

Where is Information Ethics in Iranian Library and Information Science Publications and Services?

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Abstract: There seems to be very few signs of the politeness peculiar to Iranians, when considering information ethics in Iranian library and information science scene. An expressed dissatisfaction appears to exist with library services among users studied in some dissertations on user satisfaction in library and information science in Iran. In spite of this fact that might be at least partly related to misbehavior of librarians, the words "ethics", "moral issues", and "morality" are not found in almost all of the publications related to library and information science in Iran, even in the most formal ones. These publications and documents as well as the current attempts to develop the topic in Iran, including both publications and activities, will be studied in this paper. The social, economic, and ethical aspects of the issue including the misunderstanding of the concepts of who serves and who must be served, who pays the tax and who must obtain service due to tax paying, the overall dissatisfaction of librarians concerning their social status as well as salaries and wages, the low costs, if any, of library and information services in Iran, will also be considered to show why this negligence has occurred in the profession.

There are some efforts to be made however, to improve the situation. Library and information science educators firstly must do their best to show the significance of ethics in the profession. Their efforts must comprise the formal and informal teaching of information ethics to their students. Inclusion of courses of ethics in formal syllabi is among formal attempts. The demonstration of this ethics in LIS educator's behavior is an informal one. Publication of papers on information ethics is another duty of LIS educators. Setting up workshops on information ethics is a necessary step to be taken. Professional associations such as Iranian Library and Information Science Association (ILISA) can play an important role on the scene. The provision of an information code of ethics is a major responsibility of this association and is highly recommended.

Keywords: information ethics, Iran, user satisfaction, Iranian libraries

1. Introduction

Some define professional ethics as "A set of [standards](#) governing the conduct and judgment of [librarians](#), [library staff](#), and other [information](#) professionals in their work. The [ALA Code of Ethics](#) sets standards for equitable [access](#), [intellectual freedom](#), [confidentiality](#), respect for [intellectual property rights](#), excellence, [accuracy](#), integrity, impartiality, courtesy, and respect for colleagues and library [patrons](#)" (ODLIS 2008). Having the above definitions in mind, one might be surprised when considering the issue of information ethics in Iran. Iranians are very polite people. Their Islamic beliefs as well as their long traditional culture make them quite polite, especially in relation to foreigners, who usually find Iranians very hospitable. But there seems to be very few signs of this politeness when considering information ethics in Iranian library and information science publications and services. Although results from researches on user satisfaction in different types of libraries show contradictory information, there seems however, to be a sensible dissatisfaction with library services among users studied in some dissertations and articles on user satisfaction in library and information science in Iran. What follows tries to examine firstly the situation in terms of the existence of any code of ethics, librarians as well as patrons' satisfaction rate, respect for intellectual property rights, and respect for colleagues and library patrons in Iran. The other issues concerning professional ethics as defined in ALA Code of Ethics will secondly be pointed out in brief when applicable.

2. Examination of some documents on the issue

In spite of the fact that the expressed dissatisfaction in the users' side might be at least partly related to misbehavior of librarians as one aspect of lack, or at least shortage of information ethics, in "A cyclopedic dictionary of library and information sciences", the most-frequently used encyclopedic dictionary in Iran, there is no entry for ethics or similar terms in Farsi, neither in the body of, nor in the English index to the dictionary (Soltani 2001). In the translation into Farsi of "Concise dictionary of library and information science" (Keenan 2000), however, the words: Ethics and Professional ethics have been presented. Also in a thesaurus on information science translated into Farsi, the word ethics is seen (ASIS 2001). Another dictionary entitled: "Basic dictionary of librarianship, information science and technology", compiled and translated from four English sources, the word ethics and the term professional ethics are also included (Tahavori 2005). As is

seen, the words ethics and/or professional ethics can only be seen in the dictionaries or thesauri translated into Farsi, not in ones written originally in Farsi.

The same happens when studying the issue in books on research methods in library and information science. In a book entitled "Research methods in librarianship" (Dayyani 1990) as the first book in Farsi on research methods in librarianship, no words on ethics or morality is found. In a later book on the same issue called "Research methods in library and information science" (Kumar 1995), a translation into Farsi, in a chapter on the characteristics and abilities of a researcher, the author presents some pages on the research ethics. Although one might claim that there is not any strong relationship between research ethics and information ethics, since the act of doing research is done to produce information however, some relationships might be considered.

