

ONLINE INFORMATION SOURCES IN LAW: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to take an overview of the diverse legal literature and to provide a select annotated bibliography of the various types of legal resources available on the Internet. An attempt is also made to identify and discuss specific resources that offer added features to enhance their usefulness for Indian students and professionals. Various legal information sources available on the Internet were examined and classified according to their content and use. A category wise annotated list of the resources that offer special features to enhance usefulness was presented. Resources were selected keeping in mind the needs of Indian students and professionals. Internet has greatly facilitated legal education and research by offering freely available authentic information resources. It has also revolutionized the services offered by law libraries to their clients and general public. The paper presents an overview of the diversity in legal literature and presents a category wise selective and annotated list of specific online resources.

KEYWORDS: Legal Information Sources, Online Resources–Law, Selected Bibliographies–Law

Introduction

The legal profession is called a noble profession, and lawyers are considered as the guardians of our legal system. The modern judicial system in India is greatly influenced by the British judicial system where the precedent is a binding factor in the justice delivery system. Therefore, in India also a judge has to follow the decision of any court recognized as competent binding force for him, and it is his duty to follow the same reasoning in his judgment¹. Due to this the judgments delivered by the superior courts are to be treated equally as the law of the country by the lower courts.

This doctrine of precedent makes the system of law reporting very important. Publication of decisions in the form of reliable reports of cases is necessary for the theory of precedent to operate. If the cases are to be binding, then there must be precise records of what they lay down. Certain agencies have been authorized by law to publish reports of cases e.g., All India Reporter, Supreme Court Cases. But none of these reporters are exhaustive. They contain only the more important cases of legal interest decided by the superior courts. Moreover, there is always a time lag between the decision of a case and its report appearing in publication.

This time lag and the incompleteness of these reporters resulted in the birth and sustenance of many private reports published on a commercial basis. A vast number of

law reports are being published in India, both in print and digital formats. They vary greatly in their scope i.e., the various courts, the number of cases and the number of years covered by them are varied. Their points of view are also different. Though some reporters have been granted the 'Authentic' or 'Authorized' status, the law has neither taken away the authority of the unpublished precedents i.e., cases, nor are they considered to be any less 'Authoritative'.

In addition to these Case Reporters, there are many other manifestations of legal literature such as:

- Bare Acts
- Commentaries on specific laws
- Gazettes
- Parliamentary Debates
- Parliamentary Bills
- Law Journals
 - a) Academic Journals (containing articles only)
 - b) Law Reports (containing only the full text of case laws)
 - c) Hybrid, i.e. a combination of both articles and case laws. Some of the journals also publish statutory materials such as acts, amendments, rules, etc.
 - d) Only legislative materials such as acts, rules, notifications, etc.
- Digests
- Legal Dictionaries/Encyclopedias/ Thesauri

All these different sources of legal information are very important to a student or a practitioner of law because they satisfy their varied information needs. The most common types of information sought by them are:

- Any specific case law
- Case laws on a specific topic
- Statutory provisions/Acts
- Rules framed under any Act
- Object and reasons of any Act
- Legislative history of any particular enactment
- Amendment of any Act
- Notifications issued under any particular statute
- Debates in the Parliament at the time of enactment of any particular Act
- Academic articles on a given topic
- A foreign law corresponding to any Indian statute
- Meaning of any particular "word" or "phrase" or "maxim".

During the last decade, law libraries have grown richer due to a quick adoption of ICT technologies. But though Internet has resulted in instantaneous and accurate access to information, it has made the librarian's role more vital because of their knowledge and ability to judge the authenticity of any given resource.

In today's electronic era, professionals are very computer savvy and require instant information. Nobody has the patience to find information about case laws by scanning

the huge case reporters or commentaries. They use Internet to access the necessary information instantly. Printed case reporters come with a gap of at least a month whereas case laws are updated in online databases within 24 hours. Searching for case laws online is quick and exhaustive. Amendments in Acts are also updated online in the databases instantly, whereas for a publisher it may take months to publish the amended Act. Online resources offer instant access to information with high frequency of updating of the information. Quick and exhaustive information can be obtained through online databases. Consultation with peers and/or seniors is possible through various social media like the discussion forums. Therefore it is necessary to make the practitioners and the students of law aware of the various authentic information resources available on the Internet.

Today, the law librarians are facing the challenge of providing legal information to general public as well so as to make them aware of their legal rights. According to Indian law, 'Ignorance of law is not excusable'. Nobody can plead ignorance in order to save oneself after committing an offence. According to Mallick (2010)², new role for the law librarians is to provide access to legal information to the lay persons so as to help them to protect their legal rights.

