media, the rise of social media, and the influences of post-modernism all as contributors

McIntyre, L.: *Post-Truth*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. (2018)

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### Baggini's taxonomy of truths

• Baggini identifies ten types of truth:

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|-------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Eternal truths       | 6. Creative truths  |
| 2. Authoritative truths | 7. Relative truths  |
| 3. Esoteric truths      | 8. Powerful truths  |
| 4. Reasoned truths      | 9. Moral truths     |
| 5. Empirical truths     | 10. Holistic truths |

Baggini, J.(2017) *A Short History of Truth: Consolations for a Post-Truth World*. Quercus Editions Limited, London.

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### Eternal and authoritative

- **Eternal truths:** the belief in the truth that a religious doctrine prescribes
- Baggini's rubric: "*Spiritual 'truths' should not compete with secular ones but should be seen as belonging to a different species.*"
- **Authoritative truths:** who can actually be trusted to speak with any authority?
- Baggini's rubric: "*We should think for ourselves, not by ourselves.*"

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### Esoteric and reasoned

- **Esoteric truths:** many truths are hidden from the plain view of the general public, often by elites
- Baggini's rubric: "*We should be sceptical not cynical.*"
- **Reasoned truths:** reason is "a potential generator of absolute truths, a kind of logic machine into which we could feed indubitable facts and first principles, and out of which would come a complete understanding"
- Baggini's rubric: "*Reason demands modesty not certainty.*"

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### Empirical and creative

- **Empirical truths:** we must look to evidence to guide our decisions and actions
- Baggini's rubric: "*To become smarter, we must understand the ways we are dumb.*"
- **Creative truths:** words can change truth, and they can be used for both good and ill. Societies can organise around new truths they wish to see be created.
- Baggini's rubric: "*Truths need to be created as well as found.*"

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### Relative and powerful

- **Relative truths:** "Truth has become personalised, with the individual sovereign over their own interpretation of reality."
- **Baggini's rubric:** "*Alternative perspectives should be sought not as alternative truths but as enrichers of truth.*"
- **Powerful truths:** ability of powerful to create their version of the truth
- **Baggini's rubric:** "*Power doesn't speak truth; truth must speak to power.*"

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### Moral and holistic

- **Moral truths:** Morality itself is largely based on feelings rather than facts: we are often simply "expressing a preference." Preferences often adapt as societies adapt.
- **Baggini's rubric:** "*For a better morality we need better knowledge.*"
- **Holistic truths:** "Truths do not stand or fall independently but are held in a network with other truths, all of which mutually support each other."
- **Baggini's rubric:** "*Truth needs to be understood holistically.*"

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### Truths in summary

- **Baggini:** "*Establishing the truth requires 'epistemic virtues' like modesty, scepticism, openness to other perspectives, a spirit of collective enquiry, a readiness to confront power, a desire to create better truths, a willingness to let our morals be guided by the facts*"
- **Frankfurt suggests:** "*No one in his right mind would rely on a builder, or submit to the care of a physician, who does not care about the truth*" (p.24)
- **How does a profession like librarianship address these complexities?**

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 **The hollowing out of the public sphere**

- Sandel has written extensively about what he calls the hollowing out of the public sphere, suggesting that it, “makes it difficult to cultivate the solidarity and sense of community on which democratic citizenship depends” (Sandel, 2009 p. 267).
- Like other communitarians, he has “argued not only for stronger notions of community and solidarity but also for a more robust public engagement with moral and religious questions” (Sandel, 2009 p. 247)
- Could a communitarian LIS ethic build around this concept?

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 **The case for a communitarian ethic in LIS**

- The profession is at the beginning of a major debate about the core values it espouses
- Attempts to tack on progressive elements to current codes of ethics are arguably a sticking plaster approach
- We need a period of reflection to consider what a new ethical approach that is grounded in the philosophy of communitarianism could add to an LIS ethic, while not taking away
- Some examples of the “tweaks” necessary

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 **Communitarian ethic v liberal ethic in LIS**

Liberal ethos in LIS	Communitarian ethos in LIS
The profession should be neutral in matters of morals, individual identity, and religious belief	The profession should promote and facilitate civic discourse on matters of moral, group, and religious issues that impact the wider common good
The profession should not limit individual rights even if it is detrimental to a common good	The profession should promote individual rights as a backbone of a shared, agreed common good
The profession should support the individual within society to prioritize and achieve their own goals without consideration of wider societal needs	The profession should support the development of active citizens with an emphasis to enable them to take their place as part of a civic populace able to take part in a shared democratic project.

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 **Key questions**

- Could we even get agreement on what a common good looks like?
- It may entail us acknowledging the uniqueness of borders and cultures and understanding there is no single universal LIS ethic that can be identified
- How do we get a debate started that is both respectful and fruitful?

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 **Conclusions**

- Challenge to neutrality arguably an overdue debate for LIS ethics
- Amidst the critique, we must also be cognisant of what the benefits of neutrality were and try to formulate a new LIS ethics that also accommodates those benefits
- The challenges facing our profession are complex, and controversial, and cannot be fixed with banal statements or tweaks
- An LIS ethic modelled on the philosophy of communitarianism could offer benefits, while maintaining a focus on community and group identity

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 **Thank you!**  
Any questions?



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