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Gateways to Legal Information: Best-Bet Internet Portals

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Gateways to Legal Information: Best Bet Internet Portals

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Table of Contents

Introduction to web portals	1
THOMAS (http://thomas.loc.gov/).....	1
Federal law	2
State law	3
International and Foreign law.....	3
Other features	4
Legal Information Institute (http://www.law.cornell.edu/)	5
Federal law	5
State law	6
Foreign and international law.....	6
Other features.....	7
World Legal Information Institute (http://www.worldlii.org/).....	8
Federal law.....	8
State law	8
International and foreign law.....	9
Other features	9
HG.org	10
Federal law	10
State law	10
International and foreign law.....	11
Other features	11
Justia.com	11
Federal law	12
State law	13
International and foreign law.....	14
Other features	14
DATABASE RETRIVAL ACCESS USING GOOGLE'S NEW ELECTRONIC TECHNOLOGY (DRAGNET)	16
Federal law	16

State law	16
International and foreign law.....	17
Other features	17
Conclusion.....	17

Introduction to web portals

The Internet contains an awesome assortment of information, entertainment and social interaction sites. Search engines, like Google, can help users navigate the whole, but they are tools not destinations in the way that web portals are. Web portals are sites, like MSN or Yahoo!, that seek to build communities around themselves. Rather than provide simply a search feature, a portal offers a variety of services such as RSS feeds, news updates, and most importantly lists of links to relevant online resources.

MSN and Yahoo! are examples of horizontal portals. They appeal to broad segments of the population by providing a wide array of popular culture news. For 8 to 5 endeavors, the Web also has many industry portals or vertical portals, including ones targeting law professionals and legal scholars. Finding a portal and setting it to be one's browser home page can be an easy way to keep up with information and to launch targeted searches from a familiar interface.

THOMAS (<http://thomas.loc.gov/>)

The Library of Congress hosts an attractive and informative portal for Congressional information, THOMAS. The home page is divided into three frames. The left column provides links to specific types of legislative documents and to social networking sites on the Web. The middle section enables visitors to launch searches for bills, and the right column provides links to the most current news from Capitol Hill: the day's activities, the weekly top five resolutions, a tip of the week and a link to the Library of Congress blog, *In Custodia Legis*.

Federal law

The mission of THOMAS is to provide federal legislative information freely to the general public.¹ It is the place to start online for recent legislative history or to track current pending legislation. The bills, committee documents and calendars extend back twenty years, and the search interfaces offer a variety of access points for locating a specific item and for general browsing.

The searches are designed to facilitate searching by specific bill, resolution and Presidential nominations or by daily activities of Congress. As of March, the bill and amendment search enables visitors to retrieve bills introduced in the House or Senate since 1989. The results show the bill's sponsors, the final text and any drafts, its movement through the Congress, and the ultimate fate (including roll call votes) of the bill. Appropriation bills are singled out as a discrete subcategory. With a couple of mouse clicks, users may view a prepared table of all appropriations legislation for a given year between FY2011 and FY1998.²

Searches of the *Congressional Record (CR)* and legislative calendars allow users to review the activities of Congress chronologically. Each morning THOMAS features the previous day's *Daily Digest of the Congressional Record*, which provides the most complete official record of the proceedings and debates of Congress. Back digests cover all sessions between the current one and the 101st Congress (1989).³

¹ "About THOMAS," Library of Congress THOMAS, accessed 2 March 2011, http://thomas.loc.gov/home/abt_thom.html.

² "Status of Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2011," Library of Congress THOMAS, accessed 2 March 2011, <http://thomas.loc.gov/home/approp/app11.html>.

³ "Browse the Daily Issues of the Congressional Record," Library of Congress THOMAS, accessed 2 March 2011 <http://thomas.loc.gov/home/Browse.php?&n=Issues>.

For users who desire information about a particular subject or congressperson, the “Congressional Record Index” provides keyword searching of the *CR*. The site includes a long list of words and phrases contained in the database to help users construct searches with correct terminology. For example, the user need only click on “Deal, Nathan (Governor of Georgia)” in the list rather than try to figure out if the search prefers “last name, first name” order. This search also finds all versions of “Nathan Deal” that appear in the *CR*.

