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## Information and Professional Ethics in Sub-Saharan Africa: the Ugandan experience

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*Abstract*

*Like in most Sub-Saharan African countries, Ugandan libraries and librarians persevered socioeconomic and political hardships that prevailed in the country's post-colonial era. Reflecting on Uganda's past, the paper explores the forces that shaped the professional and ethical path traversed by librarians and efforts to articulate a code of ethics in light of the current professional "re-awakening". In discussing professional ethics, the paper addresses salient issues like: legal, political, and institutional frameworks, librarian training, networking and resource sharing, and technological changes in work places. Reference is made to the wider theme of freedom of expression and access to information in Uganda drawing from activities of professional groups in the media industry. Whereas the paper primarily addresses Uganda's scenario, a few cases of good practice are mentioned for selected countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.*

## Introduction

Post independence Sub-Saharan Africa was marred by political instabilities that crippled entire national socioeconomic and political structures. In Uganda's case, the political upheavals affected the country's development path of the early 1960s and eventually contributed to near diminishing of the public services' sector. Libraries as integral parts of the public services infrastructure were naturally stifled by the poor economy and social infrastructure. Without entirely blaming colonialism for its negative impact on Africa's development and current problems, suffice to note that the continent remains tied to the horrific past evident in postcolonial sociopolitical unrest across Africa (Sturges and Neill 1998). Uganda's case is not different from the above scenario. For libraries in Uganda, high illiteracy rates and lack of a reading culture remained, and to some extent remain, the number one enemy although of recent, library institutions have ceased the opportunity to extend their services to address literacy concerns. Changes in political leadership in mid 1980s introduced an era of governance based on rule of law and respect for human dignity. The transitional stage the country is going through has created a window for restoration of unity and sense of community among librarians manifested in the rededication of the professional body, Uganda Library Association (ULA) and establishment of the National Library of Uganda among other things. The need to promulgate codes to guide professional practice and build a sense of identity cannot be overemphasized given the competitive and evolving job market in the information industry due to emerging technologies in work places (Koehler and Pamberton 1999). Rapid diffusion of western technologies for information services delivery in Uganda has turned the country into a pseudo-information society necessitating paying attention to copyrights and other rights, access to information, freedom of information, digital divide and a host of other ethical concerns characteristic of information societies. Discussed here are efforts by librarians and information professionals to promulgate a code of ethics to address the above and more concerns.

## Librarianship and professional ethics

Whereas the first library in Uganda was established as early as 1893 at a Major Seminary, librarianship as a profession is a recent phenomenon following coming of the British colonial administration in the early 1880s. Establishment of the East African Library Association (EALA) in 1957 and subsequently Uganda Library Association (ULA) in 1972 also greatly contributed to the development of the profession in Uganda. However, for a long time librarianship as a calling was not well regarded and not generally accepted by the wider Ugandan society as a profession critical in the information transfer process. It was consistently portrayed as a profession for "academic failures" along side other professions, making librarianship seemingly less attractive to the young generation seeking to build careers. The situation was aggravated by political instabilities that characterized the country for the first three decades after independence a time when dictatorial regimes deliberately made efforts to destroy institutions perceived as anti establishment. The poor economy meant that the few qualified librarians left the country for greener pastures in the Europe and North America seriously stretching local

institutional human resource needs. Recalling a case of two Ugandan librarians, Saunders (1990) vividly captures the state of affairs at the time:

> After some in-service training with me, on the project [UNESCO supported Educational Documentation Centre for Uganda], they were [the two librarians] sent off overseas - one to Britain and one to Canada - to study for professional qualifications. In fact neither of them returned to the project - the shortage of professionally qualified librarians was such that one of them, as soon as he was qualified, was appointed Kenya's National Librarian, and the other became National Librarian of Uganda. Not perhaps what Unesco had in mind when they set up the project and financed the training of the two men in question, but what really mattered in the long run was that East Africa gained two badly needed additions to their library and information manpower (Saunders, 1990).

Major developments that augmented professional growth included establishment of the East African School of Librarianship-EASL (currently East African School of Library and Information Science) in 1963, Public Libraries Board (currently the National Library) in 1964, and various academic libraries attached to institutions of higher learning and among others.  For the three decades in existence, EASLIS trained librarians at paraprofessional level, which did not help build professional esteem at a national level. Librarians remained among the most poorly remunerated public servants. Such environment was not conducive for deliberating on professional concerns like code of ethics. This dramatically changed when EASLIS introduced the Bachelor of Library and Information Science (BLIS) in 1989 and a Master of Science in Information Science (MSc. Info Sc.) in 1997.  The move generated the much-needed leadership in ULA and other LIS institutions resulting in renewed advocacy for professional recognition.

