

Copyright in the Digital Age

I was the beneficiary of two pieces of good luck at the beginning of this year. Not only did I receive funding from the CILIPS professional development fund, but this allowed me to attend the fascinating Copyright in the Digital Age workshop presented by the engaging and intelligent Naomi Korn.

It feels sometimes like copyright has been on the periphery of all the roles I have encountered in my career so far, but, as the day emphasised, the ease of accessibility to copyrighted materials online, the increasing sophistication of tools used to find and penalise copyright infringement, and the continuing tenacity of widespread misconceptions around copyright mean that information professionals will do themselves and the users they support a disservice if they do not appreciate that copyright is more important than ever, and that knowledge, or lack thereof, can have very real consequences for libraries and librarians.

I'm afraid there is some bad news. When it comes to copyright if you want a quick answer, it will probably be a no, and increasingly it is the librarian who has to deliver the bad news.

The good news is that librarians continue to have a pretty decent base of knowledge around these issues. I am a librarian in the health sector, but on the day my higher and further education colleagues acquitted themselves well in establishing the basics quickly. This was helped initially by a charming anecdote concerning the various tribulations involved in getting appropriate permissions to publish a home front diary from The First World War, and a discussion around the various types of copyright which was enlivened by a few props (who knew there was still a use for VHS tapes)

Copyright is a practical issue, it can touch on ethics, plagiarism and data protection. In pursuit of appropriate copyright permissions, a librarian or organisation can deploy significant time and resources, and still come up short, so it can also be a business-critical decision which every organisation and professional will have to judge on its own merits.

The Internet has made IP rights more vulnerable to violate, both by accident and on purpose, and in every sector. Just as it has become easier to download, share or incorporate work found on the internet into your own, more and more sophisticated tools are being developed to "detect and protect" the academic and artistic endeavours of others. These tools, alongside determination on the part of rights holders mean the impact of traditional copyright law is potentially huge.

This was always important but it has become even more so as publishers, photographers and other rights holders are increasingly likely to take legal action to recover their rights. They may just ask politely, but they may not...

Social Media has great potential for the creation and sharing of new open access material, but at present even the basic terms of creative commons licenses are regularly ignored.

Naomi's breadth of experience came in very useful as the day went on and things got even more complex but if you want to know what copyright is, what it protects, how this protection is upheld, the relevance of moral rights, and the use and usefulness of Creative Commons Licenses then I'm your man.

Unfortunately, if you want to know the potential penalties or the unfortunate outcomes that await sloppy copyright awareness then I can also give a few examples of that as well.

However, the day concluded with a discussion and agreement that if copyright awareness is promoted effectively, if procedures for tracing rights holders are agreed and followed and if common sense is deployed by cool headed librarians the rewards are not inconsiderable and with a little effort, the copyright maze can be navigated successfully.

I am already preparing to take what I've learned forward in my own role.

I would like to thank CILIPS again for their help in allowing me to attend the event, Naomi for the hard work she does around the issue, and my fellow attendees for their company, contributions and for offering a distraction from the presidential inauguration happening on the same day.

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