State law

THOMAS does not track the activities of the state legislatures, but it does provide links to the websites of the legislative bodies in all fifty states, of the Council of the District of Columbia, and of either the executive or legislative branches in the US territories.

International and Foreign law

Given THOMAS’s focus on U.S. federal law, the site provides sources at the intersection of federal and international law: treaties to which the United States is a signatory (or potential signatory). A very user-friendly search accommodates queries by keyword, by Congress, by date of transmission to the Senate, and by type of treaty (the 24 pre-sorted and identified types include: arms control, commercial and United Nations). Users may input criteria into all these fields for a very precise search or enter data into only one field for a broader search.⁴

The results include useful information for tracking a treaty’s progress (such as the senate executive report number and legislative actions on the treaty to date). Since

⁴ “Search Treaties,” Library of Congress THOMAS, accessed 28 February 2011, <http://thomas.loc.gov/home/treaties/treaties.html>.

1983, the database also includes the text of the resolution of advice and consent.

However, THOMAS does not provide the text of the treaty itself. The site offers a link to the Government Printing Office's Federal Digital System (FDsys) database of congressional documents which does contain the full text of treaties.⁵

Other features

For researchers who want quick access to recent headline-making legislation, THOMAS offers several ways to keep abreast of new developments. The site features a link to streaming video of the House floor and up-to-the minute transcript updates from both the House and Senate floor. It also offers RSS feeds with legislative updates, and it identifies a "Weekly Top Five" and "THOMAS Top Ten" for the most searched items in the portal. However, the "week" might have been up to two weeks prior.⁶

As a publicly-funded service, THOMAS also provides tools and valuable links for educators to use in developing lessons on the legislative process. The Library of Congress offers lesson plans for grades 6-12 on a variety of topics from the Declaration of Independence to immigration law. The "preparation" sections of the modules are well constructed, and many offer valuable overviews to a topic that can help practicing professionals frame historical topics and understand the complex issues surrounding them quickly.

⁵ "FDsys Browse CDOC," Government Printing Office, accessed 3 March 2011, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/browse/collection.action?collectionCode=CDOC&bread=true>.

⁶ "THOMAS Top Ten," Library of Congress THOMAS, accessed 3 March 2011, http://thomas.loc.gov/home/topten/topten_20110227.html.

Legal Information Institute (<http://www.law.cornell.edu/>)

Any discussion of law-related information should include reference to the Legal Information Institute (LII). Housed at Cornell University Law School and supported by legal scholars, government officials, publishers and computer scientists, the Institute is committed to providing free access to the law.⁷ Since its launch in 1992 as a gopher site, it has compiled links to freely available US law.

The interface allows users to begin search by jurisdiction or agency (with headings, like “Federal Law” and “State Law”) or by popular topic (for example, “Family Law,” “Criminal Law” and “Business law”).

Federal law

In its "Read the Law" section, the site provides access to several important federal documents. The LII version of the US Constitution contains annotations prepared by the Congressional Research Service. LII staff further enhanced the text with embedded links to relevant sections of the US Code, Supreme Court decisions and other official federal documents.⁸ LII also provides the US Code with a commitment to providing the most recent text (made clear to users with "last updated" information for each section of the Code). LII offers a straightforward way of navigating the *CFR* by title, chapter and part before transferring users to the FDsys online version, *e-CFR*. The *Uniform Commercial Code (UCC)* and LII's collection of Federal Rules all function with similar ease and offer similar clarity of recent updates.

Another section of the federal law area focuses on the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court calendar and the most recent decisions are easy to find in LII. Decisions

⁷ "Home page," Legal Information Institute, accessed 17 February 2011, <http://www.law.cornell.edu>.

⁸ "CRS Annotated Constitution." LII, accessed 3 March 2011, <http://www.law.cornell.edu/anncon/authorship.html>.

back to 1992 include the syllabus, the opinion, any concurrence, dissent and concurrence/dissent in part. In the collection of historic decisions of the Supreme Court, LII provides over 300 of the courts "most important decisions" since the establishment of the Court.⁹

State law

LII has great breadth, but the collection of materials for Georgia law is not as robust as other states. Currently, most of the links are down, and the link to the Georgia Attorney General's office connects to a page on the GreatAmerican Network, not the official site. Thus, despite its impressive pedigree and grand aspirations, this portal is not without shortcomings, particularly in its coverage of state law.

