Ethics for Online Intermediaries

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■ Online searchers face ethical problems which differ in kind and degree from those confronted by providers of information services in traditional settings. Online searchers differ from traditional reference librarians in that they play more of a gatekeeper role and there is often a direct charge to the client for their products and services. The ethical issues addressed in this paper, while not all unique to online searching, are exacerbated by the searcher's gatekeeper function. Issues explored include searcher competence, searcher bias, inaccurate search results, misuse of search results by the client, and privacy and confidentiality. A model for ethical decision making is presented and a list of guidelines for ethical conduct is suggested.

SINCE THE DEVELOPMENT of computerized indexes and abstracts in the 1960s, the profession of online searcher has grown and ma-

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tured, and the need for guidelines of appropriate conduct has deepened. As Trauth states in a 1982 article in *Computers & Society*, "In an increasingly technological and information-intensive society those who manipulate the tools and thereby manipulate the information must be held morally accountable for the power they

possess." (1) At Online '83, Childress presented examples of ethical issues in online searching and noted that even under the umbrella of reference service, virtually no attention has been given to ethics in online searching. (2)

The American Library Association has long been concerned with the development of ethical standards for librarians and has written and adopted three formal statements of professional ethics since 1939, most recently in 1981. However, for several reasons this "Statement on Professional Ethics" is not adequate for the discipline of online searching. First, while traditionally most searchers were librarians, the increasing heterogeneity of backgrounds and work settings of the searcher population means that many searchers come from outside the library profession. They have not completed a library graduate program, do not work in libraries, and cannot be expected to subscribe to the mores of the library community.

Second, the ALA Statement includes a section on privacy which is in conflict with ethical practice in many organizations. Section III states: "Librarians must protect each user's right to privacy with respect to information sought or received, and material consulted, borrowed, or acquired." (3) Such conduct is indeed appropriate in many settings. However, in a special library where a company is paying the salaries of the searcher and the client in addition to the search costs, both client and searcher are accountable for proper use of online services. Search logs must therefore be open to management review. In addition, many companies consider it a function of the librarian to alert a client to the fact that someone else in the company is working on the same topic, thus saving the costs of duplicate searches and duplicate effort. While it is true that this situation exists in a corporate setting even in the absence of online services, the costs associated with searching make it particularly visible and more closely monitored.

At present, then, no existing set of guidelines or code of ethics is sufficient to cover the unique problems of information service through the new technologies.

Unique Characteristics of Online Searchers

Some would argue that the ethical conduct of online searchers does not differ from that of reference librarians, and it is true that the guidelines for ethical behavior proposed in this article would, with some substitutions or changes in terminology, make good guidelines for responsible reference service. In fact, there are distinct characteristics which set online searching apart from the provision of other reference services.

First, the online searcher is a gatekeeper—an intermediary between the information and the user of that information—to an extent not realized in the largely print-based profession of reference librarianship. While reference librarians serve in varying degrees as intermediaries for printed sources of information, clients who are unhappy with answers supplied by a reference librarian in a manual search generally have the opportunity to search the indexes themselves. When computerized sources are involved, the online searcher has the specialized knowledge, equipment, and access codes required to retrieve the information, while the client seldom has the means to bypass the searcher. The pool of information is hidden away in a distant computer and only that which is retrieved by the search strategy is available to the client. Thus the online searcher can be either a conduit or an obstacle.

Second, anyone can claim to be an online searcher. As Mintz notes in an article on information malpractice, unlike the situation in law and medicine, there are "no statutes prohibiting the unlicensed practice of information." (4) Neither the possession of a Master of Library Science degree, nor employment in a library or as an independent information broker, nor online training from a database vendor guarantee search quality. The client

is rarely in a position to judge the quality of a professional service and must rely upon "the standards of conduct maintained by the profession and by the reputation of individual practitioners." (5)

Third, in many online search settings, clients pay directly for all or some of the costs of a search. When people pay out-of-pocket for a service, their expectations for value are increased. To quote Mintz, "Clients are buying not only information but also, and most critically for the profession, they are buying the quality of know-how." (6) Although Mintz is referring to information brokers, the statement applies to online searchers in any situation in which clients are charged; clients who pay are more likely to hold the service provider accountable for the quality of the service.