Online Legal Resources

A variety of legal resources were found on the Internet. They can be categorized according to their content so as to be more useful for researchers and students.

1. E-Journals: Many e-journals like the India Law Journal³ were found to be freely available on the Internet. There are many scholarly websites that list legal e-journals and provide either free or paid access to them.

- Open J-Gate⁴ provides access to 373 journals of law.
- Directory of Open Access Journals⁵ lists about 100 law journals.
- JCCC@UGC-INFONET⁶ has 148 law journals listed.
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2. Scholarly Websites like the BUBL Link⁷ and the Resource Discovery Network⁸ also provide free access to scholarly legal content. The RDN provides links to a collection of annotated legal links compiled by the Inner Temple library, e-journals, newsletters, bibliographic databases, institutional repositories, research guides and Current legal research topics database comprising topics of research pursued by Post Graduate law students in the UK.

3. Online Fee-based Databases

- **Manupatra**⁹ is an online Indian legal information database. It includes case reports from the Supreme Court, all high Courts, Orders of Tribunals, Central Acts with latest amendments, updated notifications and circulars of the Government of India Ministries, Bills and Ordinances of the Parliament, Drafts and Agreements, Court rules, Court fees, Stamp duty, etc.
- **Think Legal Resources**¹⁰ is a professional legal consultancy and database service with judgments search for all courts and tribunals, Bare Acts, forms, etc. They provide comprehensive information related to all Indian laws and

regulations. Their vision is to provide vital legal information and resources in contemporary digital format.

- **Indlaw**¹¹ is a part of the Indian Law Online Project launched in 1997. It is an electronic legal library of various primary and secondary legal documents like the Acts, Case laws, Parliamentary debates, etc. It provides research modules for Indian legal, tax, business and regulatory issues.
- **E Jurix**¹² is a collection of more than 2,50,000 full text judgments of the Supreme Court, High Courts and Tribunals.
- **Legal Pundits**¹³ is an Internet based legal and regulatory information service provider. It is a collection of full text judgments of the Supreme Court, High Court and Tribunals, Government Notifications and Circulars, Acts, Forms, etc. It also provides legal consultancy services through a tie-up with firms like D. M. Harish & Co.
- **Lexis Nexis**¹⁴ is one of the leading providers of comprehensive information and business solutions to professionals in many areas – legal, risk management, corporate, government, law enforcement, accounting and academic. It has a collection of 5 billion searchable documents from more than 32000 legal, news and business sources. It also has a big collection of legal e-books.
- **West Law**¹⁵ is Thompson West's online legal research service. It has a collection of statutes, case laws, public records and other legal resources, journals and law reviews from all around the world. Primary legal materials from UK, USA and Commonwealth countries are available.
- **World Bank Resource Online**¹⁶ is an electronic portal of World Bank's full text collection of books, reports, and other documents on social and economic development. Subscription is available only to institutions. Individuals can access the free content and purchase access to the premium content of the library.

4. Free and Authentic Online Resources

Many free and authentic resources are now available on the Internet. Majority of them do not provide free access to their archives. But they satisfy the need of current information. Many Government portals like the Judgments Information System provide free access to authentic legal information on various legal issues.

- **Legal Information Institute (LII) of India**¹⁷ is an international standard, free access and non-profit, comprehensive online portal that comprises 138 legal databases covering all States, Union Territories and Central government jurisdictions. It was formally launched in India by the Union Law Minister, Mr. Veerappa Moily in March 2011. It is a joint project developed by leading Australian and Indian legal education institutions and it draws on the framework of online public libraries that offer free and open access to legal information. It is also integrated with other similar collaborations like the World, Commonwealth and Australasian Legal Information Institutes and features tools like LawCite, an international citatory which automatically tracks citations of over 5.5 million decisions, to show the citation history of Indian cases, law journal articles and treaties from both within India and outside. The legal scholarship section

covering six law journals to date, with scholarship repositories, books and judicial scholarship has not been developed as yet.

- **Judgments Information System**¹⁸ provides free access to the Supreme Court Reports from 1950 and head notes are available for these cases up to 1993. Case reports from the High Courts, District Courts and Tribunals, information from the Bar Councils, Judicial Academy, Law Commission, etc., India Code (Acts) are also available. Special feature of this resource is that status of ongoing cases in various Courts can be checked here.
- **National Portal of India**¹⁹ provides a single window access to all Government of India websites and therefore is a one step source for all important documents and reports released or published by the Central and State Governments. This site is constantly being updated and a select list of documents includes Gazette notifications, guidelines, plan documents, annual reports, budget document, census reports, statistical reports, surveys, etc.

