



NASIG Newsletter

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Should NASIG Develop a Code of Ethics?

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I begin this short editorial with a confession: NASIG colleagues, I've been living a double life. In addition to being a serialist, I'm also a student in East Carolina University's doctoral program in Technical and Professional Discourse. In one recently completed course, Ethics in Technical and Professional Communication, a topic of focus was the role that professional organizations play in establishing codes of ethics. The course emphasized that a code of professional ethics is crucial to guiding individuals within a profession about how to behave, how to evaluate their conduct and the conduct of colleagues, and, ultimately, how to conceptualize their profession. The course further taught that it is the responsibility of the organizations that lead professions to develop these codes. In doing so, an organization builds on its values and mission to establish the norms that will shape practices in the profession and help ensure that the individuals working within a field do so in a way that's ethical.

The juxtaposition of my course work with my work as a NASIG Member-at-Large has raised one obvious question in my mind: Should NASIG adopt a code of ethics? We are an organization that bills itself as the "preeminent organization for the North American serials community" and as holding "a leadership role in the global information environment."¹ In this capacity, I wonder if we should develop a code of ethics to guide our professional activities managing serials in the global information environment. The organizations of closely aligned professions like the American Library

Association and the Society of American Archivists do provide their memberships with codes of ethics.² Should NASIG follow suit by codifying a set of standards that serials professionals can refer to as a framework for guiding ethical conduct?

My intent here is not necessarily to argue that we should. Yes, it would be nice for NASIG to have a code of ethics, but I wonder—to use a phrase I first heard uttered by our colleague Rick Anderson—whether the juice is worth the squeeze. In other words, in the context of NASIG's competing goals and priorities, is it really a wise decision right now to devote the organization's scarce time and resources to the development of a code of ethics? It's not as if our profession is one that is grappling with an epidemic of aberrantly unethical conduct. So, a code of ethics might be a "nice to have," but what practical and immediate problems would a code of ethics solve for NASIG?

I can't offer a fully articulated answer to this question, but I do think that, at the very least, a discussion about what a NASIG code of ethics would consist of would be a highly productive exercise. Indeed, a consideration of the potential contents of a NASIG code of ethics readily leads to the consideration of more fundamental questions: what are the core values that unite NASIG's membership and how should these core values be reflected in our conduct as professionals? I think that contemplating these questions would help us to better define the NASIG community and, in doing so, better

enable NASIG to play a leadership role in this community.

As we all know, the serials landscape is rapidly evolving. I think that addressing the fundamental questions associated with the development of a code of ethics has the potential to help enable NASIG to keep pace with these evolutions. But it would also be a lot of work. Again, I'm not necessarily advocating that NASIG take on this initiative, but, as our environment evolves and as our membership poses fundamental questions about NASIG's role and mission going forward, I believe that it is productive to consider the usefulness that the development of a code of ethics might have as a point

of entry into difficult questions that will have a major impact on NASIG's future.

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¹ "About NASIG" http://www.nasig.org/about_history.cfm

² "Code of Ethics of the American Library Association" <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/proethics/codeofethics/codeethics>; "SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics" <http://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>

Editor's note: Patrick will lead an informal discussion group on this topic at the 2013 NASIG conference.