Civil Commitment and the Role of Public Librarians
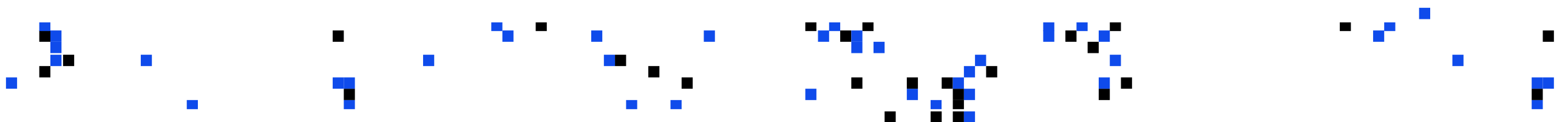
Hilary Yerbury and Maureen Henninger

University of Technology Sydney,
Australia
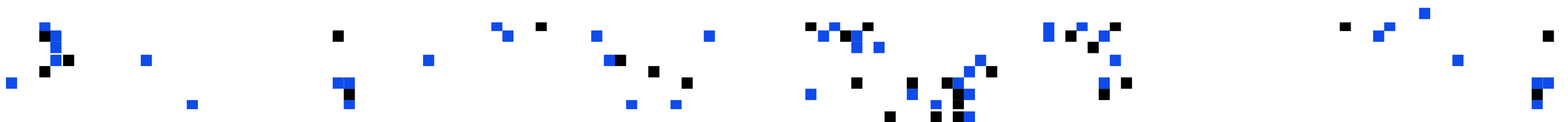
UTS

A Story of Institutional Change

- Context of local government in New South Wales

- Regimes of Truth

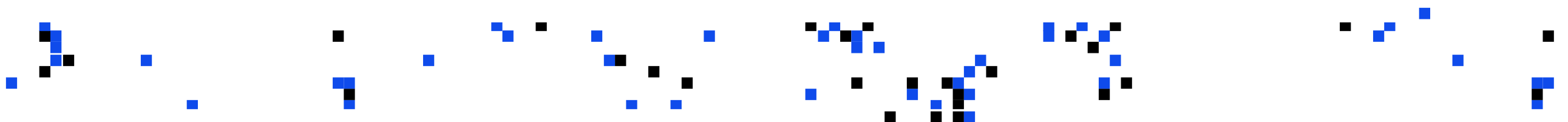 – Public Libraries, Public Librarians and trustworthiness in the community

Our Question

Given the changes in society and in the workplace for local government employees, is a new regime of truth emerging?
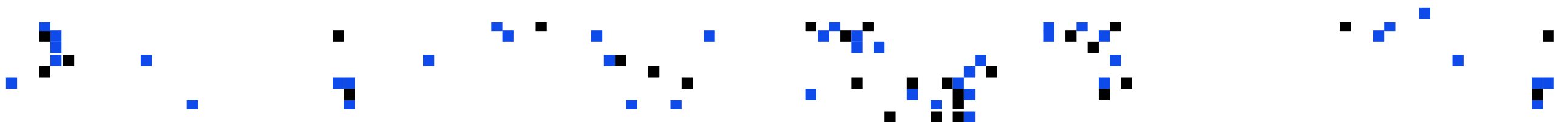
The Workplace

- Local Government and its Employees

  - More highly educated than workforce in general

  - Tend to stay in the job longer

  - Tend to be older

- 'Corporate Librarians'

  - Experienced librarians

  - Specific responsibility to work with council staff
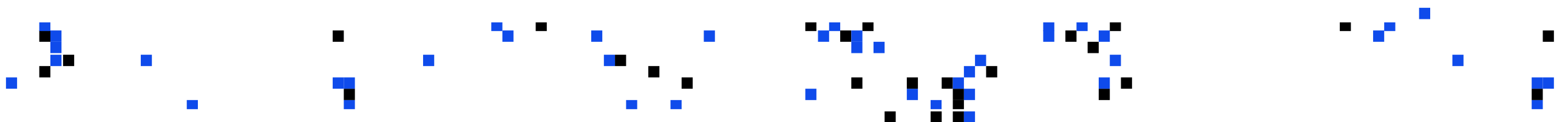
  - Numbers declining