Foreign and international law

For most countries, LII links to the official or most-appropriate online resources on case law, recent legislation, the current Constitution, civil, penal and administrative codes and the government in-power. Unlike the state law section, the global law area has very few broken links.

The international law component of the site also has good breadth, organizing documents into several broad categories: International Trade Law, United Nations Materials, Environmental Law, the International Court of Justice, International Labor Organization documents, the International Atomic Energy Agency documents, and assorted other international treaties and foreign law materials collected by the Fletcher School of International Affairs at Tufts University.¹⁰ The international trade sub-section is especially well-developed and includes documents from the World Trade

⁹ "Supreme Court decisions," LII, accessed 3 March 2011, <http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/supremes.html>.

¹⁰ "Law by source: Global," LII, accessed 3 March 2011, <http://www.law.cornell.edu/world/>.

Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Customs Organization, and the International Court of Arbitration.

Other features

The LII site is understated, and the font is tiny, but it does embrace some basic Web2.0 features. Interested researchers can follow the site's development on Twitter, and the site invites anyone to post legal questions. According to LII, the responses are given "promptly and efficiently by experts at [the site's] commercial partner, JustAnswers.com."¹¹ JustAnswers contracts with attorneys to provide answers for a set value (generally, \$15 per question).¹²

LII contains a legal dictionary and encyclopedia, which contains legal definitions and historical background for an extensive list of terms in the Wex section. Definitions come from the LII community and, when applicable, a second definition is offered from NOLO Plain-English Law Dictionary. A limited number of the entries include references to illustrative case law.

LII also provides current awareness updates that can be pushed out to subscribers, including a feed for "Supreme Court this week" and a feed for specific titles of the US Code. By selecting one of the blogs listed in LII, law professionals can receive emails every time a new item is posted to the blog. So, a lawyer interested in Title 20 (Education) can receive an email any time a change is made to that part of the Code. LII also offers a connection to legal news services provided by Jurist and Justia.com.

¹¹ "Ask a Lawyer Online," LII, accessed 2 March 2011, http://topics.law.cornell.edu/justanswer_interstitial.

¹² "How Much Should My Question Value Be?" JustAnswer, accessed 2 March 2011, <http://ww2.justanswer.com/help/how-much-should-my-question-value-be>.

World Legal Information Institute (<http://www.worldlii.org/>)

The success of LII encouraged several other sites around the world. The most comprehensive is the World Legal Information Institute (WorldLII), which contains law from over 225 countries. The types of materials included vary by country, but at a minimum the site links to the current constitution online and the website for the law-writing branch of government.

Countries continue to create Legal Institutes. The LII of India quietly launched a prototype in late November 2010 and formally launched its catalog just last month.¹³ Using a portal to access them all, rather than visit the regional LIIs has an advantage of offering one consistent interface to navigate, and multiple jurisdictions may be searched with one query.

Federal law

The WorldLII includes much of the data from the LII, but if researching US law exclusively (not comparatively), then the LII is a better starting point. because it offers greater breadth for the United States and locally appropriate terminology: “legislature” instead of “parliament.”

State law

Through its ties with LII, the WorldLII offers lists of websites, but many of these links are to questionable sources or retrieve 404 errors (dead ends). Under Florida, for example, three external links appear. The last two are solid references to the Florida State Courts official site and the Florida Supreme Court Briefs and Opinions site. But the first link to Florida Law Online is a commercial site for finding lawyers, not a portal

¹³ “About the LII of India,” Legal Information Institute of India. accessed 17 February 2011, <http://www.liiofindia.org/liiofindia/brochure.pdf>.

for “Florida Courts, Supreme Court Opinions, District Court of Appeal Opinions, Rules of Court, Ethics Opinions, Family Law Forms, Florida Laws, Constitution, Bills and Statutes, Session Laws Florida Legislature, Legislative Journals, Florida Executive Branch, State Agencies, Attorney General Opinions, Administrative Code, Local Government Codes & Ordinances and legal journals and reviews” as implied by the blurb under its link.¹⁴

