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Assignment 3
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Case Study One: "To Be or Not to Be" *A young patron, Melissa, who causes no serious problems for the staff, is followed by vague rumors of self-harm and other "problems." She approaches the reference desk with red and puffy eyes and asks for a certain book that is about suicide. Should the librarian help her find the book, and should they inform the girl's parents?*

In this study, we are only presented with anecdotal information about who Melissa is. She is not well known, but she is social enough to greet library staff as she passes. Her occasional loud speaking voice presents no real evidence of her personality, especially as it is not a persistent issue. The staff are aware of "some problems," and rumors of self-harm in the past, but the very vagueness of that knowledge should be anathema to reference librarians, who's mission it is to seek reliable information. Perhaps the most obvious indicator of her mindset is that she appears to have been crying before approaching the desk. However, even this is not necessarily evidence of emotional distress; for example, allergies and colds can cause the same effect, and it is not the librarian's job to guess what has caused red eyes and a puffy face. Having said that, a librarian is also human, and cannot always remain perfectly neutral, especially if they fear a person may be suffering. This is where the reference interview can shed some light on the patron's intentions. I would begin by assuring her I could help and then ask if she was working on a school project. If she said yes, I would ask her more about the assignment, because I would want to work with her to determine her informational needs, and whether that book would meet her requirements, or if some other source might also be of use. If she were to answer no, it wasn't for school, then I would begin searching for the record of the book online. While doing this, I would observe her body language. If she was presenting evidence of being upset, such as sniffling, I would ask if she was feeling alright and offer her a tissue. A small gesture of kindness can go a long way when trying to put someone at their ease. If she were to respond by explaining that she was upset about something, I'd ask if she would like me to help her find resources that might provide some

perspective on her problems in addition to the original book she asked for. If she were to respond by not indulging any information, I would not press her. I would locate the book and present it to her. Librarians should not make assumptions about patrons nor censor resources. Emily J.M. Knox writes how librarians in the last half of the 20th century recommitted themselves to intellectual freedom based on two ideas:

> First, they accepted epistemology of reader-response theory, which holds that different readers have different responses to the same text. Second, they accepted an agnostic-postmodernist view of reading effects wherein it is impossible to know how any one person might be affected by reading a particular text [.] (Smith and Wong, 28)

It is Melissa's right to obtain knowledge on any subject, and it is not part of a librarian's duties to guess what she will do with that information. This is made clear in the second principle of the Code of Ethics of the American Library Association: "We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources" (Smith and Wong, 43). I would however, try to emphasize the fact that she could come to me anytime to help her with any questions she may have, in order make her feel like she is welcome, and that I'm there to provide her with all the information she needs.

Like Robert C. Dowd's study, "I Want to Find Out How to Freebase Cocaine or Yet Another Unobtrusive Test of Reference Performance," the information Melissa is seeking is relating to self-harm. If a librarian were to refuse to provide them with the information they seek, they would be treading on the individual's bodily autonomy as well as their intellectual freedoms. Dowd writes of his experience, "Freebasing cocaine may not be an accepted practice even in our occasionally liberal society, but anyone in this free country should certainly have the right to read about how it is done" (492). These acts, suicide and freebasing, are not something you would ever want to encourage someone to do, but that does not mean that you can restrict access to information about them.

Case Study 2 "A Case of Honor or Privacy" *Mary is a reference librarian at an university and is asked by a student to show her how to find websites where you can purchase pre-written papers on the author James Joyce. Mary discovers it is for a class taught by Dr. Jones, a professor with whom Mary is friends. Should Mary assist the student in finding the requested website? Should they inform Dr. Jones of that student's actions?*

In this study, I feel that Mary failed in some of her duties before even showing the student how to search for the dubious website. She ought to have asked some reference interview questions. Robert Dowd was astounded by the fact that none of the librarians he approached conducted a reference interview. He writes, "The initial question presented may or may not be what the patron wants at all. I asked about cocaine when I really wanted to observe service. I would not, of course, have admitted that, but dialogue between reference librarians and library patrons is vitally important to the proper subsequent professional services rendered" (492). Bearing this in mind, I would have started with a question such as, "Are you looking for information about James Joyce himself, or about his works?" I would also ask her how many sources her professor required for the paper. Then I would show her how to search for the website, however, I would point out that its veracity has not been checked, and therefore her professor may not approve of it as a source. Assuming she had answered that she required more than one source, I would also show her how to search other databases for more reliable information, while explaining how some sources are better than others, such as peer reviewed journals and articles in scholarly publications. This would meet the requirements of one of the IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and Other Information Workers: "Responsibility towards Individuals and Society: [...] To enhance access for all, librarians and other information workers support people in their information searching, assist them to develop their reading skills and information literacy, and encourage them in the ethical use of information[.]" (Smith and Wong, pg. 61). After the student left, I would suggest to my colleagues that we hang up reminders of the university's plagiarism policy at each computer