In addition to the fee based databases and portals and the government portals, many more legal resources are available on the Internet either free of cost or for a nominal fee. Their importance for legal professionals, law students and the general public cannot be ignored. They provide general legal information, case laws, legal consultancy services, Acts of the Government, references sources like dictionaries, encyclopedias, directories, student and professionals support services, etc.

5. General and Professional Legal Databases

- The online version of the Madras Law Journal²⁰ covers case reports of Madras High Court. This is an example of a Court specific database.
- The online version of the Labour Law Journal²¹ covers labour law related cases of the Supreme Court and High Court. This is an example of a subject specific database.
- Legal India²² is a professional legal service network and law resources portal. A very special feature is that they offer Legal aid. It is an all-in-one site providing case laws, status of cases, journals, conferences, bare acts, jobs, dictionary, news, articles, discussion forums, consultancy services, FAQ by topics, links to important Government websites, etc. It also has a alphabetical list of law journals worldwide with limited open access and paid access to back files.
- Vakil no.1²³ is a legal consultancy service. It provides legal links, agreements, forms, taxation forms, Bare Acts, Free Supreme Court judgment search.
- Supreme Court Cases Online²⁴ is also a fee based professional legal consultancy and database service with Supreme Court judgments search facility. It is accepted as an authentic resource by the Indian courts and print outs from this database are acceptable in Courts as precedents and references.
- Legal Resource Links²⁵ is a resource that gives links to legal research, search engines and Indian state wise searchable databases.
- ALM Media Properties' portal, law.com²⁶ provides legal directories, surveys, lists and rankings, and law jobs.
- Legal Service India²⁷ gives full text Supreme Court judgments, articles, news, forms, and directories. It also provides legal aid.

- My Law²⁸ claims to be the world's first contextual network focused on law and lawyers. It understands the users' context and gives them access to what they need most. It contains legal information, education and professional opportunities customized for the user. Adding to all of this is quirky information, comics on the law, video interviews, photo essays, and various other things. It is the product of Rainmaker.co.in Company. It is a free resource that requires registration.

6. Blogs

- Internet for Lawyers, Inc.²⁹ provides an index of law related blogs.
- One India Blogs³⁰ is also a directory of legal blogs in Indian languages like Hindi, English, Tamil and Marathi.
- Indian Corporate Law³¹ is a subject specific blog relating to corporate and business laws. It started in 2007 and was nominated for "Top 25 blogs – 2010" by Lexis Nexis. It gives links to legal databases like Manupatra, Indlaw, Ministry websites, many useful and famous newspapers like Financial Times, Business Standard, etc., RBI and SEBI sites, etc.

7. Podcasts

- Research Copyright dot com³² is a comprehensive resource for copyright information. It has all resources for copyright research including e-books, articles, blogs, podcasts, news, resources, jobs, etc.

8. Discussion Forums

- Black Law has a discussion forum³³ for students that has 1564 topics discussed through it already.
- Lawyers Club India³⁴ is an interactive platform for lawyers and Indian public, It has topic wise forums and approximately 90,000 members. It also includes 23 State wise forums. It also has maxims dictionary.
- Cyber Law Times³⁵ has 6158 posts by 769 members.
- Law Info³⁶ is a forum and legal message board for criminal law and lawyers. It has 872 rooms (discussion topics) for the legal community.
- Legal India³⁷ is also a subject specific forum. It is a full Service Law Network and free legal information portal of India.

9. Legal News and Information Network

- Law.com³⁸ is the world's leading **legal news and information network**. It includes news, legal blog watch, firms listings, videos; **Reprints service**, dictionary, case law search, consultancy service for research; publication of regional and national journals; legal conferences listings; legal jobs; etc.

10. Search Engines

- Indiakanon.org³⁹ is a search engine for Indian laws, Courts and Tribunal judgments and law journals. It also incorporates a forum for legal advice and discussions.

- Law Khoj⁴⁰ is a legal search engine for Indian and foreign resources. It is a site which provides search engines customized for Indian legal research, and legal research for other jurisdictions like US, UK etc. It does so by searching through certain relevant websites only and throws up results which will be helpful for law researchers, students, advocates etc.
- The Law Engine⁴¹ is a free site from USA. It is a very comprehensive resource for Courts, Laws, libraries, professionals, law schools, newspapers, articles, dictionaries, encyclopedias, legal services and products, financial markets, etc.
- Search Engine Guide⁴² is a definitive guide to search engine information on the Internet. General and special search engines are categorized by topic in this searchable directory. Also listed here are and tools for exploring deep web, performing advanced research and for learning about using Search engine tool and technology.
- Law Guru⁴³ is a comprehensive legal search engine. It also has a e-mail newsletter service and a discussion forum. Many of the questions asked are by the people from USA but the maximum answers have been given by Indian lawyers.

