

# Is “Walking the Walk” Slippery Now?

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Twelve years ago, I published my first electronic article. In “‘Talk the Talk, Walk the Walk’ Ethical standards for the 21<sup>st</sup> century,”(1) I examined the 1981 revision of the “Librarian’s Code of Ethics” (originally crafted in 1938). I also discussed point-by-point the changes being proposed for the next revision, which was ultimately adopted by the ALA Council on June 28, 1995. (2)

Two very critical alterations occurred between the time I wrote the article and when the 1995 revision passed: 1) The name of the document was changed to the “ALA Code of Ethics” and 2) The declaration of each major precept changed from the original wording of “Librarians must...” to the less-didactic “We” statements, as in, “We protect...We provide...We uphold....”

Support staff now comprise over 66% of the work force in libraries but most of us do not have “librarian” in our job title. Beginning with the formation of the Library Support Staff Interests Round Table (LSSIRT) in 1993, library workers created a welcoming home in ALA for colleagues who were ready to affiliate with their professional organization. The change from “Librarian’s code of ethics” to “ALA code of ethics” heralded the beginning of a more inclusive professional organization.

Whereas the 1981 Code launched immediately into “Librarians must...” dictums, the 1995 Code preamble set the tone: “...we recognize the importance of codifying and making known to the profession and to the general public the ethical principles that guide the work of librarians, other professionals providing information services, library trustees and library staffs.” (3) The library world is made up of a myriad of professionals, all working for the combined mission of providing information and service to our patrons. The change in title, the wording of the preamble and the “We” statements are all indicative of this wider professional world.

Ten years ago, the Oscar for Best Movie went to “Forrest Gump.” William Jefferson Clinton was President of the United States. The World Wide Web was used by a select-few scientists. Identity theft happened less frequently than being struck by lightning. Everyone didn’t have a cell phone permanently affixed to their ear. The World Trade Center boldly pulled the New York City skyline towards the heavens.

All professional codes share certain characteristics, including raising awareness and consciousness of issues associated with that profession. The 1981 ALA Code revision included a principle on resisting efforts by groups or individual to censor library materials. The 1995 Code, in a splendid stroke of forethought, spoke to bigger issues yet to come: “In a political system grounded in an informed citizenry, we are members of a profession explicitly committed to intellectual freedom and the freedom of access to information. We have a special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas to present and future generations.” (4)

My 1994 article ended this way: “As support staff accept the career challenges of managing, leading and staffing library resources, we must show that we are ready not only to “talk the talk” but to “walk the walk” of professional ethics.” (5) Fast forward to the winter of 2005 and significantly more has changed than just the price of bread and milk. Rising numbers of library support staff are accepting professional challenges and we’re finding it is an increasingly slippery slope. When it comes to day-to-day occupational conduct, I’m looking to the ALA Code of Ethics.

End Notes:

(1) Kutzik, Jennifer S. “‘Talk the Talk, Walk the Walk’ Ethical Standards for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” *Associates, The Electronic Library Support Staff Journal*. Volume 1, number 2, 1994. Accessed July 7, 2006. Available from: <http://bubl.ac.uk/archive/journals/associates/v01n0294/column4.htm>

(2) “American Library Association Code of Ethics.” Adopted by the ALA Council June 28, 1995. Accessed July 7, 2006. Available from: <http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/statementspols/codeofethics/coehistory/codeofethics.pdf>

(3) “American Library Association Code of Ethics.” (ibid)

(4) “American Library Association Code of Ethics.” (ibid)

(5) Kutzik. (ibid)

## **AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION CODE OF ETHICS**

As members of the American Library Association, we recognize the importance of codifying and making known to the profession and to the general public the ethical principles that guide the work of librarians, other professionals providing information services, library trustees and library staffs.

Ethical dilemmas occur when values are in conflict. The American Library Association Code of Ethics states the values to which we are committed, and embodies the ethical responsibilities of the profession in this changing information environment.

We significantly influence or control the selection, organization, preservation, and dissemination of information. In a political system grounded in an informed citizenry we are members of a profession explicitly committed to intellectual freedom and the freedom of access to information. We have a special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas to present and future generations.

The principles of this Code are expressed in broad statements to guide ethical decision making. These statements provide a framework; they cannot and do not dictate conduct to cover particular situations.

I. We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests.

II. We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources.

III. We protect each library user’s right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted.

IV. We recognize and respect intellectual property rights.

V. We treat co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness and good faith, and advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institutions.

VI. We do not advance private interests at the expense of library users, colleagues, or our employing institutions.

VII. We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources.

VIII. We strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing our own knowledge and skills, by encouraging the professional development of co-workers, and by fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession.

*Adopted by the ALA Council*

*June 28, 1995*

## **Library Bill of Rights**

The American Library Association affirms that all libraries are forums for information and ideas, and that the following basic policies should guide their services.

I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.

III. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.

IV. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.

V. A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.

VI. Libraries which make exhibit spaces and meeting rooms available to the public they serve should make such facilities available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use.

Adopted June 18, 1948.

Amended February 2, 1961, and January 23, 1980, inclusion of "age" reaffirmed January 23, 1996, by the ALA Council.