The Study

- Interested in their specialist roles and notions of civil commitment and contribution to democratic processes

- Explored what services specialist public librarians offer to local government employees

- Explored where else in the community responsibility for a well-informed community might lie

- Asked what do specialist public librarians wish for to support the development of democratic processes in their community?
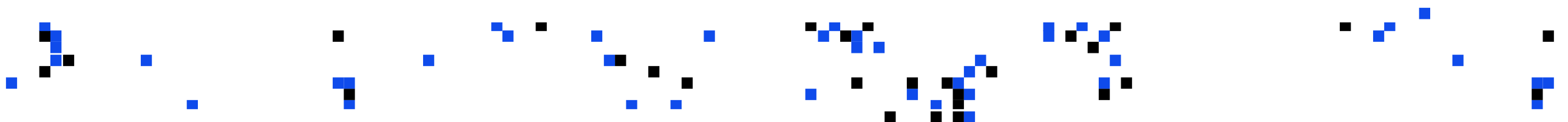
'in the past but not so much now'

- Changes in the workplace
    - Introduction of technology
    - Council decisions on funding specialist resources
    - Stronger skills in information literacy of council staff
    - Pace of decision-making
    - Responsibilities for information provision in the community
    - Less support for public libraries as having a role in the maintenance of a democratic society
    - Shift in understanding of ethical relationship with elected representatives.
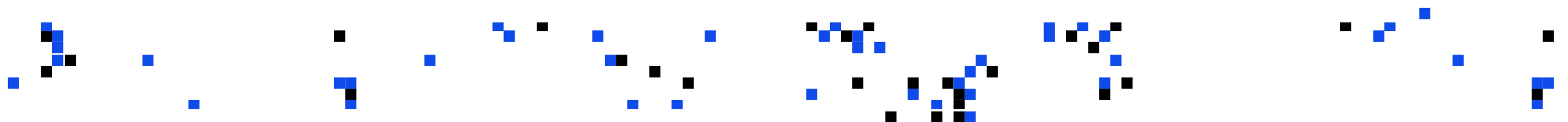
What they told us

- We've always had internet access … , but not everyone had … now council has [arranged access to specialised resources for everyone] so [the searching] still exists in council but it's not the corporate librarian's realm.

- It's very much at arms length from councillors … well the code of conduct – we can't talk to them

- The people setting the policy at the local level just need to be informed with the actual facts. [Social media] well it's not quality is it?

- A lot of the information has been politicised … that politician going "Yeah, I went out in a boat and looked" isn't the same as scientific explorations".

- It's not like it's a new thing that libraries are doing

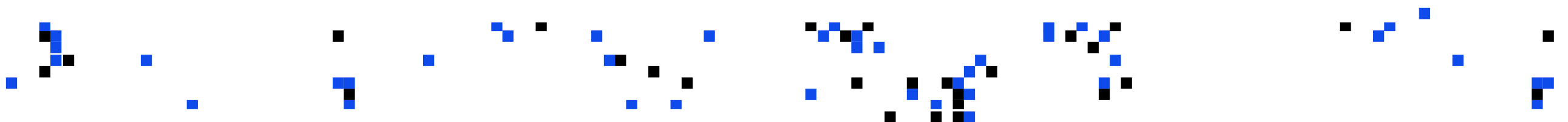- I suppose in lots of ways things haven't changed

The librarians' dilemmas

- Librarians:

  - no longer being the gatekeepers to authoritative information

  - maintaining a clear focus on a set of tasks agreed by the group of corporate librarians: including workplace induction session