International and foreign law

Participating countries contribute to the site in two ways. About half of the countries provide links to pre-existing legal information sites outside of the WorldLII. The site refers to the collection of these links as the “WorldLII catalog” and boasts of “over 15,000 websites in every country of the world.”¹⁵ The remaining 123 jurisdictions provide search interfaces within the WorldLII website to legal information databases. A complete alphabetical list of the 1165 databases and their hosting organizations is available by clicking on the “All Databases” hyperlink on the home page.¹⁶ For example, WorldLII offers a searchable database of Albanian Supreme Court documents since 1999. These resources are primarily for local populations, so they are in the official languages of the countries. Only English-speaking countries will have English records in WorldLII.

Other features

In a real sense, the WorldLII is a community. Since 1997, interested parties have gathered for regular meetings at the “Law via Internet Conference.” Like many of the other sites, WorldLII offers a RSS feed update whenever new information is added to

¹⁴ “United States of America, Courts & Case Law, State Courts, Florida,” World Legal Information Institute, accessed 2 March 2011, <http://www.worldlii.org/catalog/53984.html>.

¹⁵ “About WorldLII,” WorldLII, accessed 3 March 2011, <http://www.worldlii.org/worldlii/index.html>.

¹⁶ “Home page,” WorldLII, accessed 3 March 2011, <http://www.worldlii.org/>.

the databases or for general news and announcements about the site. Through the AustLII, a toolbar may be customized to make searching the WorldLII or any regional LII easy and just a click away.¹⁷

HG.org

One of the pioneering internet portals for legal information is Hieros Gamos (HG.org). HG.org has over fifteen years of experience providing online information about the law to both legal professional and pro sé populations. The portal offers a listing service for attorneys as well as marketing guides, a professional calendar, job listings and assorted legal publications.

Federal law

HG.org connects to the US Constitution, the US Code, *e-CFR*, the *Congressional Record*, twentieth-century US Supreme Court decisions, and the current Supreme Court docket.¹⁸ Most of these links are to official US government sites. The full text of Supreme Court decisions between 1937 and 1975 is available (surprisingly) from the Department of Commerce. The more recent decisions go to LII.

State law

For state law, HG.org does not provide any legal information beyond the lawyer directory listings for individual states.

¹⁷ "AustLII Toolbar," AustLII, accessed 3 March 2011, <http://www.austlii.edu.au/techlib/toolbar/>.

¹⁸ "United States Federal Government," HG.org, accessed 18 February 2011, <http://www.hg.org/usfederal-govt.html>.

International and foreign law

With links to law in 142 countries, HG.org provides a general introduction to foreign law.¹⁹ A quick skim through the table reveals that almost all countries reference the same four resources (GlobalLex, Library of Congress, the *World Fact Book*, and Doing Business. GlobalLex and Doing Business (particularly, its Law Library section) provide useful information on law and legislation in foreign countries. The Library of Congress and the CIA's *World Fact Book* provide overviews of and statistics on the countries in general.

Other features

HG.org started as a directory site, and three main directories (law firms, expert witnesses, and job posts) remain a great strength of the site. However, HG.org is only a listing service. It makes no attempt to verify any of the information on the posts and cautions the reader to hire only after carefully screening individuals. Anybody can create a basic entry for free ("premium" entries incur monthly charges). The only criterion enforced by HG.org is that all entries must provide a link to the entrant's website.

The portal offers articles on common topics and those of current interest written by attorneys from around the world for the HG.org site. The short articles address a variety of topics, written by practicing legal professionals specifically for the site.

Justia.com

Justia.com is a well-respected commercial portal with access to legal links, lawyer directories, a Q&A section, law blogs, podcasts, and forms. Two co-founders of FindLaw now lead Justia.com, and the portals closely resemble each other in mission and

¹⁹ "Law and Government Resources," HG.org, accessed 3 March 2011, <http://www.hg.org/1table.html>.

scope.²⁰ The portal displays ten common practice areas very prominently on its homepage, but more than twenty additional practice areas appear when the "more" button is selected. Each broad topic has several sub-topics. For example, "Employment & Labor" has eleven sub-topics, including ADA, Whistleblower, sexual harassment and employment contracts. Each of these sub-topics have separate web pages that contain a quick overview of the topic, links to relevant laws and regulations online, brief articles on related aspects of the law and other pertinent web resources.