As part of the 1999-2001 strategic plan ULA leadership setout to initiate dialog among members that would eventually lead to a professional code of ethics. The rationale for such a move was to address existing and emerging professional challenges faced by members and their institutions.  The concern then was identification and application of ethical principles and values in a fast changing environment "involving new or adopting existing institutions, practices, technologies, and philosophies to emergent local, national and global realities" (Koehler and Pamberton, 1999). Technology more than anything else necessitated the code of ethics to provide guidance to upcoming professionals faced with a highly competitive job market.

The Uganda Public Service Commission and several Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have since required potential information scientists of additional competence in areas other than library science, skills that were not required in traditional library domain. This necessarily shrinks the job market rather than expand it expected as technologies and, therefore, new roles emerge.  Technology, particularly the Internet, has created new information professionals but also empowered general users access information without necessitating intervention of information professionals, although information overload and sophisticated technologies are not making that easier. Koehler and Pamberton (1999) not that "once patrons and clients are dissuaded of the notion that the Internet is the font of all information and that they themselves are the most efficient and cost effective cybrarians, they will come to expect librarians to have the necessary skills to serve their

information needs." They also warn that librarians should expect and prepare for the same otherwise "technological incompetence itself [may] become an ethical flaw" (Koehler and Pamberton 1999). To remain competitive, and at the same time maintain professional identity and values, Ugandan librarians needed a code of ethics.

ULA's efforts to promulgate a code of ethics and the roadmap to achieve that goal documented recently indicated desire to adopt a regulatory code (Batambuze and Kawooya 2002). Since then, there has been little development probably due to competing priorities, some of which relate to professional ethics and the future of the profession in Uganda. ULA has concentrated efforts on training librarians to impart technical skills to deal with new challenges in workplaces. The professional body has also initiated a dialog on the identity of the association and, therefore, the profession in the country. The proposed name of the Association, Uganda Library and Information Workers' Association (ULIWA) not only reflects a shift from traditional librarianship to information competence, but also has ethical implications in as far as maintenance of "enduring professional values and principles" is concerned (Gorman, 2000). The Association will not be the first one to make such a move, because as earlier noted, the East African School of Librarianship changed to East African School of Library and Information Science to reflect broader roles, functions and competence of graduates from the institution in reality of national and international developments. Following that change, it was only apparent that the national body follows suit. The question is what happens to librarians 'enduring values' following such changes? Will the change mark the birth of new professional identity? Will the new identity allow emphasis of traditional norms that have uniquely guided librarians? Is the change necessary, or are librarians in Uganda succumbing to undue pressure from 'outside' forces? Whereas EASLIS' curriculum remains strong in 'traditional areas of competence' like cataloging and classification, a code of ethics is essential to hold together the profession at national level.


**Legal framework and freedom of Information**

Libraries are but part of a nation's information infrastructure. Both electronic and print media in Uganda plays a critical role in the information transfer process. Like others sectors of the information industry, the media suffered from years of political instabilities and backlash due to its consistent exposure of the human rights abuse by dictatorial regimes. The political environment did not allow freedom of expression and access to information. Laws promulgated covered areas like copyrights and legal deposit but most of these remained irrelevant to local situations since they were hastily passed as a sign of sovereignty on gaining independence from the British.

Uganda's freedom of information (FOI) record is not necessarily clean although the current environment represents a slight departure from the violent past. On several occasions the media, the main source of information for the general public, has endured criminal prosecutions through, what some perceive as, draconian and colonial legislations (Oloka-Onyango, 2001). This is so despite the constitutional provision through article 41 (1) which states that, "every citizen has a right of access to information

in the possession of the State or any other organ or agency of the State, except where the release of the information is likely to prejudice the security or sovereignty of the State or interfere with the right to the privacy of any other person" (Uganda Government, 1995). The Electronic Media and Press and Journalists statutes remains serious hindrance to a free media and so is the recently passed antiterrorist law promulgated following recent wave of terrorist attacks that stated with September 11th attack on New York twin towers. Whereas colonial legislations like the Newspaper and Publications Act and the Press Censorship and Correction Act were removed from statute books, by criminalizing certain breaches the current legislations mentioned above dangerously chock media freedom and freedom of Information (Oloka-Onyango, 2001). Its been argued that Uganda's antiterrorist legislation, like the US Patriotic Act 2001, was hurriedly passed without substantive input from the public with serous consequences to the media that reports terrorist related stories. By exploiting the then prevailing circumstances, the law has serious implications for individuals with differing views. Certainly the law is far reaching especially for operation of a free media and generally bars journalists from covering certain "terrorist activities" dangerously limiting journalists' work. Non-compliance is a criminal activity punishable by a jail term and a death penalty as the worst-case scenario.

