

Everyday Ethics for Libraries*

Part 2: Transparency

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There are four library ethical standards, and the first one I would like to talk about is transparency.

Transparency comes from the rule of law, which came from the work of Plato two thousand years ago and has been talked about a lot in western society. The concept of transparency is that what you do and how you do it should be something that the average person has access to – that decisions over people's lives, politically and financially, are not made in smoke-filled rooms, so that people cannot just know the outcome, but see the process. Very particularly in the library world, this applies to the policies of a library and its procedures. What a library does. The decisions as to who has access to information. Little details like: How many books or other items can somebody check out? What are the standards for who gets to use the computers on a busy day? Who gets to use the computers in the children's area at three o'clock when the kids start coming in from school? Does everybody get to use everything in a library equally? Those kinds of things need to be written down. But it's more than that they need to be written down, they need to be accessible to people.

I visited one library where they were very proud of their policies that were all very neatly typed up and locked up in the director's file cabinet. That's not transparency. It's also not necessarily transparency if you make it so that people have access to the information if they're articulate. If they know to come up to a counter and ask for the information. If they speak English well. If they look like middle-class people and they look like the people on the other side of the counter. Ideally transparency means that information is posted and that multiple copies are available to people at different stations throughout the library.

Even if we're talking about a one-room library, are there three or four places where a staff member can pull out the rules as they apply to circulation or behavior in the library. Are these accessible and available so that the average person can say, "These are the rules that I'm supposed to abide by." In effect, and I take this seriously, those rules are the contract that the library has with the public. And if we make those contracts secret, we tend to favor some people over others. I tell folks that I'm a middle-aged, middle-class, white, college-educated woman which means that I can pretty much go into any public library in the United States and under the circumstances get better service than a Hispanic boy of fourteen because I look like the person on the other side of the counter. And not only do I look like them, but I am of their same socio-economic class.

So part of what transparency does is it doesn't put people in the uncomfortable spot of having to ask for the information. There are no secret rules. And the more transparent we are able to do things, the more that people trust us for those times when the piece of paper isn't available. That means that the process that you use to make ethical decisions in itself has to be transparent. (And this process can be really, really annoying.) Because the annoying, difficult, loud-mouth people in your town – the ones who you cross the street to avoid – will come to a public meeting. They will shout. They will yell. They will say things that are uncomfortable.

When you write a strategic plan and post it on your library website or in a summary in an article in your newspaper, part of transparency is that you will have angry letters to the editor or irate comments on your website saying unseemly things about you. That's what transparency means. It's that real consciousness. It's that everyone has the ability to know not just the outcome of a decision that is made, but how the decisions are made as well, and they have input.

So what does it mean to the average library? Well, the first thing is written rules for everybody. I'm not

a bureaucrat. I don't believe we should have a 300-page manual for a library of twelve people. In fact, I don't think I've ever visited any library – even the big urban libraries and the huge state university libraries with a thousand employees – where anybody who works there deserves to have a 300-page manual imposed on them. On the other hand, if I work for the library, and I'm expected to enforce the rules for the library, I'd better have copy of the policies that I am expected to enforce.

How would you feel if you were driving around in town and a police officer stopped you and you said "Well, Mr. Policeman, I thought I was doing OK. Why did you stop me?" And he leaned over and said, "Well, ma'am, it's sort of a secret. I just decided on my own I didn't like how you were driving, and I thought that I have the right to stop you and take your driver's license away." Well, of course you'd be outraged. But often times, people will develop these sort of village rules in the library where they are enforcing rules and policies that literally don't exist. That never went through that transparency process of discussion. That weren't in effect put together by the people who had the legal authority to do it – the elected or appointed board of your library, your city council, your county commissioners, the director of the library (with input from the staff and the community). So, things need to be written down so the average person – whether they work for the library or come to the library – has access to them.

We also want to have an idea that the open-meeting laws are taken seriously, and that we pay attention not just to the letter of the law, but to the spirit of the law. The spirit of the law is meant to make laws ordinary and accessible so that a reasonable person can understand what goes on. However, a lot of libraries like to cheat. They'll do things like have working committees. Working committees are great ways to delegate decision making responsibilities to individuals who then feel that they don't have to do that decision making work in public. So it's a way of cheating, and it creates a library where again, if you

know enough to have access to the information and know when that working meeting is happening, yes, you might stop in. But if you don't know enough, you don't realize that a lot of decisions are in effect being perhaps done legally, but certainly not ethically.

