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Ethical Decision-Making in Library Administration

Stephen R. Shorb

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Introduction

Libraries, like many public sector service organizations, are under increasing pressure to do more with less. Pressure to make the best use of limited resources and provide an ever-expanding range of services requires a careful consideration of priorities. Establishing priorities often requires difficult decisions – decisions that can challenge long held beliefs and practices. In order to maintain the public trust and the profession's own self-esteem, library administrators need to find ways to form and evaluate decisions that can be justified. When difficult choices must be made, how do administrators know their choices are the right ones?

A growing body of literature in the study of public relations is concerned with the ethical dimensions of public service (Cooper 1994). Ethics, as the explicit philosophical reflection on morality, offers a standard by which to measure decisions. Public administrators are increasingly using ethical analysis to confirm that their decisions match the moral framework of their constituencies, and use ethical terms both to define issues and to direct their actions towards workable solutions. These explorations may lead to a useful model for ethical decision-making in libraries.

The first section of this paper develops a simple model for ethical decision-making. A useful model serves two main purposes. First, it easily explains the relationship between the various components of ethical decision-making by creating a chain between the most basic underlying values, the intervening ethical processes, and the actions that finally result. Thus, decisions can be more easily explained and justified. Second, use of the model may also assist in the actual implementation of the decision. A step-by-step progression through the model has the additional benefit of modeling the developmental stages found in models for the ethical maturation of individuals. By considering

the ethical dimensions in a structured, incremental way, individuals (and groups) at all levels of ethical development can be identified and brought into the process. Each decision process is “built from the ground up” and the resulting decisions will have cognitive consonance and a certain inherent momentum that can help convert the decision into action. The second section of the paper discusses the advantages of a decision-making model over a code of ethics and then uses the model to address actual problems in library administration.

A Simple Model for Ethical Decision-Making

The study of ethics begins with the conception, both as individuals and as a society, of what is moral. Morality may be defined as “the first-order beliefs and practices about good and evil by means of which we guide our behavior” (Hinman 2003). Thus, the most basic consideration of ethics contains the germ of a model for decision-making. Behaviors, including decisions and their implementation, are guided by moral beliefs and moral actions. Moral beliefs form the pre-existing, internal, mental framework from which moral practices are derived. Moral practices represent the external manifestation and consequences of those beliefs. The definition of morality, then, contains two essential properties of an effective model – direction (from internal to external) and motion (from belief to action).

The model can be made more useful by defining additional stages on the path from belief to practice (see Figure 1). Moral beliefs are composed of a constellation of values, defined as inherently desirable qualities. Values represent what people believe to be good and worthy of pursuit in their personal and professional lives. Values are often viewed as the ideals, customs, and institutions that arouse an emotional response in a given society or individual. They represent society's fundamental moral beliefs, subdivided into discrete concepts.

Moral beliefs also include principles, the basic laws and axioms that describe values and provide a guiding sense of the requirements and obligations of right conduct. As such, principles begin the process of turning concept into action.

They are a “mental shorthand” for relating values to practical decisions. Principles are characterized by short, simple phrases that incorporate a value (or set of values) with an explicit, or strongly implied, prescription for action. Principles can range from “Thou shalt not kill” in the religious realm to “A stitch in time saves nine” from the realm of practical experience. Both convey the underlying values along with directions for converting them into action.

Moral practices include decisions and the actions taken as a result of those decisions. The decision process requires applying appropriate principles to a given situation in such a way that appropriate actions are suggested. This process is often subdivided into problem definition, generation of alternatives, projection of consequences, and systematic acceptance or rejection of alternatives based on possible outcomes (Cooper 1998, 18). However, the critical element of decision-making is finding effective routes of transmission for the underlying values that will shape the decision. Constant reference to principles, even competing principles, will aid this process. Finally, action is necessary to complete the ethical process. Having the “strength of one’s convictions” is meaningless in the absence of timely and effective action based on principle.

Action almost always requires the assistance of others. To best assure cooperation, others must share – or at least comprehend – the ethical underpinnings of a decision and request for action. Importantly, the level of moral development (on any given issue) of others cannot usually be known with any degree of certainty. Thus, the decision process must begin at the lowest possible level and use the inherent direction and action of the model to “sweep up” and carry along participants in the decision who begin at all levels of moral development. If the model of ethical progression can clearly show the connection between each “rung of the ladder,” it may be possible to lead others “upwards” so that they share the connection to values and the validity of the process. Perhaps the classic example of this effect is from the New Testament. In the Sermon on the Mount, those from the lowest levels of spiritual development (“Blessed are the poor in spirit”) to the highest (“Blessed are the peace-makers”) are swept upward toward acceptance of the Christian ethic.

