Arabic code of ethics for records, archives and information management profession

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Abstract

The profession of records, archives and information management - like other professions - needs ethical rules that regulate the behavior of its workers and organize their relationship with users and workers in related or relevant professions, bodies and entities. Many foreign archival bodies have issued codes of ethics of the archival profession to ensure the best behavioral and ethical practices for archivists and workers in the records and information professions. This study seeks to find an Arabic ethical code for practicing this profession that is Compatible with the Arab reality and focuses on the most important Arabic issues in the field, guided by models of archival ethics codes issued by international, professional, and official archival bodies.

Keywords
Archives profession, Archival ethics, Ethical codes, Ethical rules, Behavioral rules.

Rationale for a Regional Ethical Standard

The necessity for a unified Arabic ethical standard stems from several critical professional and systemic gaps:

• Professional Regulation: Unlike other professions, archival work in many Arab institutions lacks codified ethical controls to govern behavior and standardize performance across different entities.

• Technological Advancement: The rise of digital records, artificial intelligence, and sophisticated information systems introduces new risks regarding privacy, data integrity, and the unauthorized destruction of electronic records.

• Protection of Rights: A standard is required to protect the rights of various stakeholders, including the archivists themselves, the institutions they serve, and the researchers/beneficiaries accessing the records.

• Countering Malpractice: There is an urgent need to combat the illegal acquisition of documents, the "alienation" of archival fonds (unauthorized transfer of ownership), and the tampering with historical evidence for political or personal gain.

• Regional Integration: Establishing a unified standard helps Arab archival institutions align their practices, facilitating better cooperation and a shared professional identity.

Foundational Terminology

The research establishes a specific lexicon to ensure clarity and professional consistency. Key terms include:

Term	Professional Definition
Archivist	A professionally trained individual responsible for managing, evaluating, acquiring, preserving, and describing archival materials.
Access	The right and opportunity to identify and use archival materials according to established legal and administrative rules.
Ethics	The intellectual and philosophical principles that govern the behavior of professionals within society.
Acquisition	The legitimate process of obtaining records through legal transfer, purchase, gift, or deposit.
Illegal Acquisition	Obtaining archival materials through illegitimate means, such as force, political pressure, or illicit trade.
Alienation	The unauthorized transfer of the custody or ownership of archival records from their original creating institution.
Transparency	The clear and open sharing of information regarding professional procedures, decision-making, and access rules.
Authenticity	Ensuring that records remain original, untampered with, and true to their context of creation.

Fonds	The entire body of records created or received by an individual or organization in the course of their activities.

Philosophy and Characteristics of the Proposed Standard

The proposed standard is designed not as a rigid legal code, but as an **instructional framework** that enhances service quality while maintaining professional integrity.

Core Characteristics

1. Respect for Fundamental Principles: The standard upholds archival tenants such as "Organic Unity" (preventing the fragmentation of records) and "Provenance" (respecting the original creator of the records).

2. Universality: It is designed to be applicable across various institutions (governmental, private, or religious) rather than being limited to a single entity.

3. Comprehensiveness: It covers all stages of the archival lifecycle, from creation and acquisition to description and disposal.

4. Precision and Clarity: The language is intentionally specific to avoid ambiguity in professional duties and obligations.

5. Flexibility: It is built to accommodate modern technological changes and evolving societal needs.

Key Pillars of Professional Responsibility

The draft standard divides ethical duties into three primary categories:

1. General Ethical Conduct

• Equitable Service: Archivists must provide services to all beneficiaries regardless of race, religion, gender, or nationality.

• Confidentiality: Respecting the privacy of individuals mentioned in the records and protecting sensitive personal data.

• Integrity: Professionals must avoid using their position for personal profit or to grant unauthorized advantages to specific parties.

• Professional Solidarity: Encouraging cooperation between archivists and related specialists (historians, information scientists, etc.).

2. Legal Responsibilities

• Adherence to Legislation: Working strictly within the framework of national archival laws and regulations.

• Protection of Records: Taking active measures against the illegal destruction, theft, or smuggling of archival materials.

• Documentation of Actions: Every professional action (acquisition, weeding, transfer) must be documented to ensure accountability and a clear "chain of custody."

3. Professional Duties and Acquisitions

• Legitimate Acquisition: Archivists must ensure that all materials added to the archives are obtained through legitimate channels, free from the "stain" of illegal seizure or coercion.

• Anti-Alienation: Actively opposing the transfer of archival fonds out of their rightful custody or country of origin.

• Public Awareness: Educating the public and creating entities about the value of records to prevent the loss of historical memory.

• Weeding (Deaccessioning): Ensuring that the removal of records is done via established "Retention Schedules" and objective evaluation rather than arbitrary decision-making.

Implementation Framework

The study suggests that institutions adopt the standard in two formats:

• The Full Version: A comprehensive document serving as a professional "Constitution" for internal use and policy-making.

• The Concise Version: A simplified guide designed for public display within archival reading rooms, similar to a "Patient's Bill of Rights" in a medical setting. This promotes transparency and informs beneficiaries of what they can expect from the institution and its staff.

Conclusion

The adoption of a unified Arabic Ethical Standard for Records and Archives is a vital step in modernizing the profession in the Arab world. By establishing clear rules for conduct, acquisition, and transparency, the standard protects the region's documentary heritage from neglect, illegal trade, and the challenges posed by the digital era. It empowers the archivist as a guardian of truth and a facilitator of historical justice.