

Conflicting Values in an Online Reference Question: An Ethical Dilemma

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Introduction

In their day to day work, reference librarians are guided by a set of professional values that provide a framework for the ethical discharge of their duties. There are situations in which two or more of these values may come into conflict when providing information to members of the public.

The following paper reports the results of an unobtrusive test of online reference librarians' responses to an inquiry intentionally framed to focus attention on and place into conflict two American Library Association (ALA) values—access to information and social responsibility.

Discussion of the Literature

It is a generally accepted notion that our sense of how to act rightly is informed by values and that ethical dilemmas may arise when core values come into conflict in a particular situation. Indeed, according to Rubin, ethical considerations in libraries are “mostly about how people should be treated and how one should act, if one wishes to act rightly” (Rubin 2004: 324)

The ALA also recognized that “ethical dilemmas occur when values are in conflict” (ALA 1995: 673), and created two task forces to identify the “essential set of core values which define, inform, and guide our professional practice” (ALA 2004: 1). Among the core values identified by the ALA are access to information (ALA 2004: 1, 3) and social responsibility (ALA 2004: 2, 4, 5).

At least two unobtrusive studies have been done in which reference librarians were posed questions that placed the value of freedom of information (or access to information) in potential conflict with the value of social responsibility (Hauptman 1976; Dowd 1989).

Hauptman's study involved asking reference librarians for information about bomb building at a time when there had been “1,574 bombings in the United States and Puerto Rico” in the previous nine months (Hauptman 1976: 626). Likewise Dowd asked reference librarians for information on how to freebase cocaine.

Both researchers assumed a scruffy persona and furtive aspect for their inquiries so that reference librarians would have reason to believe their inquiries were genuine requests for information which could be dangerous or illegal.

“The underlying question,” according to Rubin (2004: 325), “was whether reference librarians can be totally neutral in the performance of their duties, or whether social consequences of the information should be considered.”

In neither study, Hauptman (1976) nor Dowd (1989), did the reference librarians refuse to provide information based on potential social consequences of using the information provided.

In the current study, carried out from July 31-August 3, 2006, a group of online reference librarians were asked to provide information supposedly to an elderly lady who was considering ending her life and that of her husband.

The inquiry was purposely unclear as to whether the husband had any knowledge of his wife’s plans. Thus in providing information on how to end her life, the reference librarian could also potentially be providing information by which an unwitting individual could be killed—a very negative social consequence.

Methodology

The method used to measure online reference librarians’ responses mimicked that of Hauptman (1976) and Dowd (1989) in that the query was put without the respondents knowing that the situation presented them was not a real request for information.

This unobtrusive design was purposely used to elicit what online reference librarians actually do versus what they think they should do or report they would do when responding to more overt tests such as questionnaires.

The test consisted of an email from lucyt1931@yahoo.com addressed to the online reference service of 20 urban public libraries sampled at random from around the United States. The text of lucyt1931’s email follows:

My husband and I are living on a fixed income, and all of our children have moved away. Recently our health has begun to decline. Could you help me figure out what medicine I could take and give to my husband that would let us go to sleep and would not be painful? Also, could you tell me what I would need to tell my doctor so she would prescribe it for me?¹

Though the idea of suicide might be repugnant to some online reference librarians, the issue was whether they would provide access to the information being requested. For

some, the issue of social responsibility would already come into focus (and conflict) without consideration of the further factor discussed in the next paragraph.

In point of fact, the inquiry was also purposely vague as to whether lucyt1931's husband was aware of her plans. At that point, the respondent would have to weigh whether or not to provide information that could be used to end the life of someone who may have had no desire for such an end. Thus the value of providing access to information was placed in stark contrast to the value of social responsibility to not participate in harming a potentially innocent person.

The responses were gathered, analyzed, and graded categorially as to whether or not they provided the requested information and as to whether or not they made some sort of social referral.

The Sample

The sample consisted of 20 urban public libraries drawn from a list of 60 moderate to large public libraries roughly distributed among the eastern, southeastern, southern, midwestern, southwestern, and northwestern United States, as well as Alaska and Hawaii.

After the larger list of libraries was selected, a random table was created using an online random number generator. Then the first 20 libraries in the random list that met the following criteria were chosen for the sample: 1) they had an online reference link in their web portal, 2) they did not charge for online reference services, and 3) they allowed for a certain level of anonymity (i.e., they did not require street addresses, phone numbers, etc.).

