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Ethics Case Study

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Ethical access to documents has been in the news recently with the website Wikileaks revealing thousands of classified Iraq War documents to the public. Some documents were shocking because they revealed “how many Iraqi civilians have been killed and by whom” (Tavernise and Lehren 2010). The release of these documents created legal and international issues. This high status case on the release of private information leads to the archival discussion of the ethical treatment and access to documents within the archives. The stakes in the Wikileaks case may be higher in challenging the authority of a governing body, but the unethical treatment of individuals and their documents can also wreck lives.

Sara S. Hodson in her article, “In Secret Kept, in Silence Sealer: Privacy in the Papers of Authors and Celebrities” explores how famous people and their families have dealt with the release of their private information to the public arena of the archives. She discusses how some families decided to destroy certain or all private documents of their famous members to protect their privacy. Other families would rather be the ones in charge of pushing delicate matters into the public sphere and hide nothing. These two decisions on how to handle a renowned figure’s papers came about in response to the public’s insatiable need to know everything about the private lives of public figures (Hodson 2004). Yet these two extremes do not have to be the only option; archivists can protect privacy by placing restrictions on a collection.

Restrictions to a collection means sealing certain documents for an agreed upon deadline. There can be some exceptions to this rule such as allowing an authorized biographer to see the papers. This method gives family members and famous people a way to safeguard their records

until everyone who could potentially be embarrassed is dead. Archivists may not favor this method but it is preferred over documents being destroyed instead.

Ethical concerns also come into play in figuring out how to provide equal access to the documents. Elena S. Danielson points out that the Society of American Archivists (SAA)'s Code of Ethics promotes equal access but in reality it cannot be applied "consistently in practice for a wide variety of legal, ethical, and pragmatic reasons" (Danielson 1989). In the Wikileaks example, the documents have not been declassified and were not released through official channels, but the founders of Wikileaks felt compelled to release the documents regardless. They acted unethically in that the documents were not their's to be released, but they did neatly side step the issue of equal access in posting them online for everyone to read. However, in the archives this is a much thornier problem as issues of copyright and privacy must be taken into consideration. For example, the copyright of personal correspondences still belongs to the writer, not to the receiver who donated the letters.

The main issue in dealing with documents and ethical requirements is that the sheer number of documents exceeds the ability of an archivist to check each one for private information. Therefore an archives must have a standard practice and policy to deal with all documents for equal access unless otherwise stated. This provides a routine safeguard to protect the archives as they have a policy in place which discusses their responsibilities. Other ethical concerns arise for famous people who donate their archives while still living, but a comprehensive discussion with the donors about their collection may be able to circumvent most access issues as long as the donor realizes the importance of not only protecting their reputation but that of their correspondents as well.

Bibliography

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