Figure 1 also shows Aiken’s (1962, 68) four levels of ethical development, and the way in which they mirror the progression of the decision-making model. Values are often so deeply embedded that they can only be understood at a visceral and emotive level that Aiken terms the “expressive.” The translation of values into communicable ideas is assisted by principles – Aiken’s level of moral rules. Deeper reflection and the essence of ethical argument occur at the level of ethical analysis. Finally, the level of post-ethical consideration encompasses the actions, consequences, and moral refinement that result from the resolution of the ethical process.

Effective use of this decision-making model involves a conscious progression from values to principles to decisions to actions. It requires constant referencing between intended action and the supporting principles. Finally, in order to assist the process of leadership, there must be an open communication of the progression from the basic level of expressive understanding to the higher levels of ethical consideration.

Ethical Decision Models Versus Codes of Ethics

Professions, and librarianship is no exception, form codes of ethics with the intention of promulgating the ethical principles that guide their work. The American Library Association Code of Ethics (2004) is one example of such an effort. The code attempts to provide “principles...expressed in broad statements to guide ethical decision making.” However, using the logic developed in the first section of this paper, the information offered in the ALA code is, in fact, a mixture of values (both general and specific to the profession), principles, and practical direction. These are combined with vague exhortations to “quality” and “service” that offer very little guidance for decision-making on ethical grounds.

The ALA Code of Ethics shares a trait common to other such codes in that it focuses on the ethics required under special circumstances – points of ethical crisis – while minimizing the ethics required for successful day-to-day administration. This is not to say that special ethical situations are not important. The most prominent principle in the code, “resist all efforts to censor library resources,” is sometimes a needed shield from intense pressure exerted by

special interest groups. However, when taken out of the crisis context, the principle tends to lose meaning. If censorship is the intentional exclusion of material from the library collection, then the librarian must practice censorship on a daily basis. Since limited resources demand selectivity, materials are excluded routinely. This exclusion must be based on some principle that is less known, or less obviously stated, than the injunction against censorship found in the code.

A deeper look at values and how they are organized into moral rules, or principles, is needed to complement the code of ethics and adapt it to the decision-making required for ongoing operation of a library.

Applying a Decision-Making Model in Libraries, Using Existing Ethical Principles

Any study of the history of library administration will soon uncover the contributions of S. R. Ranganathan. Trained as a mathematician, Ranganathan was possessed of a keen analytical mind and a strong sense of the values underlying modern librarianship. He used a disciplined approach to understanding human endeavors in combination with powerful observation of practical experiences to form his five laws of library science (Ranganathan 1931). These laws possess the essential traits of principles as defined in the model discussed above. They are succinct basic axioms that consolidate a set of values, and express them in a way that both clarifies the values and points the way to their implementation. These laws are:

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

At this point, it is necessary to introduce some standard disclaimers. Even though he wrote more than seventy years ago, Ranganathan was not limiting his laws to books. In his work, he clearly explains that this is shorthand for all library materials and services. Consequently, by reader he means any user of any form of library material. The concepts of the five laws can be taken to apply equally to books and readers, videos and viewers, and computers and researchers.

Ranganathan's work is far from forgotten, as evidenced by recent articles building on his five

laws (Gorman 1998) and applying them to specific types of libraries (Yucht 2001). However, the power of his basic formulation has tended to remain in the forefront while the careful work of relating the underlying values to these principles has been neglected. A careful reading of his book shows how values can be translated into moral actions and how the principles of the five laws can form an important element of an ethical decision-making process. For each of the five laws, a brief example will demonstrate the clarity and momentum that can be achieved by clearly enunciated principles, and the efficacy of a simple decision-making model.

Example One. Computers are provided for library patrons to use. It is often convenient for them to download information onto a diskette or CD, but use of those drives opens the possibility for introduction of computer viruses and subsequent downtime. The IT department recommends disabling the diskette drives to avoid this problem.

