

# THE INTERNATIONAL CODE OF ETHICS FOR ARCHIVISTS: CHANCE AND CHALLENGE FOR PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

by

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When talking about the code of ethics for archivists I am often asked the same two questions: 'what is it exactly' and 'what is the use of it'. In this paper I will tell you the history of a professional code in the international archival community. I will try to explain what archivists all over the world think about professional ethics, and I will try to show you how an archival association, and therefore the archival profession as a whole, can benefit by the code.

I must begin with the first question. What is a code of ethics? There are of course lots of definitions, but the one I like best is the one based on the Dictionary of philosophy by A. Flew and given in a recent article on ethics in conservation.<sup>1</sup> It says: 'professional ethics is a set of standards by which a particular group decides to regulate its behaviour. These standards must somehow have come to be agreed (at least by the more influential members of the group), and appear ultimately to owe their authority to the fact that they serve to distinguish what is legitimate or accepted in pursuit of the aims of the group from what is not.'

Some years ago the French association of archivists made a comparison between several professional codes. The result of this analysis was that in general a code is a document with four types of rules: a definition of the group for whom the code is meant; a mission statement and the general rules for the professional; an enumeration of the obligations of the professional towards various groups in society; and rules about the execution of the profession.<sup>2</sup>

The idea to regulate professional behaviour by using a code was not invented by archivists. In the medical world and among other liberal professions for instance a

professional code has a long tradition. In the cultural sector the idea of a code of ethics is relatively young, and again archivists have not been among the first to take the initiative. Awareness of the need for a code came earlier from librarians (at least in the United Kingdom and in France) and in the museum world. In the late 1980s ICOM, the International Council of Museums, made a code which has since then been adopted in various countries. In the archives the conservation experts were among the first to work on a code: in 1950 the first restoration principles were already formulated by Roger Ellis, and the 1980s saw a continuation of the discussion.

The first attempt to make a professional code for archivists came in a country unhampered by a long archival tradition - the United States of America.<sup>3</sup> The discussion started in 1939, when a historian, Robert C. Blinkley, called for a code to help archivists in dealing with the conflict between freedom of information versus protection of privacy. The first code however dates from 1955. It was written by the archivist of the United States Wayne C. Grover and at first intended to be a training document for archivists of the National Archives. It contains mainly an enumeration of the duties of the archivist, and deals with problems of selection, safety of records, access, and relations with users. It forbids archivists to commercially exploit their holdings and it encourages them to give information when required and to increase archival knowledge. It was never formally adopted for the profession.

In the 1960s a discussion about archival ethics arose. The subjects were selection, acquisition, theft and alienation of records. The famous Lowenheim case (1968) - professor Francis L. Lowenheim accused the Roosevelt Library of denying him access to certain letters because a staff member wanted to edit these himself - and changes in society in the field of freedom of information, protection of privacy, and copyright caused the Society of American Archivists to install a commission to prepare a code of ethics (1976). A code was duly adopted by the SAA in 1980. It was revised and adopted by the Council of SAA in 1992.

The important thing about this American code is that, for the first time, a code was written for the archival profession in its entirety - not only for archivists working in public archives (who have statutes and regulations within which they work), but also for non-public archivists and even manuscript curators, who - more than in many European

countries - form part of the archival profession.

The American example seems to have acted as a source of inspiration for the international scene and for several countries. Among the first countries to follow the American example was Canada, where in 1991 the **Association des Archivistes du Québec** (revised in 1996) and in 1992 the **Association of Canadian Archivists** adopted a code.<sup>4</sup>

Not every code however is the same. One can distinguish between a code with only general values and principles (a true code of ethics) and a code with detailed instructions for every kind of situation (a code of practice). The advantage of a code of ethics seems clear: it is fairly easy to get agreement under a large group of people about general principles. The danger is however that such a code is hardly of any practical use. On the other hand a code of practice has the danger that it 'could be divisive or rendered meaningless by the effort to achieve consensus.'<sup>5</sup>

