



Address by Chief Justice Richard Niall to the 2026 Australian Law Librarians Association Conference

21 August 2026

Good morning and welcome.

I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we gather, the peoples of the Eastern Kulin nations. I pay my respect to their elders and knowledge holders and to any First Nations people joining us today.

I thank the Australian Law Librarians Association for organising this event, and to Kate Freedman for your kind introduction. I welcome all participants and I especially welcome our visitors from overseas.

The focus of this year's program is the architecture of information. That theme draws attention to the way information is constructed and framed. And when we think about the way in which information can be constructed or designed, this inevitably leads us to the topic of artificial intelligence.

The impact of AI on the work of the legal sector

It is by now trite that AI is a part of the world we live in and increasingly so. The capability of AI is now advancing at an exceptional pace. The metrics as to the growth of AI are truly incredible. The scale of investment in AI models, computer chips, and data centres is breathtaking. Four of the hyper-scalers – Meta, Alphabet, Amazon, and Microsoft – have between them set aside approximately USD 75 billion for data centres

and physical equipment in 2026 alone.¹ That figure is close to half the size of the entire Australian economy.² Indeed, investment in data centres and information-processing equipment accounted for almost half the *entirety* of United States GDP growth in the first half of 2025.³

It is inevitable that advances in AI, and increasing skill among the legal profession in using AI tools, can be expected to transform the work of the legal sector. There are several ways in which this is so. Let me touch briefly on some of them.

First, AI will affect the evidentiary record. This will not only arise in a context where AI is used to create images and data, but also because its capacity to synthesise, analyse and interrogate data enables access to information hitherto unavailable. Criminal trials have already seen the widespread adoption of DNA evidence, telephone location data and CCTV images. AI has the potential to turbocharge that process. This will inevitably lead to an increase in the amount of material that is available for the purposes of any litigation. Emails, correspondence, file notes, purchase orders, and contracts will increasingly have been created, modified or edited by an LLM. The clinical notes of doctors may be generated by AI from a recording of the consultation and may proffer differential diagnoses or suggest the need for pathology or radiology testing.

Expert evidence, which covers the full gamut of fields of expert knowledge, will be informed by AI. Where the expert is called upon to conduct analysis, modelling or estimation, it is likely that the various disciplines will have incorporated AI to a greater or lesser extent.

Second, AI can be used to assist with the preparation of, or even the disposition of, a case. It is very good at analysing and synthesising data and particularly documentary

¹ Thorsten Meyer, 'The \$725 Billion Question: Hyperscaler Capex Q1 2026 and What the Earnings Don't Answer' (Web Page, 6 May 2026) <<https://thorstenmeyerai.com/insights/the-725-billion-question-hyperscaler-capex-q1-2026-and-what-the-earnings-dont-answer/>>.

² 'GDP (current US\$) - Australia', *World Bank Group* (Web Page) <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=AU>>.

³ Nick Lichtenberg, 'Without Data Centers, GDP Growth was 0.1% in the First Half of 2025, Harvard Economist Says', *Fortune* (online, 7 October 2025) <<https://fortune.com/2025/10/07/data-centers-gdp-growth-zero-first-half-2025-jason-furman-harvard-economist/>>.

material. This means it can perform legal or even judicial tasks such as preparing chronologies, summaries of information, identifying conflicts in material and even expressing opinions on the correct disposition of a case having regard to legal databases to which it is directed. At trial, it is possible that AI will be used by counsel to summarise a witness' evidence as it is given, identifying points of conflict with other parts of the evidence, to aid a challenge or to warn the cross-examiner about lurking dangers and what topics to avoid. AI agents can be designed to carry out an entire workflow rather than a single discrete task – and to do so with far less human supervision. In a law firm, for instance, AI might be asked to plan a piece of work, carry it out, and deliver a finished product. As his Honour Justice Michael Kirby presciently predicted back in 2004:

Instead of collapsing at the very sight of such divided decisions as *Northern Sandblasting Pty Ltd v Harris* (1997) 188 CLR 313 or *Perre v Apand Pty Ltd* (1999) 198 CLR 180 a thinking machine will do in minutes the analysis that it would take a contemporary lawyer a thousand hours and countless cups of strong coffee to accomplish.⁴

There is a central thread that connects these AI use-cases and that is that AI will change the way information is received, collated, presented and reviewed. In short, AI has the potential to transform the tenor of the communication of information across the legal sector.