  - developing relationships with elected representatives in support of democratic processes
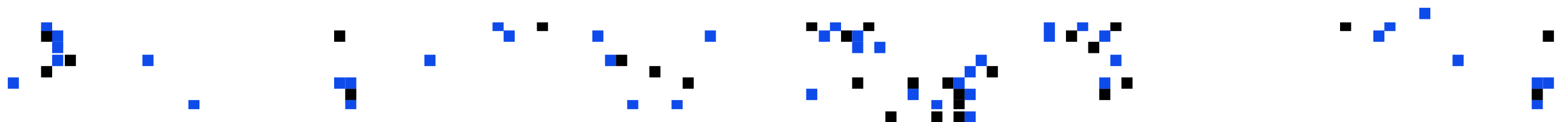
The dilemma with information literacy

- Developing individuals who are information literate by supporting local government employees in the employees' context

- Creating a workplace culture accepting the principles of quality in information and information resources
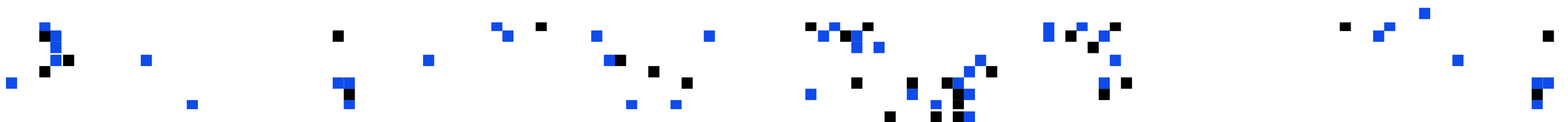
What they would like in their work place

- Free and unimpeded access to information

- Increased funding to broaden base of resources

- Dispersing the hive mind

- Stronger ties with local university libraries to enhance information literacy

- Better understanding for elected representatives and citizens of workings of democracy at a local level
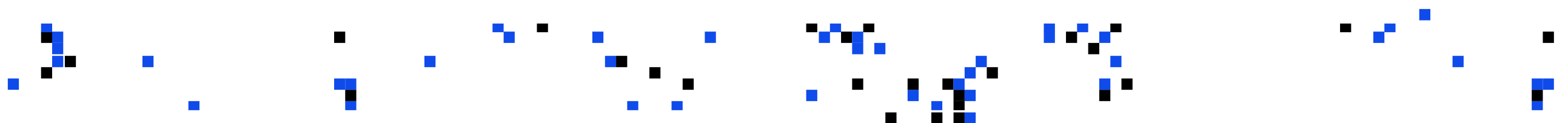
Regime of Truth for these Librarians

- Some fundamental changes in the workplace

- Some fundamental changes to access to information in society

- Some weakening of position of the public library in the democratic processes

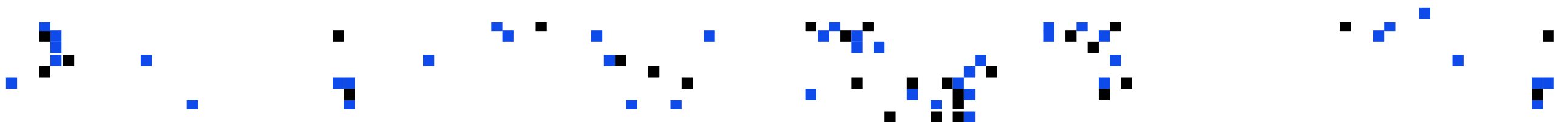- BUT **Some things remain the same**

Their Unchanged Regime of Truth

- Professional principles, knowledge and skills of these public librarians;

- Acceptance of ways to establish quality of information

Civil Commitment for the Future

- Even though they have had to give up the role of gatekeeper to information for other employees …

- These specialist librarians believe they can:
  - Articulate for their employers and for other employees in local government:
    - Principles and criteria for judging the trustworthiness of information
    - Differences between opinion, experience and evidence
  - Advocate for adoption of these principles (perhaps)
  - Collaborate with others in the community to consolidate the new regime which values diversity of thought based on information coming from a variety of sources.

Thank you!