

Scenario: As a reference librarian you are approached by an individual asking that you provide him with information for building a bomb, that would enable him to blow up a suburban home. What should you do, and why? Do you blindly serve the patron, discounting any moral obligation, or is it your primary duty to think of the collective 'good'?

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This scenario<sup>1</sup> confirms what we read in our assigned text where Rubin (2010) asserts that LIS professionals need to "anticipate and understand the nature of ethical dilemmas likely to occur in libraries, be familiar with the ethical prescriptions of the field, and know the factors that should be considered when deliberating ethical issues" (p. 417). I imagine one could argue whether this reference scenario would even occur in today's information society, nevertheless I give my answer based on how I understand the ethical prescriptions and factors to consider in this specific case.

No, I wouldn't blindly serve the patron, discounting any moral obligation. We understand that a trait of LIS professionals is their devotion to meeting the needs of clients or patrons. We also recognize the deep commitment of LIS professionals to the welfare of society, also stated as the collective 'good'. In our text Rubin (2010) states that "conflicts might occur between social responsibility and respecting the individual" (p. 419). Although this scenario may initially seem like two LIS professional qualities are in conflict, it becomes clear that this is a false conflict when you consider that library patrons have the moral agency to act as they want "insofar as they do not violate the dignity and respect of others" (Rubin, 2010, p. 418). It would be morally irresponsible to blindly serve a patron without considering the moral obligations a LIS professional has towards their community and the collective 'good'. A more likely dilemma that LIS professionals may face in libraries deals with the issue of item selection. A library may choose to select less controversial items for the library collection to appeal to a broader audience and "improve the prospects of the library's survival" (Rubin, 2010, p. 419). In this case the focus is less on the goal to meet the needs of the individual patron and more on the collective good of society.

#### Footnote

1. The building-a-bomb scenario was addressed by Robert Hauptman in his symposium contribution, *Ethical Concerns in Librarianship: An Overview*, given at the 27th annual symposium of the graduate alumni and faculty of the Rutgers School of Communication, Information, and Library Studies. Hauptman's research in library ethics was also cited by Moya K. Mason in her research paper entitled *Ethics of Librarianship: Libraries, Intellectual Freedom, and Censorship in the Age of Technology*.

#### References

- Hauptman, Robert. 1990. *Ethical Concerns in Librarianship: An Overview*. In *Information Ethics*, ed. by Anne Mintz, pp. 14-23. Jefferson: McFarland.
- Mason, M. K. (2013). *Ethics of librarianship: Libraries, intellectual freedom, and censorship in the age of technology*. Retrieved from <http://www.moyak.com/papers/ethics-librarianship.html>
- Rubin, R.E. (2010). *Foundations of library and information science*. New York: Neal-Schuman.