This of course has wide-ranging implications. As AI-generated content supplements or even displaces evidence and communication in the courtroom, it may become increasingly difficult to ascertain what constitutes 'truthful' or veracious evidence, and what is fabricated. This represents an ongoing challenge to the task of fact-finding. It has also prompted broader, more philosophical concerns about how to protect and preserve public trust in official channels including the justice system.

⁴ Justice Michael Kirby, 'A Law Libraries Love Affair' (Speech, Australian Law Librarians Symposium, 29 September 2004).

The role of law libraries

In that context, I will turn to the role that law libraries have traditionally played in the legal community.

Libraries, both physical and virtual, contain the resources that surround and sustain the legal profession in the work that it does. They are vanguards of the information that is central to the functioning of the legal sector. It is for this reason that, in an address to this very conference, former Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia Robert French once described them, evocatively, as places of 'power and danger'.⁵ His Honour explained that:

Important and complex decision making in today's world requires information literacy. This term has been defined, in the literature of librarianship, as the capacity to 'recognise when information is needed and ... locate, evaluate and use selectively the needed information'. The informed selection and arrangement and persuasive presentation of information is an important element of much decision-making. The contemporary arts of advocacy and judgment in the Courts rest upon information literacy so understood. It is necessary to the persuasive presentation of a case. It is necessary to its persuasive disposition.⁶

Law libraries are properly described as places of power because they hold the keys to information literacy. They provide access to the information that is essential to the exercise of judicial power and to the judicial process. They provide methods of systematising and authenticating that information. Importantly, they also provide crucial training to lawyers and law students about how to access, navigate and assess that information, and how to distinguish credible and authentic sources from misleading or false ones. They are uniquely positioned to act as community centres of truth and education.

This remains true in the age of AI. As I have observed, AI has already brought about significant changes to our information and knowledge environment and will continue

⁵ Chief Justice Robert French, 'Law Libraries: Places of Power and Danger' (Speech, Australian Law Librarians Association Conference, 2008) (citations omitted).

⁶ Ibid 2 (citations omitted).

to do so. As AI grows ever cheaper and faster, focus will shift from the production of information to its verification.⁷ The role of the library becomes ever-important in this context. As was observed in a recent report of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions:

The role of librarians in this scenario remain[s] remarkably consistent. As the media we collect and the services we deploy will be AI-enhanced, the role of the librarian is less to find materials as to research and certify the materials' origins ... rather than seeing this as a burden, today we see this as a service that helps our community – a sort of reference renaissance ... in a world of 'doubt first' images, librarians today are called on not as arbiters of quality, but arbiters of reality.⁸

In other words, law libraries are in many ways uniquely positioned to meet and adapt to the changes brought about by AI – by shaping environments where truth-seeking can flourish. In a world where 'every judge and lawyer will have a vast library of cyberspace at his or her fingertips', law libraries can and should act as professional 'information services'.⁹

The evolving role of law libraries

With this in mind, I turn to consider the specific ways in which the use of AI might impact libraries in their truth-seeking role.

In 1931, S R Ranganathan published *The Five Laws of Library Science*.¹⁰

The first law is that books are for use.¹¹ In the context of AI, this principle invites us to consider: how can AI increase the use of law library materials? AI-powered chatbots may increase the accessibility of information, automating cataloguing may increase

⁷ Christina Catalini, Xiang Hui and Jane Wu, 'Some Simple Economics of AGI' (Working Paper, 26 February 2026) arXiv:2602.20946. The paper is a working paper and has not been peer-reviewed.

⁸ *International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions*, 'Trend Report 2024: Facing the Future of Information with Confidence' (Report, 2024) 83–4.

⁹ Justice Michael Kirby, 'A Law Libraries Love Affair' (Speech, Australian Law Librarians Symposium, 29 September 2004).

¹⁰ SR Ranganathan, *The Five Laws of Library Science* (The Madras Library Association, 1931) ('*Five Laws of Library Science*').

¹¹ *Ibid* 1.

discoverability, and AI analytics tools may assist librarians to ensure their collections keep pace with the evolving needs of lawyers.¹²

The second and third laws are that every reader has their book,¹³ and every book has its reader.¹⁴ Personalised AI tools and customised search results may assist lawyers to find the right legal resources to address the problems that come before them.

