

# ALUMNI MATTERS: THE RIGHT TO KNOW

Holli Sargeant

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After working in Herbert Smith Freehills' Brisbane arm, Holli Sargeant is studying for a PhD at Cambridge on the intersection between AI, government and business.

**Holli Sargeant** always knew she would move into academia, and now she is studying for a PhD at Cambridge university on a subject that is of key importance to all of us in our everyday lives – how artificial intelligence is used in decisions by corporations and governments.

“It is a subject that is right up my street,” says Holli, “bringing together economics, human rights and law.” On a BHP John Monash Scholarship, Holli embarked on a PhD at Cambridge University in September 2020 to research the lawful design and deployment of emergent technologies, such as artificial intelligence in corporate and government decision making. In particular, she is focusing on the extent to which financial institutions are using AI to make decisions that have a huge bearing on their customers.



There are great benefits in using AI or machine learning (ML), in terms of efficiency and quickness of decisions. However, there is also a lot of scope for bias and therefore flawed decisions that have adverse effects, Holli explains. “The problems may come if, for example, banks use data from your Fitbit or Facebook page and then profile you and make decisions about whether you can access financial products and at what price. That, I believe, needs the intervention of law, either to mitigate the unfairness of decisions and/ or to give people the right to know how decisions have been made.

“At the same time, the many potential benefits of AI- and ML-based decisions could be explored with awareness of, and strategies to mitigate, the potential suboptimal outcomes it may cause.”

As part of her research, Holli is participating in various multidisciplinary research projects to identify practical uses of AI in law and finance. There is no shortage of data, but a particular challenge is that, in such a fast-changing environment, the information can be easily superseded. “A substantial portion of my research is ensuring the principles and premise is future-proof. I’m doing what I can to make sure that by the time I finish my research, it is not out of date,” Holli laughs.

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While Holli has relished the chance to conduct her research at Cambridge University, the pandemic and lockdown have made the experience to date slightly less than ideal, as the university has been largely empty of students. Thanks, however, to the magic of social networking, she has met a number of other Australians who are in a similar position. She is hopeful that, with easing of lockdown, she can enjoy the full university experience. “I absolutely love Cambridge, and, without hordes of students and tourists, I have been able to marvel at its beauty, as well as the intellectual inspiration you draw from the place.”



Before she started her PhD, she was seconded from Herbert Smith Freehills to the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) to work on a project to analyse the infiltration of algorithmic bias in different AI-based decision making. Working in collaboration with scientists and consumer organisations, Holli was one of the principal writers in the final paper. Prior to that, she was one of a Herbert Smith Freehills team providing legal expertise input to a discussion paper researching human rights and technology and specifically on the legal issues surrounding facial recognition technology.

“There had often been small nudges pointing me in the direction of academia,” Holli says. “I enjoyed the legal practice, but I missed the abstraction of exploring why the law works the way it does, and making recommendations for ways that it should work. I was interested in exploring the rabbit holes, which you have the privilege to do as an academic. But, at the same time, I wanted to use my skills from legal practice to be systematic, pragmatic and logical.”