In the syllabi for undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral courses for library and information science in Iran, that have been approved by the High Council of Planning of the former Ministry of Culture and Higher Education (now: Ministry of Sciences, Researches, and Technology) in the years 1987, 1995, and 1993 respectively, as far as the author has checked word by word, there is no word of ethics in any kind, neither in the titles nor in the contents. Surprisingly even in the two revision projects of the syllabi for undergraduate and M. Lib. courses, undertaken by Shaheed Chamran University in Ahwaz, where the author is a senior lecturer, and Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, both finalized in the year 2005, the words "ethics", "morality", or other similar concepts are absolutely not seen. It should be noted that although these syllabi were approved after the Revolution of 1978, but they rooted in pre-Revolution era and went back to the year 1965 when the first official M. Lib. course was set up in the School of Psychology and Education of the University of Tehran by some American and British lecturers as well as some Iranians educated mainly in the United States and United Kingdom (Kiani Khouzestani 1996). While the librarians' code of ethics in the United States was prepared in 1939, the question is: why this code of ethics has not been reflected in the syllabi at that time in Iran?

There were only four articles on "ethics of library and information science" in "Library and information science index" (Niazi 1999) that covers some 1750 papers and reports in the period 1968-1999. Of the four, that is, %0.22 of the total papers and reports covered, two are translations and two are originally written.

A search performed in Farsi, in National Library and Archive of the Islamic Republic of Iran (NLAI) database (2008) that includes some 1155763 records, on 27 March 2008, yielded the results shown in table 1:

Table 1: The results of the search performed in NLAI database

Topic	Ethics	Morality	Professional ethics
Information science	0	0	1 (Non-related)
Librarianship	0	0	1 (2007)
Lib. & inf. science	1 (Translated. 2000)	0	1 (Translated. 2005)

As shown in the table, of the 1155763 records included in the NLAI database, only three records were found on the issue of which two were translated and only one was originally written. It should be noted that the search was performed in all databases, in all fields and for any kind of library material on the issue. Since the search was performed in all fields including controlled subject headings, the results imply that there have been no subject headings in any kind in the "List of Persian Subject Headings", the official subject heading list used by the National Library and Archive of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Also No entry was found on "ethics", "professional ethics", and "morality" in the subject index of "Dissertations abstracts of library & information science" (Sadigh Behzadi 2000) covering some 776 dissertations in the period 1966-1999 both in and outside of Iran. Also an advanced search performed in a major governmental database Called Iranian Scientific Publications and Documentation Center (Irandoc) (Irandoc 2008) comprising some 510000 records yielded zero hits on the issue. The search was performed on 24 March 2008, and the databases for theses and dissertations as well as journal articles that held some 129892 and 124012 records respectively were searched. To make sure that the keywords are appropriate, the Farsi equivalents for the words "ethics", "professional ethics", and "morality" that are sometimes used interchangeably in the profession's literature, were searched in an AND Boolean search with both Farsi equivalents of words "librarianship" and "library and information science". The first phase of the search was done in subject field of the database. In the second phase, the same search was performed using all fields; the result however, was the same.

In the Encyclopedia of library and information science (Encyclopedia of library and information science 2003-2007), the only encyclopedia in Farsi of the profession, there is an entry for professional ethics at the end of which, there are seven references of which two are in Farsi. While there is absolutely no mention of the issue in Iranian situation in the body of text, of the two Farsi references only one, an article translated into Farsi on 1994 belongs to the necessity of commitment to moral principles in information science. The second Farsi reference belongs to philosophy of ethics in general.

Surprisingly the same impoliteness can be seen in the library softwares developed by Iranian computer experts in consultation with Iranian librarians. The usual polite sentences such as "Please wait while something happens" that usually appear when pop-up windows are opened are rarely seen in these softwares. Sometimes even the welcome phrases at the time when the program is starting are not seen.

3. Some current attempts

Some current attempts to develop the issue in Iran, including both publications and activities, are worth mentioning here. In a recently-published book entitled: "Professional ethics for librarians and information professionals" (Qom Library Association 2007), after some discussions on the necessity of ethics, the meaning of professional ethics, the codes for professional ethics, and principles and codes of ethics in library and information science, the codes for professional ethics of library associations in twenty eight countries have been presented. Two appendices, one concerning the ethical principles for Iran's librarians and information scientists, and the other concerning the ethical principles of academic librarians end the book. The principles presented in appendix B, have been extracted from the contents of a workshop on library ethics that has been held in summer 2004 in the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. That workshop was among few workshops on library ethics held in Iran, if not the only one. What seems worth mentioning is that in the preface to the book, the author of the preface has felt satisfied with the recent attention paid to professional ethics in Iranian library community and hoped to have more of the workshops and writings about the issue. Also in the introduction to the same book, the purpose of writing of the book has been stated as follows:

1. Filling the gap of not having a work that deals totally with ethics for librarians and information practitioners....,
2. Inspiring more survey, research, and reading in professional ethics, and
3. Suggesting the inclusion of a course on the topic at undergraduate level to make the students familiar with ethical issues and observing them.

