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Codes of Ethics in Latin America

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### ***Abstract***

*Not all Latin American countries have professional codes of ethics today. There are codes – if one also includes codes of conduct as well that describe rights, duties and responsibilities of the members of colegios in Brazil (1986), Costa Rica (1991), Chile (1977), El Salvador (1999), Mexico (1992), Panama (1996), Peru (1997), Puerto Rico (199?), Uruguay (2000) and Venezuela (2001). It should be pointed out that in Chile, that since 1981, all professional colegios were converted into asociaciones gremials by law.*

The Asociación de Bibliotecarios Mexicanos (Mexican Librarians Association) was the first librarian association established in Latin America, that in 1924; soon followed by similar organizations in Brazil and Cuba in the 1930s.

Today all countries have at least one professional association or *colegio*, terms used by groups of librarians, but with very different meanings. “Associations” are generally groups of individuals with or without professional credentials employed in libraries. “Colegios,” on the other hand, limit their membership only to those with professional educations in library or related fields.

The first implementation by a professional organization of a proposed code of librarian responsibilities, rights, duties, and conduct in the exercise of his or her profession took

place in Brazil in 1961. This proposal at the III Congreso Brasileño de Bibliotecología y Documentación resulted in the adoption of the first librarian code of ethics in Latin America on July 12, 1963, by a number of library associations and library schools.

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There are two types of codes: (1) those, which have been adopted by the professional library community in a vote in an assembly of colleagues, and (2) those published in the official registrars of their countries and which carry the force of law. Such is the case with Brazil's Code of Professional Ethics adopted by the Conselho Federal de Biblioteconomia and published in the *Diario Oficial da Uniao* on November 4, 1986; in Costa Rica, the rules were published in the *Diario Oficial* on October 2, 1991; and in Panama, the code of ethics was adopted into law on February 7, 1996.

The II Latin American Seminar of Librarian and Associated Professions (II Seminario Latinoamericano de Asociaciones de Bibliotecarios y Profesionales Afines), held in Mexico City from March 15 to 17, 1999, made the following recommendation calling upon participants to consider codes existing in other countries and to adopt them to the needs and requirements of our “new times”:

Las asociaciones deben contar con su código de ética profesional y difundirlo en sus comunidades bibliotecarias, para lo cual se recomienda considerar y analizar los códigos de ética profesional existentes en Brasil, Perú, Puerto Rico y otros países, y adecuarlos a los requerimientos de los nuevos tiempos” (Memoria del II Seminario)

As in other countries, the codes of ethics in Latin American countries propose norms of professional behavior, respect for and strengthening of the profession, continuing education, and information access, confidentiality and respect for users, and so on. A number of codes, for example those in Brazil and Costa Rica that are more legal and explicit in character, describe sanctions which may be brought against the librarian who transgresses against the code. For some of the more grave violations, a suspension of the professional license may result.

Much of the discussions, codes, reflections, are directed to professional librarians, which is to say those who hold professional degrees or diplomas, yet ethical behavior is not limited exclusively to the professional. According to Ríos Álvarez (*La ética profesional*), ethical behavior is the concern of us all. What is to be done for the larger proportion of library workers who do not have professional degrees and who have primary contact with the public? Shall we not require ethical behavior from these personnel? They project the image of the librarian before the public. I believe it is necessary to provide them with the ethical skills to relate with the public, the institutions, and colleagues. We should not avoid our responsibility in addressing the role of these participants as they are equally important as librarian professionals who affect the prestige of the profession and who

benefit the society that requests their assistance. This agrees with the arguments of the Chilean Ríos Álvarez, that whatever the status of the actor, ethics must permeate all professional practice because ethical behavior is an indispensable requirement of social life.

There is a need to revise of existing codes such that they apply to all employees of libraries or information centers and not only to the professional librarians members of a colegio or professional association. This concept is clearly stated in the Norway and Mexico chapters in *The Ethics of Librarianship: An International Survey*. To do so requires a sufficient impetus that takes into consideration the many global advances as well as the changes that the Internet has introduced to library services.

Margarita Pérez Pulido (*Códigos de ética ...*) has stated:

Desde la publicación del primer código de ética, nuestra profesión ha ido experimentando numerosos cambios en función de un entorno igualmente cambiante, lo que obliga a una progresiva revisión de los códigos deontológicos... De este modo en la actualidad contemplan, aparte del principio básico de libertad intelectual, nuevos principios y valores como la lealtad hacia la institución, la dignificación de la profesión, la formación continua, la cooperación, el respeto a las leyes de copyright y propiedad intelectual o la protección de la privacidad y confidencialidad del usuario ante el avance tecnológico

In sum, Pérez Pulido recognizes that ethical codes have undergone an evolutionary change from a recognition of the basic principle of intellectual freedom to one that embraces additional principles and values to include institutional loyalty, professional dignity, recognition of copyright and intellectual property law, confidentiality, and so on. In addition, she also recognizes that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights represents the fundamental basis upon which librarian and other information professional codes of ethics rest.

Professional associations and colegios must constantly analyze and evaluate the content of existing codes of ethics with an end to revising them to changing local and international conditions. In particular, these associations should be aware of changes that affect them as well as consider new global norms of importance. These include the rights of authors, freedom of expression, freedom of access to information, the declaration on libraries and intellectual freedom, the IFLA Manifesto on Internet (on library censorship), and the importance of inter-library cooperation. In Mexico, for example, a federal law of June 12, 2003 (Ley federal de transparencia y acceso a la información pública gubernamental) has important implications for librarians and archivists.

Other important aspects that contribute to our consideration of codes of ethics are:

- The obligation of librarians to preserve the collective memory and to preserve the cultural heritage of each country. This is one of the rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- The right of access to information by persons with disabilities with services and facilities adapted appropriately to their needs, e.g. the blind, the deaf, paraplegic, reclusives, aged, etc.

- The right of access to information for ethnic minorities. This aspect, often forgotten in Latin America, particularly Mexico, where services to indigenous groups is often non existent.

In conclusion, in these times of constant technological change that impact library services, librarian associations and colegios must respond with more effective codes of ethics that promote a professional behavior that corresponds to the information needs that society demands and that is consistent with society's best interests.

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