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# Falling into libraries



## Appropriately skilled information professionals are at the heart of provision to communities in our changing world.

**A**DMITTED as a practitioner to the Supreme Court of the Australian Capital Territory, Trish Hepworth was working as in-house counsel for a government department when she “fell into libraries by complete accident”.

Maybe this destiny could have been foretold. Her grandmother was the senior librarian for a school in Sydney, and Trish would spend holidays hanging out there, playing her way through *Where in the world is Carmen Sandiego?* on one of the school’s only computers. But things really sparked when she started to work with the Australian Libraries and Copyright Commission. There, Trish became involved with a wide range of groups looking at issues of equitable access to knowledge, information, and culture – from libraries to tech companies, education institutions, and organisations like Vision Australia.

“I saw the full breadth of library and information services,” Trish explains. “It was a vantage point that very few people get to see things from, and I owe the hugest debt of gratitude to countless amazing professionals who walked me through each aspect of the sector.”

That support and expertise was much needed as Trish delved deep into the intricacies of the Australian copyright ecosystem. There, she found “a confusing, often quite antiquated patchwork of legislation, which sometimes doesn’t even make sense”. For example, until a recent copyright reform, it was an offence to file document delivery request slips in chronological order.

As Copyright and Policy Adviser for the Australian Libraries and Copyright Commission, as well as Executive Officer for the Australian Digital Alliance, Trish was based in Canberra, finding her home at the National Library of Australia. Since then, she has become Director of Policy and Education at the Australian Library and Information Association, ALIA.

For Trish, the Covid-19 pandemic has emphasised the persisting obstacles to accessing Australia’s wealth of archival materials. “Even when we’re not under lockdown,” Trish says, “it still disproportionately favours people who live in large metropolitan centres and close proximity to the physical collections. Why should people who live in rural areas, or whose disabilities make travel difficult, be disadvantaged relative to people, say, who live in the centre of Melbourne? With all of the technologies and capabilities that we have, it’s slightly ridiculous that this is even an issue.”

The challenges to providing full and fair access take different forms, Trish argues: “If you belong to a local council that doesn’t fund a library, or a school that decides it doesn’t need a school librarian to run its library, you might theoretically have access to a collection, but it’s not really giving you access to the information that you need. If you don’t have people who know what they’re doing, then communities lose out.”

At the time of writing, Trish is a leading voice in opposition to proposed cuts by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation which would reduce the numbers of professional library and archival staff at the nation’s public broadcaster. The campaign against cuts at the ABC highlights that the growth of digital collections brings new information challenges such as limits on digital storage, unstable file formats, and the risk of permanent loss when content is not properly stored or described. ALIA and the Australian Society of Archivists argue that professional skills are more necessary than ever in an age of digital management and preservation.

Alongside the threat of cuts and the ongoing work needed to dismantle legal barriers to information equity, the shift to digital also affects publisher relations, as Trish notes: “We have seen a strengthening in the power of publishers to potentially restrict things. Digital licensing can mean increased control over who you can sell to, and at what price.”



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Librarianship in the digital age requires an agility and tenacity comparable to a rock climber’s, Trish suggests. Appropriately skilled information professionals are at the heart of provision to communities in our changing world. Though the work of librarians varies widely according to their setting and role, “libraries figure out where they fit based on the needs of the community”. That ranges from digital offerings and neighbourhood public libraries to huge cultural institutions and “two people at a desk in an office in a government agency”.

ALIA’s new Professional Pathways project is designed to address these challenges by supporting the journey of professionals from entering LIS education right through their entire career. Trish says it’s about “ensuring that whatever the library service, we’ve got the pathways which mean that people will have shared values and the right skills for the role that they play in meeting their community’s needs, plus the career-long support which will see you through the changing needs and opportunities presented by your community”.

Find out more about ALIA’s Professional Pathways project at [www.professionalpathways.alia.org.au](http://www.professionalpathways.alia.org.au). **IP**