terminal, alongside other information such as computer usage rules and printing directions, as a way to hopefully discourage future students should they also consider downloading work that is not theirs. Supposing that my efforts hadn't influenced the student's decision to submit a paper that she did not write, and I was still faced with the described conversation with Dr. Jones, I would not reveal any information about the student who asked for help on James Joyce. Knox writes, "Librarians do not discuss individuals' questions with other people, including fellow librarians in ways that will identify the patron" (Smith and Wong, pg. 36). What I would do instead is offer to show her how to use websites or programs designed for instructors to search for evidence of plagiarism across the web. This would allow me to simultaneously meet the requirements of three of the IFLA Code of Ethics: 1-Access to Information, 3-Privacy, Secrecy and Transparency, and 5-Neutrality, Personal Integrity and Professional Skills (Smith and Wong, 62). I would also suggest that Dr. Jones make it clear to her students the serious consequences that can arise from plagiarism, starting from the beginning of the semester, and with regular reminders before each assignment.

Case Study 3 "What Would You Do?" *A teenager named David has been seen in the Library browsing what appear to be neo-Nazi and other hate groups websites. He asks the reference librarian to help him find additional info on the topics. Should the librarian deny him service? Should they inform David's parents?*

This study is particularly interesting in light of the current political environment; the increase of mass shootings, conspiracy peddlers, and the rise of white nationalism. These factors cause David's research interests to raise some red flags. However, we cannot assume that his search for information means he's plotting something nefarious. What we should be more concerned about is correcting any misinformation or imbalance coming from his sources. It could be that he is working on an assignment about racist subgroups, or he's just trying to better inform

himself about what their arguments are, without agreeing with them. The librarian does not have the right to censor what he reads on the internet, but once he approaches her for reference help, she has an opportunity to learn more about what his motivations are, and what kind of results he is expecting to find. She should then find him sources on the information he seeks, but she could search for sources that compare and contrast the evidence behind both points of views in an objective manner. This would be providing him with the information he seeks, while giving him balanced format. Ironically, if she were to deny him service based on his request, she would be behaving in manner not in conflict with Nazi ideology:

> Totalitarian systems attempt to maintain themselves in power by the ruthless suppression of any concept that challenges the established orthodoxy. The power of a democratic system to adapt to change is vastly strengthened by the freedom of its citizens to choose widely from among conflicting opinions offered freely to them ("Freedom to Read Statement," Smith and Wong, 55).

I do not believe she should not inform his parents. David is entitled to his privacy, just as every other patron in the library, as stated in the Code of Ethics of the American Library Association: "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" (Smith and Wong, 43). She may have hesitated at his request and this is perhaps natural, but she should not refuse to help or betray his privacy. A personal anecdote related to this subject; in high school, my brother once checked a copy of *Mein Kampf* out of our local public library for research purposes. The librarian had a son around same age as my brother. We later (as adults) found out from him that his mother had gone home and warned him to stay away from my brother, because "he reads Nazi propaganda." She had broken several important ethical codes by doing so, including a violation of privacy. Should the librarian in the case study have done the same, she would be guilty of the same ethical breaches.

Robert Hauptman argues that, “censorship is never warranted, but it should not be confused with a refusal to aid and abet egregiously antisocial acts in the name of some higher obligation” (329). This leaves too much room for interpretation of what counts as “egregiously antisocial acts,” and so should be better defined. I think that if a patron has a research request and explicitly states their intentions to use the provided information to cause bodily harm to others, a librarian should then put their responsibilities to society ahead of their professional ethics, just as other professions that rely heavily on confidentiality, i.e. lawyers, doctors, and clergy. When we witness a real threat to society, we must consult with our colleagues and try to come to a collective decision as to what the next step ought to be. However, someone researching ways to cause harm to others and does not express their intention of what they are using the information for, we must not assume the worst.

Works Cited

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