11. Dictionaries

- Blacks Law Dictionary – This is the most authentic and standard legal dictionary. An online version of the latest edition can be accessed through the paid Westlaw legal information service and as of late 2006, West Academic has published Black's Law Dictionary Digital, 8th edition (ISBN 9780314176103) which has toolbars that integrate with Microsoft Word, Mozilla Firefox and Internet Explorer.
- LegalDictionaries.org⁴⁴ is a collection of some of the best legal dictionaries of the Web. It includes specialized dictionaries in legal proceedings and divorce, Legal Maxims (Latin legal terms), real estate, etc.
- Legal dictionary in the Free Dictionary website⁴⁵ has more than 4000 entries from the West's Encyclopedia of American Law and 3000 additional entries from the People's law dictionary by Gerald and Kathleen Hill. It also includes legal maxims, and a thesaurus.
- *In Rebus*⁴⁶ is a dictionary of legal maxims. Maxims are the established universal principles of law and moral philosophy. e.g., ***mens rea*** means a guilty state of mind.

12. Encyclopedias

- The Lectric Law Library⁴⁷ is a comprehensive legal resource. Its reference room contains topic wise encyclopedic information, law lexicon, **lay people's lounge**, forms, lawyer search, etc. It is useful for all – lawyers, students and lay persons.
- Zimmerman's Research Guide⁴⁸ is an online encyclopedia for legal researchers developed and maintained by Andrew Zimmerman. It is a collaborative effort. Anyone wanting to add or edit entries can send them to him by e-mail. This controlled adding and editing, unlike the wikis, ensures the authenticity of the resource.

13. e-Books

- Digital Library of India⁴⁹ is the Government of India digitization project with 21 participating centers. It provides access to 732 law e-books.
- E-Books.com⁵⁰ is a digital book store that lists legal e-books subject wise.
- E-Books Directory⁵¹ provides free access to 37 e-books on subjects like civil rights, human rights, international law, IPR, etc.
- 202ook, a directory of e-books⁵² also provides free access to 1252 legal e-books categorized subject wise.

14. Institutional Repositories

The Directory of Open Access Repositories⁵³ gives access to 25 legal repositories with English interface. Few of them are described below.

- **Bepress legal repository**⁵⁴ includes full text law related working papers contributed by a network of academic and research organizations and hosted on the Berkeley Electronic Press website. It also includes a selection of peer reviewed journals and ExpressO Preprint Series.
- **Cadmus**⁵⁵ is the European University Institute Repository providing access to the publication output of the institution. The contents include articles, references, LL.M. and Ph.D. theses, unpublished works and books. Majority of these are in English but Italian, Dutch, French and Polish works are also included. Subjects covered include history, law, economics, politics and social sciences. Many items are available in full-text; however some items are only listed as metadata (bibliographic) entries. Registered users can set up email alerts to notify them of newly added relevant content.
- **Iowa Publications Online**⁵⁶ is a service of the State Library of Iowa. This website is an electronic depository for documents intended for the general public produced by Iowa state agencies. The repository contains materials pertaining the work and regulations of the state government of interest to local businesses, educational establishments, health workers, lawyers and those employed in recreation and tourism.

15. Moot Court Guides

Moot courts are the greatest learning tools for law students. A hypothetical case is given to students to solve. One team represents the petitioner and the other represents the respondent. Students argue the case in a simulated situation and then are explained their positive and negative points by the teachers. Moot court competitions are held from college to international levels. Guides explaining the theory of moot courts and of how to prepare for moot courts are also available on the Internet. Two examples of such guides are:

- GoForTheLaw.com⁵⁷ provides a Moot Court Guide by Dr. G. B. Reddy of Osmania University, Hyderabad.
- Oxford University Press⁵⁸ provides a detailed moot court guide on its website.

Conclusion

The Internet has increased free online access to legal resources in almost all the subject areas. Lawyers, law students and also general public would benefit greatly by acquainting themselves with these online resources. It offers the ability to advertise, to engage in educational discussions with fellow professionals, and to augment conventional methods of legal research, all at the touch of a computer keypad. Government and academic sites provide well designed and reputable sources of information, often including search strategy and user guides. It is now possible for libraries of all types and sizes to incorporate free legal resources into their Web pages. Law librarians can also give extensive services to their clients. They can also fulfill their additional role of helping the public in recognizing their legal rights with the help of sites giving basic legal information and free legal advice.

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