The fourth and fifth laws attract greater force when the requirements of the first three laws become increasingly fulfilled, and they are of particular importance in the context of AI.¹⁵ The fourth law is to save the time of the reader.¹⁶ Writing presciently in 1931, Ranganathan said that this law 'has been responsible for many reforms in library administration and has a great potentiality for effecting many more reforms in the future'.¹⁷ AI-powered recommendations and search tools can increase the speed of information retrieval,¹⁸ and guard against 'wastage not only of the nation's money but also of its best brains'.¹⁹

Ranganathan's final law is that a library is a growing organism.²⁰ This speaks to the 'vital and lasting characteristics of the library as an institution'.²¹ Ranganathan explains that a library has all the features of a growing organism because it is mutable: it can take in new matter, cast off old matter, change in size and take on new shapes and forms. Put simply, libraries should be well-placed to adapt to changing circumstances.

While AI may displace some tasks in law libraries, such as cataloguing and reference services, it also presents opportunities for the role of law librarians to evolve toward such areas as information literacy and ethical AI usage.²² In 2023, two librarians

¹² Dattatraya Kalbande, Digambar Hemke and Nandkishor Motewar, 'Artificial Intelligence and the Five Laws: A New Vision for Library Science' (2025) 43(4) *Library Hi Tech News* 1, 3 ('*AI and the Five Laws*').

¹³ *Five Laws of Library Science* 74.

¹⁴ *Ibid* 299.

¹⁵ *Ibid* 337.

¹⁶ *Ibid* 336.

¹⁷ *Ibid* 337.

¹⁸ *AI and the Five Laws* 3–4.

¹⁹ *Five Laws of Library Science* 354.

²⁰ *Ibid* 382.

²¹ *Ibid* 382.

²² Henderson Waithe, 'Emerging Trends in AI for Academic Law Libraries: Global Insights with a Caribbean Lens' (2025) 53(2) *International Journal of Legal Information* 95, 98.

conducted a study to evaluate ChatGPT's performance in legal research tasks.²³ They asked ChatGPT to compile law journal articles on various topics within US and international law and found that ChatGPT hallucinated the vast majority of its responses, even when prompted to only refer to real articles.²⁴ Law librarians will play a crucial role in teaching lawyers the skills to critically evaluate the accuracy of AI outputs.

This adaptive capacity of law libraries has also proven true throughout history. The law library of my own Court was founded in the 1850s by Sir Redmond Barry, a judge of the Supreme Court and a bibliophile.²⁵ Nearly two centuries later it provides 24/7 access to numerous digital resources. It maintains a collection of publicly available judgments which are accessible via an online catalogue. Its most recent Strategy Paper outlines its vision to provide a 'truly digital library service'.²⁶ Some of you have been on a tour through the library building earlier this week. You will have seen that within the building – which was first built in 1884²⁷ – one can find digital catalogues and computers. In many ways the library has already evolved beyond the recognition of its founders. I see no reason why it cannot adapt to the changes AI will bring, however seismic they may be.

Navigating the change

So what, practically, can law librarians and law library associations do to adapt?

As I have already observed, librarians play a crucial role in knowledge transmission and management. Librarians can build on this role by actively scanning the environment for policy and guideline settings of governments, states and legal organisations with regard to the use and management of legal information, and to contribute to the formation of those guidelines as they are developed, leveraging their

²³ Andrew Martineau and Loren Turner, 'Legal Scholarship Through the Lens of Generative AI, Darkly' (2025) 117 *Law Library Journal* 232 [10].

²⁴ Ibid [12].

²⁵ Law Library of Victoria, 'History of the Supreme Court Library' (Web Page) <<https://www.lawlibrary.vic.gov.au/history>>.

²⁶ *Law Library of Victoria*, 'Law Library Victoria Strategy 2020-2025' (Strategy Paper, November 2022) 1.