A comparison of the texts of the early codes of SAA and the **Association des Archivistes du Québec** can illustrate the difference between an ethics orientated code and a code based on professional practice. The American code is an example of the last type. It deals with nine main topics: collecting policies (III); relation with donors, and restrictions (IV); appraisal, protection and arrangement (V); privacy and privileged information (VI); use and restrictions (VII); information about researchers and correction of errors (VIII); research by archivists (IX); complaints about other institutions (X) and professional activities (XI). This code is a practical text, dealing with everyday situations. It is followed by a commentary in which the reasoning of the committee is explained, and where members of the committee comment on areas where there was no unanimity of opinion between them.<sup>6</sup>

The Quebec code is quite different. Ethical statements are grouped under four headings summarising the duties of the archivist towards society; towards users; towards the profession; and towards the association. The Quebec code gives no prescriptions, recommendations or practical solutions; it stresses mainly the attitude the archivist should adopt.

The one type of code is not necessarily better than the other; it is simply that one type of code may suit a particular country better than another. Which type is chosen

depends on the *archival* tradition.

In 1990 the Section of Professional Associations of the International Council on Archives (ICA/SPA) became aware of the growing interest in the theme of a code and recognised that problems arose because of lack of one. For that reason SPA decided to take on the job of providing an international code of ethics for the archival profession.<sup>7</sup> The work started with a discussion at the 1991 spring meeting of the Steering Committee, evaluating available codes of ethics or of professional practice. For this the Italian archivist Marco Carassi had compiled a working document, based on existing codes of professional bodies of archivists, records managers, historians, museum-staff and librarians in Australia, Canada, Great Britain and the United States. In October 1991 the annual meeting of SPA delegates decided to accept the idea of a code of ethics which would contain elements both of a code of ethics and of a code of practice. At the 1992 International Congress on Archives in Montreal the code of ethics was subject of discussion by SPA members and other archivists during a symposium. After an introduction by the English archivist Michael Roper about the role a code of ethics can play in the profession a draft code was presented to the professional associations for comment and discussion. In 1993 and 1994 the secretary of SPA, Marco Carassi sent an improved draft text to all ICA-bodies, to all professional associations and to various related groups. The comments that were received were discussed and where needed included in the text. Finally in 1995 a, what SPA thought was definite, text was presented to the Executive Committee of ICA. The Committee however expressed the wish to have audiovisual and electronic media expressis verbis included in the text, wanted more accent on the life cycle principle of archives and on the whole asked SPA to look at the wording of the text. The text was thereafter worked upon by the SPA steering committee in collaboration with the president of ICA, dr. Jean Pierre Wallot, who had made the code of ethics his special subject. A working group of Wallot, together with the German archivist Reimer Witt and me met twice in Amsterdam. There the text was changed and rearranged in what we soon called the 'ten commandments'. The final touch was added during a notable meeting of the SPA Steering Committee in Schleswig (Germany; February 1996). There on Saturday 2 February at midnight the final touches of the English and French version were added. It will not surprise you that

our host Reimer Witt marked the occasion by opening a bottle of champagne. In its spring meeting of 1996, in Ottawa the text was unanimously agreed upon by the Executive Committee. It was approved by the the General Assembly of ICA in september 1996. <sup>8</sup> At this moment the text is being translated in several languages and discussed and/or adopted by archival associations ali over the world.

In the period SPA was working on the international code the archival associations did not sit still. In several countries study days were organised with often a lively debate on professional ethics. In some countries (Canada, Austrália, the United Kingdom) this resulted in a national code.