Application of Law 1: Books are for Use.

This law reflects the basic premise that libraries acquire materials for the express purpose of making the contents (information, knowledge, inspiration, entertainment) easily available and easily transmissible. The simple clause "for use" must then include a huge diversity of factors, including the organization of materials, open access, hours of operation, qualifications of staff, etc.

The underlying values of the first law are many. They include a belief in the free transmission of ideas, the right of the individual to education, and equality of access to the common birthright of human knowledge. The principle "books are for use" gathers these concepts into a form that can be easily weighed against a specific situation. If books are for use, then all forms of information are for use and all forms of information technology are for use. It would not make sense to "disable" the index of a book, or chain it to a bench as in Medieval times, to limit its accessibility. The first law links the value of free transmission of ideas to the question of unfettered computer access and points the way toward an ethical decision based on that value. Action taken will reflect the paramount morality of usefulness and include actions to guarantee that the computers will continue to be available for optimal use. The drives should remain

activated, complemented with anti-virus software, an educational campaign about viruses, or other options to reduce the risk of equipment failure.

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Example Two. The university is increasing its focus on distance learning. Although excellent instruction and access to electronic resources will be available to all registered students, some library materials can be accessed only in their physical form at the main library. Some of these items are too scarce to send copies by mail, so distance learners will be unable to have the same opportunity to access these items.

Application of Law 2: Every Reader His/Her Book. This law has several main components, all enunciating the theme that each person in a community should be served by the library designed for that community. First, the library is for the “real world” user, not for the librarian or for some idealized version of what the user should be. Librarians must select items beyond their own interests to reflect the needs of the community. Second, the concept of “every reader” must be very inclusive. Library users of all groups in the community should have access to meet their needs. Accommodation for handicapped individuals, literacy programs for those unable to read, training for inexperienced users, and research to find the best materials for advanced scholars are all elements of this law.

The values informing the second law include those of equality, open access to knowledge, universal education and literacy, professional detachment, and intellectual neutrality. In this case, decisions must be made based on the underlying values of equality and access. Distance learners pay the same tuition and deserve the best possible facsimile of the on-campus experience that can be provided. Action on this decision will reflect the principle of the second law by finding ways to make materials more widely available. The scarce material should be digitized, with the necessary work required for copyright clearance and technical issues dealt with as appropriate.

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Example Three. A section of the library has a large number of items with multiple copies. The items are rarely used and occupy considerable

space. However, they do contribute to the total number of volumes in the collection – a measure of quality and prestige in academic circles. It is also difficult to tell whether scholars might find some renewed interest in a seemingly obsolete topic.

Application of Law 3: Every Book Its Reader.

This law points out that books not read, and equipment not used, can only interfere with the other laws and run counter to several core values of libraries. Each item should be selected, maintained, and continuously evaluated on the basis of its potential contribution to the needs of a specific user. Items not used should be promoted and advertised to appropriate audiences so that the potential usefulness can be achieved or they should be discarded to make way for other items with greater potential.

The values collected in the third law include economy, responsible use of public resources, and the duty to communicate about available resources. To assure “every book its reader,” the book must be appropriate for the intended audience and the reader must be informed, or easily led to the item through good methods of organizing the collection. The third law links the value of economy to the decision to keep or discard items. Action taken will weigh actual use, potential use, and the “opportunity cost” of inaction. The redundant multiple copies should be removed to make way for more useful items. The withdrawal could be complemented with an effort to donate the extra copies to another library.

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Example Four. The library web site is being redesigned. It is found that a large percentage of users follow several links to arrive at the online book catalog, and then key in a simple keyword search to locate a needed item. The web committee is divided. Some think they should move a simple search window to the top page. Others feel this will cause users to take the “easy way out” and fail to see ways to conduct more sophisticated searches that could be found on a web page with more detailed information about the online catalog.

Application of Law 4: Save the Time of the Reader. This law helps bring the required degree of specificity to broad calls for “quality”

and “excellence of service.” Library policies should be designed to benefit the user – not merely make administration more convenient for the library staff. The essentials of any bureaucracy required to accomplish library functions should be continuously examined for opportunities to streamline. The important work of the first three laws can best take place in an environment arranged for ease of use.

