SOCIAL MEDIA AND OTHER RESEARCH TOOLS

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Are there any low-cost or no-cost research tools available for the solo or small firm practitioner?

Modern law firms must either have or develop the capability to conduct online research in order to remain current, competitive, and ethical. Results of a recent ABA Legal Technology Survey reveal that WestlawNext is the most popular among lawyers who use fee-based legal research, services with Westlaw and Lexis running a close second and third, respectively.[1]

However, many attorneys are on the constant quest to locate no-cost or low-cost information that will either supplement or supplant commercial services.

Indeed, many such resources are available in both the investigative and legal research arenas. The following is intended to introduce readers to several of the many prominent available sources:

General Sources

1. An excellent starting point is The Cybersleuth's Guide to the Internet: Conducting Effective Investigative & Legal Research on the Internet, 12th edition, coauthored by Carole Levitt and Mark E. Rosch.

2. Pace Law Library provides "Free and Low Cost Resources for Legal Research," which is geared toward those who "don't have access to Westlaw or Lexis."

3. Justia.com provides a portal to primary legal materials including free case law, codes, regulations and legal articles.

Social Media Sources

Blawgs (and other social media sites) present an opportunity to gather broad information about topics prior to honing in on primary sources. I rely heavily on blawgs in order to remain updated in certain areas. Recognizing the serious impact of "blawgs", a Blawg Hall of Fame has been created by the ABA and is worthy of review. In addition, Blawgsearch lists thousands of blawgs broken down by subject and jurisdictional categories and provides an effective search engine as well.

Information can be readily found on *Twitter* by plugging relevant keywords into Twitter's search bar. For example, the keywords "New Jersey alimony" produced a significant number of tweets alluding to legal reform currently underway. Third-year law student Patrick M. Ellis set out to show social media's potential as a legitimate source of legal information by writing a Scholarly Note for the *Michigan State Law Review* researched almost exclusively through Twitter. A working draft of the Note "140 Characters or Less: An Experiment in Legal Research" is available for download.

Collaboration and *crowdsourcing*, buzzwords of the decade, have widespread application in the area of legal research. That potential is being tapped by relative newcomers Casetext and Mootus. Casetext provides access to federal and some state court cases and allows for participant annotation of the cases, while Mootus allows participating lawyers to collaborate on legal research projects. Both are worth checking out.

Citation of Social Media Sources

Various manuals of style recognize that social media sites are legitimate sources from which to cite. Notably, the preface to the Nineteenth Edition of *The Bluebook: A Uniform System of Citation* acknowledges the enhanced array of resources available to lawyers courtesy of the Internet. Attention is drawn to Rule 18, which specifically details the considerable changes in the rules of citation, even providing guidance on citation of podcasts and online recordings. Additional information is found in the Chicago Manual of Style and the Purdue Online Writing Lab.

Link rot (landing on unavailable links) and *reference* rot (where the link exists but the referenced documentation no longer does) are two issues to be considered when citing internet sources. Cited authority should be printed to assure preservation. An alternative is to submit cited URLs to Perma.cc (an ambitious project initiated and maintained by Harvard Library Innovation Lab). Content at a URL submitted by an author is downloaded in real time and a new URL (a "Perma.cc link") is created and returned to the author, which can then be inserted into the brief, opinion, or other writing.

In our next installment, we will explore the use of social media as a litigation tool.

Endnotes

1. Additional data from the survey can be found at the site from which this information was retrieved: "For Paid Legal Research, WestlawNext Is Most Popular, ABA Survey Says" Robert Ambrogi's LawSites August 22, 2013 retrieved December 2, 2013.