In the United Kingdom ethics appeared twice on the agenda of the annual general meeting of the Society of Archivists. In 1988 three speakers discussed professional ethics: a conservation expert, a librarian, and an archivist. <sup>9</sup> The conservation expert reminded archivists of the principles of conservation by Roger Ellis (1950), which can be summarized in the words 'good manners towards documents' and stressed the need for cooperation between archivist and conservator. He judged this necessary in assessing the risks to a document of proposed treatment, the effect on its evidential value and the cost-effectiveness. The librarian described the Library's Association's code of professional conduct, which is in reality a code of ethics in which moral issues are stated, and its byelaws, which form a code of practice, contravention of which can lead to disciplinary action. The archivist, was sceptical about the effect of a code in a profession made up of people practising in very different circumstances. One year later, at the 1989 annual meeting, three other speakers discussed ethical dilemmas. A business archivist stressed that his primary task was to preserve his masters muniments (documents which defend their owners claims). A local government archivist and museum officer pointed out that in a community concious of its culture the archivist must respond to the priorities of its patrons. And the head of preservation of the National Library of Scotland went into the conflict between preservation and access. <sup>10</sup> Although most of the English speakers were not opposed to the idea of a code of ethics the outcome of the debate in the Society was inconclusive. In 1988 Council of the Society had set up a working party to consider a code of practice. In 1994 a code of

conduct, binding for all members of the profession, was adopted.<sup>11</sup>

The French Association des Archivistes Français gave its members the chance to discuss the ethics of an archivist during a study day in January 1992. Apart from the international debate, their interest in ethics was also related to changes in the profession, due to decentralisation, the rise of business archivists and the changes in training of archivists. Furthermore the wish was expressed to cooperate with related professions. Therefore, after a general introduction on the subject of codes of ethics and of professional practices, and some information about the international debate in ICA/SPA, a documentalist and a librarian were invited to give their view on the need of, and their experience with a professional code.<sup>12</sup>

The documentalist defended the need of a code for his profession out of the intellectual power the documentalist possesses, a power which is easily misused. A code defines the limits within which the professionals operate, gives trust towards those for whom they work, makes it easier for the documentalists to identify with the profession, and provides credibility towards the outside world and therefore legitimation to the profession. Although a documentalist is different from an archivist in that he is primarily interested in information and not in a document as such, it was stated that his values are comparable to those of archivists. French documentalists have chosen for a text with ethical values, not for a code of professional behaviour. Four sets of values are identified: towards the user; towards the employer; towards the sources of information; and towards the profession. French librarians, who adopted a code in 1984, stress three main principles as the basis for their code: professional competence; intellectual magnanimity towards the documents and the users (meaning that they intend to acquire a balanced collection and to provide service in a tactful and responsible manner). In general it can be said that the similarity in general values between these two groups and archivists is remarkable indeed.

In preparation for the study day the French association had sent out a questionnaire to their members about the relation between the archivist and their employers, the users, the archives creators, colleagues, and related professions. On the basis of the answers two texts were formulated for discussion: a charter - a two paragraph general statement of principles - and a 20 articles code of practice, with rules about transfer of

documents, conservation and communication. In the discussion familiar topics as code of ethics versus a code of practice, a code for internal or for external use, and a code for archivists versus a code for all information professionals were raised. No general agreement was reached.

The discussion in Australia had a more practical character. It was not, as in France, the theory of a code as such that interested them, but a cases from the everyday life of an archivist. On a studyday of the Canberra branch of the Australian Association of Archivists (1993) four of such cases were discussed.<sup>13</sup> They had to do with the attitude of the archivist to his collection, to the public, to his superiors and to the profession. The most simple of these cases was the question 'what does an archivist do when the minister of foreign affairs, in order to improve the relations with an other country, wants to present the only original copy of an important document to that country?' The other cases were even more complex. From the discussions arose that the intervention of the archivist often presents a complication, especially in cases with a political character or when there exist conflicting interests.

One year later, in 1994, the Assor.iar.io H' Aravers de Hatalunya organised a study day on the code of ethics.<sup>14</sup> One of the topics there was the necessity to protect (political) archives against loss or destruction. The impartiality of the archivist and his professional secret were, together with more common subjects as access, the attitude to the public and criticising of colleagues, major subjects in the discussion.