Ethical Issues for Online Searchers

This article addresses the subject of ethical conduct for individual online searchers. Deliberately excluded are questions for which resolution is outside the province of the individual—issues which reflect institutionally-determined policies (charging for searches or the cancellation of subscriptions to printed indexes) or developments in the information industry (downloading, database quality control). Another development beyond the control of the individual searcher is that of end-user searching, the proliferation of which poses its own unique problems. End-user searching is only in its infancy. It will continue to grow, as will the population which either uses online searching infrequently or is unsophisticated in the use of information technologies and continues to rely on online searchers for assistance.

Searcher Competence

It is often difficult for the client of online services to accurately evaluate the level of service received, the results of a particular search (especially if the subject matter or the literature searched is out-

side the client's area of expertise), and the skills of the searcher. Clients who are very familiar with their subject matter and their disciplines can recognize incomplete or inaccurate search results. In general, though, the invisibility and lack of browsability of online information serves to shield the mediocre or incompetent searcher.

> **The searcher needs to be acutely aware of the line which divides negotiation and problem clarification from information counseling. While information counseling may be the highest professional service a searcher can provide, it must be done with searcher awareness and client consent.**

Another concern is that of competence in various databases and online systems. No online searcher can be highly competent in, or even familiar with, all systems and databases—just as no reference librarian can be conversant with all reference tools. In many cases, cost considerations or administrative decisions will limit a searcher's access to one or two online systems. Furthermore, most searchers do not have at their disposal all of the manuals, thesauri, and the like for all the databases to which they have access. Occasionally the use of an unfamiliar database is most appropriate for a given request. In such cases it is incumbent upon the searcher to apprise the client of the appropriate database and the searcher's level of expertise, if that may significantly affect the results of the search. Further, it is the responsibility of the searcher to spend additional time in search preparation, using the search aids available and consulting colleagues as necessary (with client permission).

While it may be said that the traditional reference librarian does not go into

similar explanations at the reference desk, it is also the case that the client of manual reference services does not generally pay out-of-pocket for the results, as do many clients of onlie services. And, as noted earlier, the client of traditional reference services need not rely exclusively on the expertise of the reference librarian.

Searcher Bias

Most searchers have biases, that is, tendencies or inclinations toward or against certain databases, online systems, or search techniques. A searcher's bias against a particular online system may mean that the most appropriate database for a given search is not used. Biases in online search techniques are most likely to be habits that were developed because they were comfortable or because they were correct on a particular database or system at a particular time. Such search habits may, indeed, be efficient and effective. Some, however, may range from sloppy and inefficient to unproductive and misleading.

Whenever a client chooses to utilize an intermediary, the search request must be filtered through the mind of the online searcher. It is understood, of course, that the online searcher often must use skillful interviewing techniques to help the client express the need rather than to merely accept the request as the client initially states it. However, the searcher may feel a strong temptation, especially with an inarticulate or unsophisticated client, to "lead the witness," to deliver what the searcher thinks the client needs rather than what the client requests. There is an arrogance in this. The searcher needs to be acutely aware of the line which divides negotiation and problem clarification from information counseling. While information counseling may often be the highest professional service a searcher can provide, it must be done with searcher awareness and client consent.

Through excess enthusiasm for the capabilities of online searching, searchers may be biased toward its use even when the needed information may be more readily and cheaply available in other ways—a telephone call or an encyclopedia article. It is easy to oversell online searching, and it is difficult for most clients to make sound judgments about databases and systems other than on the recommendation of the searcher.

