



World Library and Information Congress: 69th IFLA General Conference and Council

1-9 August 2003, Berlin

Code Number:

086-E

Meeting:

170. Library Theory and Research & Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE)

Off-site Workshop: Haus Berliner Stadtbibliothek

Simultaneous Interpretation:

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Ethics of librarianship in the Nordic Countries

Dr. Robert W. Vaagan

Oslo University College

Abstract

The 5 Nordic countries - Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – share a number of geographical, historical, cultural and (with the exception of Finland) linguistic features. The similarities extend also to libraries and professional librarianship. Yet if we look at professional LIS ethics in the 5 countries, we find some variety: The national library associations of Finland, Sweden and Iceland have all established codes of ethics for all types of librarians. In Norway there exists so far only a nationally approved code of ethics for librarians in academic and research libraries, and in Denmark there is no national code of ethics for librarians. How can one explain these variations, especially the situation in Norway and Denmark, at a time when the many challenges of the information age all indicate a need for codes of ethics for all types of librarians and for information professionals?

Nordic libraries and ethics

Core values and ethics in librarianship are perhaps easiest to consider in relation to general libraries. This is because general libraries by serving a wider public than other types of libraries, epitomize many social and community ideals closely related with general core values and ethics. If we look at general libraries in the Nordic countries their public utility emphasis on free services and equitable access in fact mirror the development of the much acclaimed Scandinavian welfare model. In Norway much of LIS research remains preoccupied with general libraries and how they are grappling with a changing environment (Audunson 2001). At the root of this is an ethically motivated concern that e.g. digitisation, market forces, commercialisation of information and New Public Management may negatively affect the traditional role of general libraries in promoting values of equity, participation, democracy and social inclusion (Usherwood, Linley 2000, Vaagan 2003). A

concern with ethics and core values is also noticeable in LIS education and research in the other Nordic countries, e.g. in Denmark, where standard LIS textbooks now include chapters on ethical accounting and knowledge-based asset measurement and management (Johannsen, Pors 2002; Sveiby 1998).

My theme today – the ethics of librarianship in the 5 Nordic countries – is therefore appropriate. The points I shall raise are limited to a few features from the book on ethics in librarianship which I had the pleasure of editing last year with contributions from several of my esteemed colleagues here today (Vaagan 2002a).

Finland

Among the 5 Nordic countries Finland was a forerunner in introducing an ethical code for librarians. In the mid-1980s library associations in Finland started discussing the introduction of an ethical code, and this work caught the attention of other Nordic countries. In 1989 a statement called "Principles of library work" was adopted by the Finnish library associations. The 4 principles involved concerned 1) library work and society, 2) service to clients, 3) professional knowledge and 4) the work team or community. In the early 1990s several Nordic reports and surveys were conducted, concluding that Nordic librarians basically have the same set of ethical values, although some differences were noted on issues such as solidarity versus protectionism, user payment and violation of the law. By highlighting the fundamental values and ethics of librarianship, the code is seen as useful as libraries and librarians are faced by the challenges of the information age (Sevón 2002:110ff)

Iceland

When the Icelandic Librarians' Association in 1996 approved a code of ethics, Iceland became the second Nordic country to do so after Finland. In 1999 4 library associations merged in a new united association of professional librarians and paraprofessionals: Information - The Icelandic Library and Information Science Association. The new organization immediately set about revising the code of ethics and a new code was adopted in 2001. There were no major changes apart from a formulation regarding members where paraprofessionals was added. The code plays an important role in Icelandic librarianship. Iceland's isolated geographical location means that a lot of emphasis is placed on Internet services. Icelandic librarians face more ethical issues now with online searching in databases that are free of charge, and net filtering is currently a hotly debated issue (Friðgeirsdóttir 2002:133ff).

Sweden

The third Nordic country to introduce a code of ethics was Sweden, shortly after Iceland. In Sweden the question appears to be particularly entangled with the history of how trade unions have developed. In the mid-1980s The Library Association first adopted guidelines for reference work. In 1992-93 the librarians within the DIK Association developed a first draft code of ethics for librarians which was approved in 1997. That same year SFF (the union for librarians working in general libraries) and VBT (librarians working in university/research libraries) merged under the DIK umbrella. DIK is the union and professional association for librarians, and 90% of Swedish librarians are today members of DIK. Within DIK, the librarians form the Swedish Association of Librarians. The code of ethics, in the view of DIK, makes no reference to ICT and will be need to be revised to redress this deficiency. The code,

though seen as useful by DIK, is considered just a first step towards developing a higher professional awareness among librarians and information professionals (Hägström 2002:253ff).