With the adoption of the code of ethics for archivists by the International Council on Archives in 1996 there is now one universally accepted text for the whole profession. The international code is a mixture of ethics and practical matters. The 'ten commandments' are focussed on the behaviour of the archivist and stress his responsibility as keeper of the integrity of archives. In everything he does the archivist should act respectfully and professionally (art. 1, 2, 3, 4). He should record and be able to justify his actions on archival materials (art. 5). He should stimulate the use of archives and provide impartial service to everyone (art. 6). In addition he is expected to respect both access and privacy and act within the boundaries of the law (art.7), to avoid

using his position to unfairly benefit himself or others (art.8), to continually update his professional knowledge and share the results with others (art.9) and to promote the preservation and use of the world's documentary heritage (art. 10).

Since the adoption of the ICA-code the subject of ethics has found a place on the agenda of most archival associations. On the meeting of the international round table on archives, last September in Edinburgh, representatives of archival associations and of national archival services all over the world made mention of efforts to discuss, translate, publish and/or adopt the code. <sup>15</sup>

But let us now come to the practical side of the matter. What is the use of a code? When does an archivist need one, if ever? In the beginning in many countries with an old archival tradition the reaction of archivists towards the idea of a code has been divided. This is not surprising, after all the archival profession has done without a code for more than a century. The opponents can be divided in the idealists who think archivists don't need a code because everyone is a decent and trustworthy person and the values are self evident; the cynics, who say the existence of a code won't prevent evildoers from doing evil, especially when a code has no sanctions and anyway archivists from the private and from the public sector won't agree; and the optimists who believe that teaching and legislation are sufficient and that everything can be solved with common sense.



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In general it can be stated that the necessity of guidance by, for instance, a code of ethics arises when moral values and questions of integrity are involved. In short at a moment when the really difficult choices, that every profession knows, have to be made. In the archival profession these problems very often arise in the field of acquisition and privacy. Let me give you some examples. What should an archivist do when he can obtain important material, which is better placed in another repository? Or when he is offered archives which are very interesting, but under condition of very limited access? Or, even worse, when he can get interesting documents but suspects they are of dubious provenance? When the archives are safely in his custody his problems don't stop. What's to think about the tricky question of privacy? Of course

there are laws, rules and regulations - but what is to be done when these are not clear? When, for instance, there is no restriction on access to a document, but the archivist discovers that it contains information which can cause serious damage to the interests of other, still living people, or even to his employers?

Acquisition and privacy are two of the most common subjects about which problems can arise, but not the only ones. What, for instance, is to be done when an employer because of lack of money wants to sell an important part of the collection to a private person, thereby reducing access, or when there is pressure on the archivist to destroy certain documents?

Of course a code of ethics can never provide a definite solution for problems like these. It is not intended to. In the introduction to the ICA code this is made clear. The code is a reminder of the essential values of the profession: its identity, its mission, its place in society. It provides an ethical framework for members of the profession. And it is precisely for that reason that a code can be a useful instrument for an archival association to assert itself. Recent experience shows that almost everywhere the international code provokes a debate among professionals. At almost all studydays on archival ethics the archival associations have organised in the last ten years archivists were forced to rethink the basic values of the profession. And this is as it should be. The ICA code is a living document. It can be used to inform new members of the profession of their duties and to remind experienced colleagues of their responsibilities. It can also be used to show the outside world what the profession stands for and by this illustrate the importance of archives for society.