Sometimes decisions are made in such a way that people don't have access to them. And I actually know a library that used to hold its board meetings at an abandoned airfield that it was up in the hillside. And you had to have a four-wheel drive, and yeah, you sort of knew where it was. And they did it on purpose because there were two difficult people in town that the board never wanted to come to the board meetings and hear the discussions. So in effect they picked a place that was geographically inaccessible. Was it legal? Well, yeah. Was it unethical? You betcha. So, it's very easy to forget that those laws are in place not just to annoy you and make your life difficult, but to afford the average citizen access to the decision making processes that go on, particularly in local government.

Another thing is timely communication. If a decision was made by a committee or a board or a group in your library, whether it was your trustees, or a particular committee, or your executive team, how long would it take until everyone who works in the library, including part-timers and volunteers, would know about that information and be able to use it? My standard, which some people think is kind of tough, is simply this that within 24 hours of a decision being made everyone should have access to that decision.

Well, that means, for example, that you don't send the information out in just one form. Not everyone has email. Not everyone has working email. And some people have email that has a tendency to dump everything interesting and important into junk mail. Not everyone has a fax machine. Not everyone comes into the library all the time. So you might decide that you actually mail out something on a postcard or in a letter to part-timers. You post decisions in a timely fashion – within those 24 hours – on

the wall of a staff room or in a hallway so everybody has access to it. You might decide to have a phone tree. You might decide to post it to your website or the intranet of your library so all your staff and patrons have access to it. I know a library in Colorado – in fact our largest library in Colorado, which is the Jefferson County Library District – that makes sure that everything is written up and posted to the website. So in effect, as soon as a decision is made, I'm told, that information is posted so that everybody has access to it equally at the same time.

I'm tough enough about this issue that if you have a meeting, say of department heads or building managers, and, there's one or two people who never seem to take the time to get the information out in a timely fashion, they in effect have abdicated. They have lost their ability to control how information is sent out to people, and someone else does it for them. I was working with a large academic library with about 800 employees with seven different locations, and this issue came up about decisions made by the executive team. And I asked the team if there was someone on the team who was reliably sending out information in a timely fashion to the staff. And everybody pointed to the head of tech services. I said, "Now let me get this straight. You're the person who when you leave this meeting and go back to your office, there's going to be 400 post-it notes on your terminal. There's going to be 500 emails from people because their server's down, their email is down, their computer is down, the software isn't working, there's a virus that has frozen their machine, your voice mail is going to be filled with angry phone calls." And the guy said, "Yeah, that's about right." And I said, "And yet, the first thing that you do when you come back from a meeting is that you actually sit down and craft an email that explains to everybody on your staff what happened at this meeting and you send it to all of them and you print out a copy and put it in your office?" And he said, "Yes." And I said, "How do you find the time to do that?" And he said, "Because I put my people first." So I figure if somebody like that can find the time when he comes back from a meeting to ensure that a hundred people – and this case 800 people –

get the information quickly, what does it say about everybody else?

Finally, we want to make sure that transparency also is measured by the fact that everyone has access to the same services. That we have not created a library where there are two levels of service – one for people we know, one for people we don't know; one for people we like, one for people we don't like. Colorado is acknowledged perhaps as having the strictest rules in the country regarding access to information on children. That in the way the state law is written, it does not differentiate between children and adults when it discusses intellectual freedom. Part of the result of that law is that, if you are a parent in Colorado and your child has an overdue book that you are legally responsible for, you nonetheless don't have the right to know what book your child is reading. Well, one of the libraries did a work-around for that. The director did not like that rule, couldn't do anything about it, did not want to enforce it. So, he has a special way, where if the parent knows the code, in effect the card number of the child's library card, they can go to a terminal in the computer area, type in that number, and have access to their child's record. And I said to the director, "Well, that's a good work-around. Now do you have it posted on a big sign in front of reference? And did you put it in the newsletter for your library? And do you send that out to everybody once a year who has a library card so everybody knows that that's the work-around for this state law, that's how to break the law?" And he looked horrified and said "Of course not, I just tell a few people." And I said, "So this is the special circumstance for people who are articulate enough to know that there's a system they can jazz and people who like you like and trust enough who you know in effect won't turn you in for violating what is in effect state law?" And he didn't like that. He said, "No, I'm not playing favorites." And I said, "Yes, you are. This violates transparency. You've decided on your own that there's a way to work around the law, and you only told certain people at your library. This is not transparency."

So, transparency takes time to achieve. And one way to achieve it is to start with your patrons and put yourself in your patrons' shoes and think about what is the information they need to get fair service at their library.

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