Norway

In 1990 Norway could have become the second Nordic country to adopt a code of ethics, but chose not to. In 1990 The Norwegian Library Association (NBF) decided to shelve indefinitely a proposed set of rudimentary ethical guidelines for employees in all Norwegian libraries. This happened partly due to differences between public and private sector libraries, and partly since it was felt that existing Norwegian jurisdiction and standards were sufficient. During the 1990s ethics remained a non-issue in Norwegian librarianship while at the same time ethical debate was very apparent in academic and public life as well as in private business. Since 1990 several individual libraries (e.g. Oslo's main general library Deichman), as well as many local authorities and municipalities have introduced ethical codes. Today professional values and ethics are an important aspect of professional debate among Norwegian librarians (Vaagan, Holm 2003).

In early 2002 a working group set up by The National Office for Research Documentation, Academic and Special Libraries (RBT) which was headed by the present author, presented a set of guidelines to RBT. These were subsequently published as the official, recommended, ethical guidelines of RBT for Norwegian academic and research libraries. Today academic and research libraries have a recommended ethical guidelines, but there is no uniform code of ethics or conduct at the national level applying to *all* types of Norwegian libraries. A logical next step would be that The Norwegian Library Association (NLA) adapts the existing guidelines of academic and research libraries and formulates a national and unified code for all librarians, but NLA has so far not done this, leaving general libraries to ad hoc solutions.

In part this may be explained by other developments which have dominated debate among librarians: the appearance from 1 January 2003 of a new organization: The Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum Authority (NALMA). The purpose of NALMA is to establish a unified organizational superstructure and to bring together 3 former separate sector organizations into a coherent and balanced organizational unit with common goals and purposes. Within librarianship there was a history of strained relations between the two former main organizations: The National Office for Research Documentation, Academic and Special Libraries (RBT) under The Ministry of Education and Research and on the other hand The Norwegian Directorate for Public Libraries (SBT) under The Ministry of Culture and Church Affairs

In terms of ethics, the NALMA concept faces several challenges. Today only general librarians lack nationally approved ethical guidelines within the NALMA framework. Both archivists and museum staff had ethical codes long before the appearance of NALMA and academic/research librarians now have national ethical guidelines. One possible way of achieving greater internal cohesion and unity of purpose is therefore to harmonize ethical codes of archives, libraries and museums. All three types of institutions face similar challenges such as digitisation (Vaagan 2002b). In my view it is probable that with time NLA will formulate a unified code of ethics, and that a harmonized code of ethics will emerge within the structure of NALMA.

Denmark

Denmark is the only Nordic country without any national code of ethics for librarians, and Denmark is also the only Nordic country not represented in the book of ethics I edited last year. Even so, there is nothing "rotten in the Kingdom of Denmark", to misquote Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ! The Danish Library Association has preferred not to formulate an ethical code, but it has strongly supported that Danish local authorities (and therefore indirectly also general libraries) adopt an Internet ethics policy. The absence of a formal code therefore does not mean that ethical debate in Denmark is limited or that Danish libraries and librarians do not adhere to ethical standards. Ethical debate, though, mostly revolves around infoethics, cyberethics or Web ethics, and the 4th and revised issue of the Library ABZ (2002) typically has an entry on Web ethics. In a sense Danish librarianship is already deeply involved in the implications of the information age and the changes of the profession.

Two years ago I published an article in the Danish journal *DF-revy* (No.2 March 2001) which is published by The Danish Research Library Association. The article was entitled "Do we need national ethical guidelines?", and I gave a brief summary of my work at the time with ethics in Norway. I tried to stir some discussion by pointing at the paradox that the Danish Minister of Culture at the time had intervened to prevent a local general library from net-filtering websites with pornographic content. Of course when one knows that Denmark in 1969 had officially disbanded restrictions on pornography, this intervention becomes more comprehensible. Nonetheless, it seemed slightly paradoxical that a Minister of Culture should intervene in effect to defend access to pornography in a general library. My article failed to arouse much discussion or response from Danish colleagues, and I failed also in finding a Danish LIS scholar willing to contribute an article on ethics to the book I edited last year. Perhaps this was as much my fault as anyone else's. There can be little doubt, though, that ethical value considerations are important in Danish librarianship and information science, Not only do standard LIS textbooks deal with ethical issues but a recent survey among leaders of Danish general libraries also documented ethical awareness and concern (Johannsen, Pors 2001). However, as the information age unfolds and as librarians increasingly become information professionals, it is my view that The Danish Library Association cannot avoid in the long run formulating a national code of infoethics, but this will depend on how local authorities formulate Internet policies.

Conclusion

I hope to have shown that there are far more points of similarity than diversity among the 5 Nordic countries with respect to ethics in librarianship. In the 3 Nordic countries which have adopted codes of ethics - Finland, Iceland and Sweden - the codes are seen as useful and important especially to meet the changes of the profession and the challenges of the information age. In Norway this is also the case, and the organizational innovation of NALMA will probably entail a harmonization of ethical codes for archives, libraries and museums. The only clear Nordic "exception" is Denmark, but on closer inspection the lack of a nationally approved code of ethics in fact conceals considerable concern with infoethics (cyberethics, Web ethics). I therefore expect that The Danish Library Association within the foreseeable future will formulate a code of infoethics, perhaps in response to how local authorities develop (or do not develop) Internet policies.

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