Federal law

Justia.com offers a variety of primary legal materials for federal law, including case law, codes and statutes, and regulations. The site also provides a variety of forms for federal courts under the "Legal forms" heading, and an impressive number of links to official websites for federal agencies and departments.

Justia.com has an emphasis on the federal courts. Federal Appellate and Federal District court cases may be searched within the Justia site by year or by circuit/district. The resulting displays contain brief data about the case with the name, docket number, court, date, and opinion or judgment. The site offers a pdf version of the opinion or judgment for download. In the US Supreme Court Center, users can browse cases by volume, year and recent opinions. The most recent five opinions of the Supreme Court are available in text or pdf versions complete with syllabus, the opinion, and any concurrence, dissent or concurrences/dissents in part.

Justia.com also provides text versions of the US Constitution and the US Code. As in the LII, the Constitution in Justia.com contains annotations and analysis provided by

²⁰ "FindLaw for Legal Professionals," Findlaw.com, accessed 3 March 2011, <http://lp.findlaw.com/>.

the Congressional Research Service (2002, as updated by 2004 supplements).²¹ The Code is from the most recent version available at GPO access (January 24, 2002).²²

Under the “Regulations” section, users can access the *CFR* and *Federal Register*. The Regulation Tracker is a powerful tool for searching the *Federal Register*. In addition to a well-defined search feature, the site enables users to browse the *Federal Register* by government agency or by date.²³

Each of the branches of government has an extensive list of online resources, mostly official websites. The links under the “Executive Branch” includes Office of Management and Budget and National Security Council in addition to the myriad of agencies and services under each cabinet-level department.

State law

Access to state information is very thorough and well presented. For Georgia, the links direct users to official state government sites for all three branches, as well as to city sites and codes and to all Georgia Superior Courts. For case law, important case transcripts are available as pdf's for download. Justia.com offers decisions of the Georgia Supreme Court since 2008.²⁴

The extensive statistics available for each state are a handy reference tool. The amount of data compressed into a single webpage is staggering, but it is difficult to

²¹ “US Constitution,” Justia.com, accessed 3 March 2011, <http://law.justia.com/constitution/us/>.

²² “US Code,” Justia.com, accessed 3 March 2011, <http://law.justia.com/codes/us/>.

²³ “Regulation Tracker,” Justia.com, accessed 3 March 2011, <http://regulations.justia.com/>.

²⁴ “Georgia Supreme Court Decisions,” Justia.com, accessed 3 March 2011, <http://law.justia.com/cases/georgia/supreme-court/>.

locate the reference source and some of the data is quite old. For example, statistics on average income for Georgia households are from 1999.²⁵

The forms section has one thousand forms for Georgia courts, 632 for local and county courts, 239 for state courts and another hundred for worker's compensation and Georgia Secretary of State forms. The forms may be downloaded for free as printable pdf's or the user may purchase an interactive pdf version from the Formsworflow.com.²⁶ Most importantly, the site prominently displays the date of last revision for each form.

International and foreign law

Justia.com features specific pages for federal and state/provincial law in Mexico and nineteen countries in Central America and South America. The resources for each are in Spanish or Portuguese. Rather than access official websites within Latin America, the links to the constitutions refer to pages within the Justia site on which the text has been retyped. Most of the individual laws and codes are presented as pdf's of the official document, but without the date of issuance, publisher information or title page. It is hard to know when the laws went into effect or to feel confident that the document displayed is the most current version.

Other features

Justia.com is an enormous site with features for the legal professional as well as the general public. One of the handiest features for navigating the site is the internal

²⁵ "Georgia Legal Resources," Justia.com, accessed 28 February 2011, <http://www.justia.com/us-states/georgia/#resources>.

²⁶ "Free Georgia Legal Forms," Justia.com, accessed 3 March 2011, <http://forms.justia.com/georgia/>.