The fourth law touches on some very deep values not ordinarily associated with library administration. In simple axiomatic form, it envelops the ideas that life is precious and that our time – limited as it is – is a commodity to be valued. The purpose of life (which may be partly expressed in the values of the first three laws – knowledge, understanding, exploration, enlightenment) must be accomplished in the time allotted. Therefore, the web committee must weigh convenience against depth of knowledge without knowing if the depth is desired. A top level search should be allowed, moderated by training and other “pointers” that will assure access to more detailed searches for those who need them.

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Example Five. There is tremendous value in maintaining long runs of scientific journals. Each issue of a journal brings development of previous ideas and suggestions for further research. Each issue also brings an increase in the total amount of space needed to store this information. Many key journals now make their entire historical runs available on electronic databases. Some suggest that the printed copies can be safely discarded, relying on the electronic services. Others insist that the library has always kept paper copies, and that electronic services are commercial businesses or grant-funded initiatives that could disappear without warning.

Application of Law 5: The Library is a Growing Organism. The fifth law draws a powerful analogy between the world of knowledge and its biological host – the human being. The essence of life is growth and change. Technology, individuals, communities, and societies are all subject to growth. Some growth results in a larger physical presence, and other growth results in a change of character. Librarians must remember that information

resources will grow and develop and must be dutiful in their planning for that inevitability.

The values underlying this law include a belief in progress and the acceptance that change is to be welcomed as a form of growth. These values also include the importance of planning for the future (even though we can’t know exactly what it will bring) and the duty for responsible stewardship of human knowledge. As Ranganathan (1931, 112) himself puts it, “a growing organism takes in new matter, casts off old matter, changes in size and takes new shapes and forms.” The fifth law would aid greatly the decision to discard redundant printed sources in favor of electronic forms. A growing organism does not always experience less exposure to hazard. A larger electronic library may be more vulnerable to business failure, yet less vulnerable to fire or other physical threats. Finally, it must be considered that an organism unable to shed waste would eventually collapse under its own weight. The avoidance of that fate is one that can be planned for and realized.

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Assessment and Conclusion

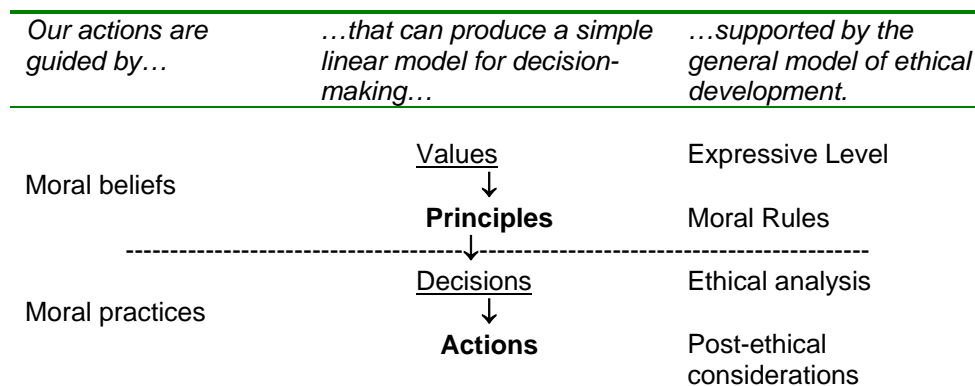
The preceding “trial run” of the simple ethical decision model shows that the consideration of commonplace library issues can be enriched by examining the path from values to principles to decisions and actions. As the examples indicate, the approach is essentially deontological, in that values influence dutiful actions on the part of the library administrator. The model could be improved by introducing more elements of the teleological approach to moral thinking, which would further consider the end effects of decision making in libraries. An increased emphasis on the “science” in library science should include the qualitative factors that the extended field of moral philosophy can offer. Each example could also be further explored to see how the model might facilitate group consensus on the issues. To be most useful, the model would combine the preceding justifications for action with the potential to serve as a way to organize different viewpoints and direct them towards a concordant result.

Library administrators will soon face the greatest challenges ever in the short history of modern librarianship. Rapidly advancing technology and changing user expectations will combine to assure that the status quo cannot be

maintained. The process of setting priorities and making appropriate decisions will be discomfoting to many. The increasing pressure to justify results and demonstrate value will

require a return to the core values of the field. Opportunities for true leadership through ethical decision-making will result for those who can successfully link values to actions.

Figure 1. A simple model for ethical decision-making.



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