²⁷ Law Library of Victoria, 'History of the Supreme Court Library' (Web Page) <<https://www.lawlibrary.vic.gov.au/history>>.

skills across information literacy, research and privacy. Reflecting on a series of roundtables held by law librarians, panellists at the American Association of Law Libraries Conference stressed that law librarians must ‘be advocates, both for themselves and for the necessary technology to position law libraries as a trusted resource for technological knowledge and execution’.²⁸ They should ‘seek to be part of decision-making processes for any AI implementation’ and ‘advocate for legal research instruction at all levels... preserving and advancing the profession of law librarians as critical thinkers and evaluators of legal information’.²⁹

Librarians can also play a didactic role in the legal community, helping lawyers to build their digital capacity and AI literacy by assisting with the use of AI tools.

Lastly – and returning to the role libraries can play in preserving the integrity of courts’ fact-finding function – librarians can be actively managing data sources to make sure that material used in court settings is reliable.

This I think is crucial. As I observed at the start, one of the great challenges presented by AI is its capacity to create images and documents that appear authentic but which are created by AI for both innocent and less benign purposes. The ability to trust information and its sources will become an increasingly valuable commodity. This is not new to the law. The need for authenticated and timely sources of truth was in fact the driver behind the development of authorised law reporting of decided cases throughout the 19th Century. It is worth touching briefly on this history.

I have already mentioned Sir Redmond Barry. At the time at which he was appointed to the bench and founded the library of my own Court, law reporting in Victoria was principally a matter of newspaper reporting, with various often short-lived attempts by practitioners to produce professional law reports and journals.³⁰ From the 1850s, for example, *The Argus*, the colony’s most prominent broadsheet, produced regular

²⁸ Zach Warren, ‘Virtuous and Vicious Cycles: The Potential Paths of GenAI in Law Libraries’ (Thomson Reuters Institute, Article, 12 August 2024) <<https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en/institute/articles/genai-law-libraries>>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Peter G Willis SC, *Binding Authority: 150 Years of Authorised Law Reporting in Victoria (1875–2025)* (Little William Bourke, 2025) 19 (*‘Binding Authority’*).

reports of Supreme Court decisions, with teams working in shifts throughout the night to cover the Court's major cases.³¹ These reports were often a hotchpotch synthesis of evidence, dispositions and reasons, relying on the shorthand of court reporters, stringers or counsel.³²

The founding series of the *Victorian Law Reports* was edited by barristers Alfred Wyatt and George Webb and published by Sands and McDougall, and covered cases decided in 1861–1863. It was priced at a mere four guineas.³³ Two further series followed.³⁴ Though private, the *Reports* were frequently reviewed by judges and so quickly garnered a reputation as authoritative.³⁵ A string of competitors soon began to emerge.³⁶ In August 1874, driven by a desire to place 'the Victorian law reports on a satisfactory basis', about 30 members of the Bar met to discuss the possibility of establishing a council of law reporting in Victoria, noting the salience of authentic case reports as essential 'tools of trade'.³⁷ The Council was duly appointed in December 1874 and continues in existence to this day, overseeing the production of what would become the *Victorian Reports*, the first official authorised law reports in Australia.³⁸

The Council of Law Reporting faced, in the 19th Century, a challenge that is in many respects equivalent to the challenge facing law librarians today. That is the challenge of supplying the legal profession with a single source of 'authentic but also full and early reports' of proceedings in Victorian law courts in the face of numerous practical barriers.³⁹ In the 19th Century the *Victorian Reports* were the answer. In the age of AI, when cases – and consequently reporting – may be easily fabricated, the challenge may be finding and safeguarding a modern equivalent to the authorised reports.

Final thoughts

³¹ Ibid 22.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid 24.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid 25.

³⁶ Ibid 25–6.

³⁷ Ibid 29.

³⁸ Ibid 28–32.

³⁹ Ibid 29.

AI undoubtedly presents risks. These risks are well-traversed. But the considered, responsible and clear-eyed use of AI has the potential to achieve significant gains in both time and cost. Law libraries are a crucial part of the architecture of information in the legal sector. They will play an important role in fostering an informed, ethical and technologically proficient legal community in the age of AI.

I might conclude by observing that, while the focus of this conference has been on emerging technologies, Ranganathan's fifth law — that is, that a library is a growing organism — has broader import. Libraries must be responsive not only to technological advances but also to other changes in the sector. After this address we will hear from the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria on Treaty. This reminds us that other milestone changes to law and governance happen and will continue to happen.

Thank you.