Google search box. The box displays at the top of most pages and launches a search of the site for that term or phrase.

Justia.com helps people find lawyers and legal aid services. The site knows from where a user is accessing it and offers lawyers in the proximity with experience in various areas of the law. Attorneys self-register by joining the site and completing a detailed questionnaire about years of experience, educational background, jurisdictions and current address, practice areas, fees, professional affiliations and languages spoken.

The “BlawgSearch” section offers thousands of law related blogs to help anyone stay current with the main conversations and events in the legal world. The full volume of the options is intimidating, but Justia.com succeeds reasonable well at presenting the available blogs in a useful and manageable manner. In one compact table, readers can skim through the last three entries posted to all twenty-four blogs related to energy law.²⁷

The “Legal Answers” section launched in November 2010.²⁸ Practicing attorneys might enjoy fielding some questions for the site. Unlike JustAnswers, the service on Justia.com is free. Responders gain “points, badges and exposure to potential clients.”²⁹

²⁷ “BlawgSearch,” Justia.com, accessed 2 March 2011, <http://blawgsearch.justia.com/blogs/categories/energy-law>.

²⁸ “A Little Help from My Friends... Announcing Justia Legal Answers,” Justia.com, accessed 28 February 2011, <http://onward.justia.com/2010/11/09/announcing-justia-answers/>.

²⁹ “Legal Answers,” Justia.com, accessed 3 March 2011, <http://answers.justia.com/>.

DATABASE RETRIVAL ACCESS USING GOOGLE'S NEW ELECTRONIC TECHNOLOGY (DRAGNET)

DRAGNET has the distinction of being a search engine and a portal. The general search engine aspect is unique and compelling. For researchers accustomed to GoogleScholar, the comparison is easy: through Google logic a subset of all the indexed web pages have been group together to better satisfy a certain subject area query. In this case, the subset is law materials. The library staff at the New York Law School vetted sites to include in the searches “for their reliability and utility to legal researcher.”³⁰

Federal law

DRAGNET includes the expected federal websites (like, GPO access, Oyez, e-CFR), and all of the portals discussed above. The New York Law School does not enhance or maintain any of DRAGNET's databases in-house. Unlike the other portals, all searches in DRAGNET retrieve results outside of the site.

State law

As a product of the New York Law School Library, the state focus of DRAGNET is on New York and New Jersey law. New York resources from the Office of the Attorney General, State Assembly and Senate, and court system provide online access to state law and state court decisions. Links to the New Jersey Digital Legal Library connect users to a variety of materials in the public domain, including New Jersey Supreme Court Oral Arguments, executive orders, administrative orders, and attorney general opinions.³¹

³⁰ “Home page,” DRAGNET, accessed 28 February 2011, http://www.nyls.edu/library/research_tools_and_sources/dragnet/.

³¹ “Home page,” New Jersey Digital Library, accessed 3 March 2011, <http://njlegallib.rutgers.edu/>.

Under a separate link titled "DRAGNET Constitutions and Codes" users can find constitutions, administrative rules and state codes for the other states.³²

International and foreign law

DRAGNET includes the World LII, the Council of Europe, United Nations, Globalex and Global Legal Information Network among other sites to provide well-rounded access to international law. It does not generate any of its own information or add any value to the information available elsewhere.

Other features

DRAGNET does not have the community-building features that the other portals have. Its key attribute is the personal attention that the selected sites receive. It is a bit of a throw-back to when portals were less Web2.0 and focused more on collecting quality sites and maintaining link integrity.

Conclusion

Internet portals provide convenience and functionality in an effort to make the information accessible and to develop a loyal community. Finding a portal that suits one's research needs can save much time and frustration by reducing the sites to remember or bookmark individually. Most of these law-related portals provide similar information to federal law, but the commitment to maintaining links and verifying information for state and foreign law varies. As with any web resource, portals are helpful starting places, but the real work of analyzing the information always remains the responsibility of the researcher.

³² "DRAGNET: Constitutions and Codes," New York Law School, accessed 3 March 2011, http://www.nyls.edu/library/research_tools_and_sources/dragnet_concodes.