As is seen, in a book concerning ethics for librarians in Iran and published in the year 2007, the authors admit that there is a gap of a book totally written on information ethics for Iranian librarians, and they also suggest the inclusion of a course on information ethics at undergraduate level to make the students familiar (not more familiar!) with ethical issues.

Suggesting the inclusion of a course on the topic at the undergraduate level is due to the lack of a course in undergraduate, graduate and doctoral levels in Iran. In the syllabi for undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral courses for library and information science in Iran, as mentioned above, there is no word of ethics or professional ethics, neither in the titles nor in the contents of the syllabi. There seems to be no words of ethics, code of ethics, or morality even in "Public services in libraries", the course that logically should contain some content on moral issues.

4. Final analysis

The main reasons for this lack of ethical or moral issues in Library and information science services and publications can be enumerated as the misunderstanding of the concepts of who serves and who must be served in Iranian libraries, who pays the tax and therefore is eligible to obtain service due to tax paying, the overall dissatisfaction of librarians concerning their social status as well as salaries and wages, the more or less violation of copyright, and the low costs of library as well as information services in Iran. These will be discussed in some detail below.

4.1 An overall misunderstanding of who must serve and who must be served

In Iran there is an overall misunderstanding of who must serve and who must be served in all aspects of trade. In spite of the politeness peculiar to Iranians, when one steps in an Iranian shop of any kind as a customer, although the shopkeeper knows that the customer, by paying money, must be served and the shopkeeper by respecting her/him can attract more customer's attention and gain benefit, behaves as if the

shopkeeper must be respected and served instead of the customer! An evident expression of this misunderstanding is the utterance of the word "Salaam", the Arabic word equivalent to the English "hello" that is used as greeting in Iran. The shopkeeper as the one, who must respect the customer and say salaam, waits for the customer's salaam. Otherwise, the customer won't be served properly! The same happens in Iranian libraries. The word used in Iranian libraries to describe library user is not the words "patron" or "client" as used most frequently in similar western situation. This fact implies that the library user does not even have the status of a usual customer. The circulation librarian usually waits to be greeted by the library user and seldom asks the polite question: Can I help you or how can I help you. The librarians are also not very much familiar with non-verbal communication skills. The need for changing this pattern of behavior has not been felt by the library and information professionals and thus not reflected in the profession's publications.

Also one reason why Iranian librarians do not feel the necessity to treat library users as clients lies in the fact that the issue of tax paying is not clear in the profession. In other words, the librarians do not know that they are paid by the taxes the users pay. If this concept becomes clear, then it is expected that the librarians' behavior changes towards better acceptance and service of users.

It should be noted that the trend is gradually changing towards better understanding of the issue and Iranian librarians become more and more hospitable of library patrons.

4.2 The overall dissatisfaction of librarians concerning their social status as well as salaries and wages

Iranian librarians are generally not happy with their social status. A research on the job satisfaction of some academic as well as special librarians in Iran indicated that their satisfaction rate concerning financial, educational, and security status were below average (Bagheri 1999). Another research carried out comparing the job satisfaction among some 206 Islamic Azad University (a non-governmental, profitable university) librarians with some 524 academic librarians employed in the universities and institutions under the Ministry of Sciences, Researches, and Technology illustrated a dissatisfaction rate below the average for both groups (Hariri 2002). The lowest satisfaction rate belonged to job payments in both groups. Another research on job satisfaction rate among some 177 women librarians employed in 12 central libraries of governmental universities in Tehran showed a total dissatisfaction among the librarians studied (Agha Shahi 2002). One of the most dissatisfaction aspects belonged to their payments although they were happy with their social status. Another survey on job satisfaction rate of some 75 librarians in the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults in Tehran, the most important institute responsible for the Iranian children and young adults cultural affairs, revealed a total dissatisfaction with promotion and payment (Nafisi Kia 2000).

Special librarians are usually well-paid than other librarians in Iran, and academic librarians rank second in this regard. Academic librarians however, possess a better social status due to their working in universities where their presence is more felt and needed. Public librarians have the worst situation concerning both salary and social status. And the school librarians, who are seldom found in schools, rank the worst.