An important factor in dealing with searcher bias is the searcher's obligation to inform the client about appropriate databases and systems, their coverage and limitations, and relevant limitations in the searcher's expertise. Ideally, the client will receive adequate and accurate, but not excessive, information. Some publications on the search negotiation process, in detailing all the information which the searcher should convey to the client, suggest something more appropriate to a three-credit course than an online search interview. Just as the physician does not train the patient in medicine, so too does the searcher exercise professional judgment in his or her practice. However, both the good physician and the good searcher work on the principle of informed consent.

The Inaccurate Search

Even with the most careful preparation, the online searcher will occasionally deliver a flawed search, and the inaccuracy may only later become apparent to the searcher. It is sometimes difficult to deal with this "good faith" error. If, for example, the search was done to assist a student with a term paper and the term is over, locating the client and rectifying the error may be difficult. In general, however, the ethical response would be to inform the client and to perform a corrected search at no additional charge.

Misuse of Information

The online searcher, like the reference librarian, may be faced with a dilemma when he or she suspects that the information obtained from a search may be misunderstood or misused. This problem

is exacerbated in the case of the online searcher, in that the searcher becomes a party to the abuse. An example would be an author and/or citation search requested for use in a hiring or promotion and tenure situation, in which candidates are evaluated partly on the basis of how much they have published or how many times their publications have been cited by other authors. In such a case, it becomes the duty of the searcher to explain to the client the fallacies inherent in such "evidence": many databases do not list all co-authors; coverage, in spite of the large number of databases, is not universal; the work of other authors with the same name may be retrieved. In the case of a citation search, the client should be made aware that papers are cited for many reasons, not all of which are to the credit of the cited author.

Other instances in which the searcher mistrusts the client's motives may be more difficult to deal with, raising the specter of searcher as censor. Librarians have frequently debated this issue (for example, dealing with requests for information on how to commit suicide or construct a bomb), and online searchers in their role as gatekeepers have a heightened responsibility in such situations. In a brief commentary on the ethics of reference librarianship, Murray warned:

> There is no way to define exactly when the professional who is making a decision as to the best available material to give the patron and elects one set of titles over another has crossed over into the ranks of censor. But if the use to which the material is going to be put or the opinion expressed by the user causes the librarian deliberately to withhold available information, some form of censorship is present. (7)

Another instance of misuse occurs when a client insists on an online search when a print source would be more appropriate. If any of the search costs are subsidized, it may be necessary to have a policy to cover this situation. Otherwise, the searcher's communication skills are called into play to deflect the client

from a possibly inappropriate course of action.

Privacy and Confidentiality

In some settings, the client relinquishes the right to privacy by virtue of the manner in which both online charges and client salaries are paid. However, in public and academic libraries, and in the case of information brokers, the confidentiality of online search requests must be as inviolate as that of reference questions.

Problems may arise due to the paper trail that is inevitably created in online searching. While reference questions are logged in some institutions, the major part of the traditional reference interaction is verbal and information is delivered directly to the client by the librarian, or is sought by the client following guidance received. In online searching, however, the client or the searcher typically fills out a request form which will remain in the searcher's files, and the searcher logs the request so that it can be checked against the invoices from the online systems. In some search services, a copy of the search printout is kept on file. The recordkeeping requirements of the online searcher and the client's privacy can both be served if the searcher takes care not to leave the various parts of the paper trail in public view on desktops. Additionally, a records retention policy should be drawn up and adhered to, insuring that search-related records are kept only for the length of time that data may be needed for administrative purposes, and are then destroyed.

For some searches, the online searcher may need to consult colleagues more knowledgeable in the appropriate databases, or who have access to necessary search aids. As in manual reference work, the online client may be better served when the searcher seeks advice in this manner, and it is tempting to simply involve colleagues in formal or informal consultation without regard to the user. Like other professional groups, online searchers would be well advised to seek the client's permission before involving

	Known to searcher	Not known to searcher
Known to client	OPEN	BLIND
Not known to client	HIDDEN	UNKNOWN

Figure 1. Johari Window adapted for online searching

other information professionals, however innocently.