To discuss and adopt a code is not the end of the process. It must have a place in professional training and to make a code really effective one needs an authority and perhaps even sanctions. The international code has no sanctions. ICA/SPA relies on the professional associations, national and otherwise, for its adoption and enforcement. On national level every country has its own way to deal with archivists who act against the code. In the United States for instance SAA since 1994 knows a Committee in Ethics and Professional Conduct. This body is charged with the task to review on a continuing basis the SAA code of ethics, to propose changes when necessary and to develop a procedure for treating complaints - by preference by mediation between

parties.<sup>17</sup> In the United Kingdom the discussion about ethics led to a process of defining the profession, of certification of archival training and to a development toward a register of archivists - from which a misbehaving colleague can be struck. Even in countries without a formal code there exist such groups and procedures, like Italy where 'prohi viri' (wise man) judge professional behaviour.

It is in this field that the professional association can play an important role. That is because in many countries the association is a binding element. It provides the only forum where all archivists can discuss professional matters on a more or less equal footing, regardless of status or hierarchical relations. It is therefore, in my opinion, one of the main responsibilities of a professional association to guard the values and standards of the profession. We live in an age of rapid change - think of growing specialization among archivists (with all the dangers of the group falling apart), changes in training (with more emphasis on information management and electronic records), processes of privatisation, the rapid growth of electronic archives (and all its problems of selection and preservation), and the ever growing importance of privacy regulations. In this world the associations face an important challenge indeed.

Thank you for your attention.



## NOTES

1. J. ASHMAN, 'Ethics in conservation', in: **Journal of the Society of Archivists** XIV (1993) p. 15.
2. F. BRAIZE 'Eléments de réflexion sur la déontologie', in: **La Gazette des Archives** nouvelle série nr. 157 (1992) p. 82-83.
3. K. BENEDIKT, 'Archival ethics', in: **Managing archives and archival institutions** (Chicago 1989) p. 174-184; C. BIANCHI, 'Archives: professionalisme et déontologie en Amérique du Nord', in **Abido**. 10 (1997) p. 12-14. The SAA code of ethics is published in: **SAA Newsletter** November 1992.
4. 'Code d'éthique de l' Association des archivistes du Québec', in: **Archives**, XXIV (1992) p.5-8; this code was revised in 1996. C. BIANCHI, 'Archives', p. 13-14.
5. As said the Scottish archivist A. Cameron; see S. HEALY, 'The Society's chronicle', in: **Journal of the Society of Archivists** IX (1988) p. 169.
6. A. MORGAN CAMPBELL ed., 'Minutes: Council meeting, 28 January 1980', in: **The Canadian Archivist** XLIII (1980) p. 414-418.
7. R. WITT, 'Internationaler Archivrat - Section of Professional Archival Associations (ICA/SPA) 1992 bis 1996', in **Per Archivar** 50 (1997) p. 360-361.
8. The English version of the ICA code is published in International Council on Archives/Conseil International d'Archives, **Bulletin** 1997/1, p. 23-25.
9. S. HEALY, 'The Society's chronicle', in: **Journal of the Society of Archivists** IX (1988), p. 169; A.D. BAYNES-COPE, 'Ethics and the conservation of archival documents', in: **Journal of the Society of Archivists** IX (1988) p. 185-187.
10. D. ROBINSON, 'Society of Archivists Conference 1989: a personal retrospect', in: **Journal of the Society of Archivists** X (1989) p. 174; L MCDONALD, 'Ethical dilemmas facing an archivist in the business environment: the constraints on a business archivist', in: **Journal of the Society of Archivists** X (1989) p. 168-172.
11. The code of conduct was published in a leaflet by The Society of Archivists (1996).
12. The texts of the study day are all published in **La Gazette des Archives** 1992, nouvelle série nr. 157, p. 90.
13. S. YORKE ed., **Ethics, lies and archives** (Canberra 1994).
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15. Some recent examples from Western Europe: Belgium (1996-1997), The Netherlands (1996, 1998), Germany (1996), Switzerland (1997).

16. M. CARASSI, 'Quelques éléments du débat international sur la déontologie des archivistes', in: La Gazette des Archives nouvelle série nr. 157 (1992) p. 90.

17. L. DURANTI, 'Enforcing the SAA Code of Ethics' in: Archival Outlook (July 1993) p. 7;  
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