One of the reasons for the low social status of librarians in Iran is the word that is used to describe the job of a librarian. The Farsi equivalent for the English word librarian is *kitabdār*, a compound word consisting of the Arabic word *kitab* meaning book, and the Farsi suffix *dār*, meaning having or processing. The word generally signifies a person who is most eager to keep books rather than to deliver them for use, and is mostly if not entirely concerned with the traditional medium of book. Although the word *kitabdār* indicated a respectful job and was only given to prominent persons, mostly scientists, in Iran's even near past; the word is now most disliked by Iranian librarians specially the younger generations. Young librarians, who find they are working in the electronic age, do not like the word that represents them as keepers of a traditional medium, that is, book. The author himself has frequently heard this voice of dissatisfaction with this word among young students of the profession and believes that the word plays an important role in the lowering of social status of Iranian librarians.

One cannot deny the negative impact of this dissatisfaction with social status and salaries and wages on misbehavior of the librarians.

4.3 Violation of copyright

Although the copyright law for the protection of writers, composers, and artists in Iran was approved in 1968, there are still some books that are published without any contract, are made illegally from the original copy,

or collected from works of some writers or poets without any permission. Some translations are re-published under different or unknown titles, some works are translated and issued without the author being informed, and different kinds of plagiarism that occur, though not as intense as before, but more or less happen in Iran. The present author himself has been a victim of this violation. Three books of him have been published without any contract, and one of his published papers was published again in a newspaper without permission of the author. It is quite obvious that the violation of copyright lessens the value of information media and carriers as the commodity traded in libraries and information centers, the status of librarians as the personnel working in these places, and results more dissatisfaction of the librarians and probable misbehavior of librarians.

4.4 The low costs of library as well as information commodities and services

Library services in Iran are not as expensive as they are in west. Information carriers such as books and periodicals are also much cheaper compared to those in western countries. One impact of this is that users do not see any need to refer to libraries for their information needs, and thus do not understand the value of libraries and information centers. Table 2 might give some clue as to the price of books as the still-most-used information carriers in Iran (Horri 2007)

Table 2: The average price for first editions of books published in Iran (1992-2001)

Year	Average price for first editions (US dollar)
1992	0.26
1993	0.30
1994	0.51
1995	0.79
1996	0.91
1997	1.12
1998	1.35
1999	1.43
2000	1.69
2001	2.09

To give some more information on information commodities cost in Iran, table 3 illustrates the price of the last issues of some Iranian library journals (The titles of the journals have been translated by the author).

Table 3: The price of the last issues of some Iranian library journals

Title	Year	Price (US dollar)	Publisher
Librarianship	2006	0.65	Governmental
Informology	2007	3.26	Private
Library and Inf. Science	2008	1.08	Governmental
Book Quarterly	2006	1.30	Governmental

As can be seen, the prices are so low compared to those in western countries that the journals can be bought by almost anyone. The journals listed in the table are among the expensive journals in Iran.

The effects of low cost of information commodities on Iranian librarians are that they feel the commodity they are trading does not cost very much and therefore, their business is not very much alive. They gradually fell depressed and this depression is reflected in their misbehavior towards library patrons.

What mentioned above as reasons concerning lack of information ethics in Iranian library and information services and publications are but some of main reasons. These and the other reasons can be gathered under the umbrella of a broad misunderstanding: In Iran, library and information services are mostly thought of as techniques rather than services. When one thinks of himself/herself as a technician, what he/she tries to do at most is to do the technical job well. A librarian, who believes he/she presents some kind of service, is committed to observe ethics in his/her presentation of the services.

5. Some suggestions

Libraries and information centers in Iran work as subsystems under the super system of "culture". When the super system misunderstands the concept of service in all of its forms, the subsystem of libraries and information centers cannot be independent from it. Libraries and information centers are not isolated islands far from the general culture dominating Iran.

There are some efforts to be made however, to improve the situation within the subsystem. Library and information science educators firstly must do their best to show the significance of ethics in the profession. Their efforts must consist of formal and informal teaching of information ethics to their students. Inclusion of courses of ethics in formal syllabi is among formal attempts. The demonstration of this ethics in their behavior is an informal one. Publication of papers on information ethics is another duty of library and information educators. Setting up workshops on information ethics is a necessary step to be taken. Professional associations such as Iranian Library and Information Science Association (ILISA) can play an important role on the scene. The provision of an information code of ethics is a major responsibility of this association.

These efforts when mixed with traditional and Islamic politeness of Iranians can yield an appropriate result faster than expected.

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Note: All the references except the one related to "ODLIS: Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science" are in Farsi, the official language of Iran.

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