Professional bodies like National Institute of Journalists of Uganda (NIJU) have consistently opposed such legislations. NIJU through regular press releases dismisses hard-line stance taken by government against media organizations. A local independent daily was recently closed down under the anti terrorist legislation for publishing an article with inaccurate information perceived by government as morale boost to rebel groups operating in the northern part of the country. Whereas the accuracy of the article was debatable, government's reaction and seizure of the media organization's property was uncalled for and a serious setback to freedom of expression and information. However, Onyango-Obbo (2001) observed that ineffectiveness of media's campaign against draconian laws are based on wrong assumptions that the public would side with the journalists, rather the public supports the laws to prevent "irresponsible journalism." He also observes that The Press and Journalist Statute (1995) is not as bad as the Bill from which it was drawn noting the provision for the freedom of the press to unclassified public information (Onyango-Obbo, 2001).

The proposed Freedom of Information Act will go along way in making public information readily available. Once passed, the law will grant the public unlimited access to information held in public offices unless such entities demonstrate that release of such information is a threat to national security (Eremu 2003). However it is easy to demonstrate "threat to national security" whenever government finds it convenient as long as doing so denies access to certain information.

Government's liberalization policy in the communications sector has translated into proliferation of radio stations, which serve as major sources of information and means of engaging in discourse by the public through call-in programs. Talk shows known as "bimeeza" recently banned by government were popular among the public. Held in informal gatherings in settings like bars, such talk shows allows participants to discuss a

wide range of political, economic, social topics moderated by a radio presenter. By banning these shows, government closed one of the best avenues for the public to dialog on problems and challenges facing the country. However, call-in programs remain in existence whose participation has been helped by rapid growth in the telecommunications sector although large sections of the Ugandan population is without access to basic communications services.

Enactment of the National Library Act 2002 marked a major step towards greater access to and preservation of the country's intellectual output. The Institution is charged with responsibilities of establishing public and community libraries, which may translate to close proximity to information resources and services. The library will also undertake functional adult literacy programs under government's The Social Sector Development Investment Plan.

**Elsewhere in African**

The Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) launched in 1997 following merger of several organization is running a successful intellectual freedom and access to information campaign. By incorporating these in the Association's corporate plans, LIASA's campaign stands out as model for professional organizations in the region. LIASA's campaign is facilitated by positive environment created by government involving enactment of the Freedom of Information legislation. Whereas no code has been adopted, LIASA's mission advocating for "provision of efficient, user-oriented and excellent library and information services that aspire to equitable access to information for all communities (literate and illiterate) in South Africa" (LIASA 1997).

Several professional bodies in Sub-Saharan Africa have not promulgated codes but have constitutions embodied with professional values and principles. It is not apparent when such associations will promulgate codes of ethics given competing priorities and weaknesses in leadership ranks. Recent support to professional bodies in Africa from Carnegie Corporation through The International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) is already strengthening these bodies, which may translate into considerations like code of ethics.

**Conclusion**

Professional ethics code for librarians in Uganda has not been passed despite consistent appeals for the same. The present leadership had setout to have a code in place by 2001 but this never happened mainly due to competing priorities. This does not mean the code is not needed given the changing nature of work environments of practitioners and pressure from other fields identifying with information services delivery. The forthcoming constitutional changes and deliberations on the future of the profession in Uganda present a real opportunity to conclusively discuss the issue of the ethics code. However, Uganda's scene is reflected in others countries where most associations lack codes but have constitutional provisions embodied with professional values and principles characteristic of ethical codes. Such provisions are not a replacement of

codified guidelines agreed upon by professionals. In any case librarians should not work in isolations since other professionals, especially journalists are faced and battle the same concerns of freedom of expression and access to information. Collaborating with the media and other interested parties will increase visibility of the issues at stake and strengthen professional bodies stake in their respective countries.

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