Interestingly, it took 28 tries to gather a sample of 20 libraries that met the criteria from the list. Every library website examined had an online reference link, but several required identification that would compromise the inquirer's anonymity² and a few actually charged for their services.

Results

Of the 20 online reference lines queried, only one nonresponse was noted. The remaining responses were divided among those who responded to the query for assisted suicide information by providing some form of relevant information—either social service referrals or end of life information or both—and those who did not respond to that line of inquiry. The table below illustrates the responses.

Table. Responses to lucyt1931's inquiry

	<i>Gave social referral</i>	<i>Did not give social referral</i>	Total
<i>Gave end of life information</i>	2	0	2
<i>Did not give end of life information</i>	4	13	17
Total	6	13	19

Of the 13 respondents who gave neither end of life information nor social service referrals, 5 respondents treated the inquiry as a request for information on sleep medications, and 8 simply stated they could not provide medical advice and suggested speaking with a doctor.

In reviewing the query as posed, interpreting lucyt1931's request for medical information is a legitimate reading of the text. Plainly stated, the question was poorly formulated. It is an open question, however, whether the reference librarians actually understood the intent of the query and opted to answer the question in a manner that sidestepped the dilemma of whether or not to provide end of life information in an ambiguous situation.

In fact, to be effective the query should have been something more direct such as:

My husband and I are in declining health, and I have been thinking about end of life issues. Could you suggest some books or other resources that would give me information about how to end our lives without a lot of pain?

Such a question would be an improvement in two ways. First, it would make explicit that lucyt1931 is asking for information on how to end her life (and that of her husband), and second, it would explicitly ask for information resources which reference librarians should feel more free to provide than advice on medications. In any future iterations of the study, a revised formulation of the query such as in the paragraph above would be preferred.

Of the remaining respondents who clearly understood the query as lucyt1931's request for information on how to die, only two respondents actually gave information that would point her toward information that would answer her question. One merely gave her the url for a website affiliated with what was formerly the Hemlock Society. The other gave her several online references, as well as suggesting she do searches in the library's online catalogue using the search terms "right to die" and "assisted suicide." Both of these respondents also provided referrals to crisis hotlines or community services for the aged.

The remaining four respondents clearly understood the request for end of life information, but responded only with social service referrals such as crisis hotlines and local social

service agencies. One respondent went so far as to forward lucyt1931's email to several local social service agencies.³

Summarizing, all of those who were clearly responding to lucyt1931's query as a request for information on how to die (and how to kill her husband—possibly without his knowledge), provided social service referral information indicating that they were acting on the ALA value of social responsibility. In addition, only two respondents also indicated to lucyt1931 where she might actually get the information she was seeking.

Conclusion

With so small a group of responses, no generalization can be made beyond the data set. It is clear, however, that the online reference librarians who responded to lucyt1931's query as a request for information on how to die prioritized their value responses as 1) social responsibility and 2) access to information. It is, in fact, striking that none of the respondents gave end of life information absent social referrals. It is striking as well that the respondents favored social responsibility over access to information in contradistinction to Hauptman (1976) and Dowd (1989).

Endnotes

¹ In an attempt to mimic an elderly lady, I resorted to euphemism and vagueness in the request for end of life or assisted suicide information. In retrospect, as noted in the discussion of results, a query clearly indicating "thinking of end of life issues" and specifically requesting books or other information resources would have been more effective.

² Of course an investigator with the proper resources could trace an email back to its source computer, but requiring phone numbers and street addresses would make the identity of an inquirer accessible to even the casually curious. It is worth considering whether the requirement to make one's identity known might inhibit some persons from pursuing legitimate inquiries.

³ In that particular instance, the actual email address of the respondent was used in the reference line reply. So I immediately emailed her and explained that lucyt1931 and her husband were not in danger and that the query was part of a research project studying the responses of online reference services when presented an ethical dilemma. Anticipating such a situation, I had also created a yahoo profile for lucyt1931 with a link to johnt1928's profile where a brief explanation of the project resided for those who might be worried enough for lucyt1931 and her husband to try to track them down through their yahoo profiles.

References

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