A Model for Ethical Decision Making

In this discussion of ethical issues for online searchers, it is apparent that awareness and searcher-client communication are keys to solving ethical problems. Many difficulties are readily resolved if the client and the searcher have the same understanding of the question, the means to answer it, and the powers and limitations of online searching. This shared understanding can be achieved during the search interview if the searcher is sensitive to what needs to be discussed and clarified. The Johari Window (8) is shown here in a version adapted for online searching, and can be used to help the searcher determine the ethical decision points in any given search negotiation. (Figure 1.)

Open: The "open" area in the Johari Window is one of shared knowledge about the subject matter, the database(s), and the system(s). However, there is a clear danger of faulty assumptions by both searcher and client. The searcher may assume that the client understands the nature of searching, the content and coverage of particular databases, and/or the limitations inherent in online searching. The client may have requested online searches in the past and may feel that he or she "knows all about it," while having, in fact, developed a faulty idea of the universality of coverage or the reliability of information from a computer. The

searcher needs to be aware of the danger of assumptions in the "open" area in order to give the client appropriate information.

Blind: In many online search situations the client possesses relevant knowledge which the searcher, often a generalist rather than a specialist in a particular discipline, does not have. Such situations require in-depth search negotiation to enable the searcher to understand such things as terminology in the client's subject area. If the searcher is new to a field in which he or she will be doing a considerable amount of searching, it is incumbent upon the searcher to reduce the "blind" area by obtaining continuing education in the subject area.

Hidden: As was discussed earlier, the searcher must exercise professional judgment regarding the amount and level of information about online searching provided to clients to assist them in making intelligent decisions. This "hidden" information about databases, systems, search techniques, and the like, is vast. In each situation, the searcher should try to share appropriate information.

Unknown: The online searcher acts as an intermediary for the client in situations in which the structure and protocols of a collection of information are unknown to the client but, presumably, known to the searcher. However, online searchers must be sensitive to their own "unknown" area in order to act in an ethical manner. When the searcher's lack

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of knowledge or experience might affect the outcome of a search, he or she must make the client aware of these, as when the searcher is unfamiliar with the online system or database to be searched. In addition, the searcher has the obligation to make every effort to prepare adequately for a search, to reduce the extent of the "unknown" in the Johari Window by reading manuals, checking print equivalents, consulting with colleagues (with client approval), or requesting assistance from system and/or database help desks.

Suggested Guidelines for the Ethical Behavior of Online Searchers

A profession's ethical standards are distilled from the mores, tradition, and established practices of the profession. While online searching is a young profession, it has been guided by reference li-brarians, with departures from reference experience caused by the gatekeeper role of the online searcher and by the fact that many searchers are not librarians. The following is an attempt to define guidelines for the ethical conduct of online searchers.

- The online searcher has an obligation to his or her institution and to the user to maintain awareness of the range of information resources available in order to fairly and impartially advise the client.
- The online searcher must strive to maintain a reasonable skill level in the systems available for searching.
- The online searcher must eschew bias in the selection of appropriate databases and systems in order to meet the needs of the client.
- The online searcher must make the client aware of the searcher's level of expertise in searching a given database or system if that may affect the search results.
- The online searcher should be aware of

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the level of confidentiality required by both the setting and the request, and he or she should respect those boundaries.

- The online searcher must make clear the appropriateness of the online search in meeting the client's needs and the limitations of the search process for the client's intentions.
- The online searcher must guard against tendencies to fill the client's needs as the searcher sees them or as the client initially states them, but rather must utilize appropriate interview techniques to ascertain the client's needs.
- The online searcher must, if appropriate, apprise the client of major errors in previous searches, both in strategy formulation and database selection.
- The online searcher must resist attempts by the client to select inappropriate databases and/or systems.

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