

International codes of archival ethics: an analytical comparative study

Research – English
Summary

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Abstract

Standards or codes are one of the most important control tools for any profession. Codes of archival ethics get their importance from the fact that it's a codified tool for controlling the conduct of archivists and workers in records and information with their various titles. Ethical control for archivists and workers in records and information is an important step towards properly performing the functions of records units and archival entities. The codes of professional ethics are supposed to be a constitution between archivists and users that defines the duties and rights of each party to prevent blackmailing of users or Damage archives. By comparing and analyzing models of codes of archival ethics, it is possible to extract the most important issues that must be focused on when establishing or adopting any ethical code that regulates relationship between archivists and users, and between archivists and workers in related professions.

Keywords

Archive as profession, Archival ethics, Ethical codes, Codes of conduct

Introduction

Over the past decades, numerous ethical and behavioral standards have been issued by official and unofficial archival entities, including national archives, professional archival associations, and international organizations such as the International Council on Archives. These ethical standards address various archival issues and practices, highlighting their significance, encouraging adherence, expanding best practices, and cautioning against certain behaviors. They also engage with theoretical, applied, and humanitarian questions, addressing areas of controversy within archival work and clarifying the positions of the issuing entities on these matters.

While some standards exhibit consistency in their coverage of key issues and practices, others distinguish themselves by emphasizing specific aspects that are either unique to them or receive limited attention in other standards. This study examines a range of archival ethics standards issued by different archival entities worldwide, comparing and analyzing their content to identify key themes and variations.

A) Research Problem

The core problem of this study lies in the variation of ethical standards for the archival profession, with each standard reflecting the priorities and concerns of the issuing entity. These variations are influenced by the specific environment in which a standard is developed, the prevailing issues in that context, and the perspectives of archivists and governing bodies. As a result, each standard prioritizes certain ethical concerns while overlooking others, creating a diverse landscape of archival ethics that warrants further analysis.

B) Significance of the Study

Comparing and analyzing ethical standards in the archival profession provides valuable insights into the most pressing issues requiring ethical and behavioral regulation for archivists and professionals in document and archive management. This study also highlights the key ethical and professional concerns that capture the attention of archivists worldwide. Furthermore, its findings will be instrumental in formulating an ethical standard tailored to the Arab world by drawing from established international, national, and professional guidelines to extract the most relevant and applicable principles.

C) Research Objectives

This study aims to:

- Compare and analyze different archival ethics standards issued by international, national, and professional archival entities.
- Identify key areas of agreement and divergence among these standards.
- Assess the strengths and weaknesses of each standard.
- Evaluate the extent to which local contexts influence the formulation of archival ethics.
- Explore the potential need for a specialized archival ethics standard for the Arab world.

D) Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the most significant archival ethics standards issued globally?
2. What are the primary similarities and differences between the selected standards?
3. Why do archival ethics standards differ in their coverage of professional issues?
4. How do local environments influence the topics addressed in archival ethics standards?
5. Is there a need for a specialized archival ethics standard for the Arab world?

E) Scope of the Study

- **Thematic Scope:** Ethical standards for document and archive management.
- **Geographical Scope:** Global.
- **Temporal Scope:** From the issuance of the first ethical standard for the archival profession to the conclusion of this study in 2024.

F) Research Methodology

This study employs the following research methods:

1. **Historical Method:** To trace the origins and development of archival ethics standards worldwide and examine the key archival institutions and entities that have issued these standards.
2. **Comparative Method:** To systematically compare and analyze different archival ethics standards, identifying key similarities and differences among them.

By employing these methodologies, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of ethical standards in the archival profession and inform potential efforts to develop a region-specific standard for the Arab world.

Results and Recommendations

Results

The study reached the following key findings:

1. Establishing ethical standards for the archival profession is essential for ensuring professional and behavioral integrity in archival work.
2. Ethical standards precede technical archival standards, yet they have not received sufficient attention.
3. Archival ethics focus on critical professional practices that require ethical conduct, as reflected in the models examined in this study. These include:
 - Upholding personal integrity among archivists.
 - Preventing archivists from exploiting their professional privileges for personal or financial gain, such as unauthorized access to documents or research findings.
4. Ethical standards emphasize the need for archivists to avoid conflicts of interest.
5. The ethical models analyzed in this study are influenced by the nature of the institutions that developed them, as well as the prevailing ethical, professional, and societal concerns within those institutions.
6. Many ethical standards share common principles that promote transparency in archival procedures, such as:
 - Ethical and legal acquisition of documents.

- Preventing illegal or unethical acquisitions.
 - Ensuring transparency in archival management, also known as "archival accuracy."
7. Ethical standards help protect archives from political manipulation by advocating for transparency, freedom of information, and the safeguarding of personal and private data.
 8. These standards reinforce the independence of the archival profession by supporting human rights and protecting the interests of marginalized and vulnerable communities.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis of various ethical standards in archival practice, the study recommends the following:

1. Archival institutions that have established ethical standards should regularly update them while ensuring that previous versions remain accessible on their websites for research, comparison, and development purposes.
2. The International Council on Archives, archival institutions, researchers, and professionals should develop ethical guidelines addressing the impact of artificial intelligence—both its benefits and challenges—on archival and document management.
3. National archival authorities in the Arab world, along with the Arab Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (ARABICA), should draw upon international archival ethics to formulate a unified Arab ethical standard. This standard should guide national archives and archival entities across the region in their professional practice.