5-8-2003

Around the World in Twenty Minutes: International Legal Research on the Web

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Repository Citation
https://digitalcommons.law.uga.edu/speeches/20
Around the World in Twenty Minutes: International Legal Research on the Internet

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I. Introduction

a. Preliminary Definitions

Public International Law

a. Historical Definition:

♦ Law that governs the relationships between or among nation-states.

b. Modern Definition:

♦ Law that applies to the conduct of nation-states and of international organizations
♦ Law that applies to the relationships between nation-states and international organizations
♦ Law that applies to some relationships between nation-states or international organizations and persons.

The sources of public international law include:

♦ international agreements, conventions, treaties
♦ customary international law
♦ general principles of international law recognized by civilized nations
♦ judicial decisions and the teachings of highly-regarded publicists

Foreign Law: Law of jurisdictions other than the United States

Private International Law: Individual nations create rules to determine which nation’s laws will
apply in a dispute involving entities in more than one jurisdiction. In the United States we
generally refer to this as “conflicts;” in most other nations, it is called “private international law.”
Related term: *transnational law* - evolving legal framework governing economic and monetary
transactions and contracts (involving two or more countries or parties from two or more
countries): conventions, model laws, legal guides, and other documents and instruments that
regulate private relationships across national borders

*Comparative Law*: not a legal system, but a methodology for studying the similarities and
differences between the laws of two or more countries, or between two or more legal systems.

**b. Internet as a Resource**

A researcher in “international law” may need to locate primary sources such as international
treaties, decisions of international and domestic tribunals, and foreign laws while also seeking
secondary sources such as treatises and articles. The Internet has improved access to foreign and
international materials immeasurably in the past few years. Items that formerly were not available
in a published format might now be available with a click of the mouse. Many international
organizations and countries are now placing primary legal materials on the Web, although not always in English and usually only for recent years. Like other areas of the Web, finding these materials is not always easy. The rapid growth of electronic materials in this area makes maintaining an accurate set of links impossible. However, many resources exist to help the researcher find relevant foreign and international information in this vast web of resources.
II. Where to Start

Research Strategy

♦ Is there a research guide on my particular topic or jurisdiction?

♦ Is there a relevant treaty?

A good research guide is invaluable when using the Web to locate foreign and international legal materials. Some useful guides include:

*ASIL Guide to Electronic Resources for International Law*

[http://www.asil.org/resource/home.htm](http://www.asil.org/resource/home.htm)

A development project of the American Society of International Law, the *ASIL Guide* focuses on Web resources but also discusses CD-ROM and other electronic resources. The Current chapters cover Human Rights; International Commercial Arbitration; International Criminal Law; International Economic Law; International Environmental Law; International Organizations; Lists, Newsgroups & Networks; Private International Law; Treaties; and the United Nations.

*Law Library Resource Xchange (LLRX)*

[http://www.llrx.com/resources4.htm](http://www.llrx.com/resources4.htm)

LLRX maintains a number of research guides for foreign and international legal materials. Find
guides to researching the laws of a number of foreign jurisdictions, from Algeria
(http://www.llrx.com/features/algerian.htm) to the United Kingdom
(http://www.llrx.com/features/uk2.htm). Also look to LLRX for guides to researching various
topics in international law, such as international intellectual property law
(http://www.llrx.com/features/iplaw2.htm) and international commercial arbitration
(http://www.llrx.com/features/arbitration2.htm).

Research Guide to International Law on the Internet
http://www.spfo.unibo.it/spolfo/ILMAIN.htm

From the University of Bologna, this site provides extensive coverage of a number of
international legal topics, including international trade, human rights, international environmental
law, the European Union, international peacekeeping operations, humanitarian law, international
criminal law, and international organizations.

Strategies for Locating Foreign Government Information on the Internet
http://www.libraries.psu.edu/crsweb/docs/forgate.htm

This handy site for conducting foreign legal research integrates links into a series of strategies for
locating foreign government information.

III. Sampling of Useful URLs for Foreign & International Materials

Note: the following sites were selected either because they provide the text of foreign and
international legal materials or they provide numerous links to sites containing text.
**Europa**  
[http://europa.eu.int](http://europa.eu.int)

Europa contains information and documents, including links to the EUR-LEX database (see below), and the European Court of Justice site ([http://curia.eu.int/](http://curia.eu.int/)). The Europa site evidences the European Commission’s commitment to making material accessible, but the sheer volume of information, especially given the numerous official languages of the EU, has proved difficult to organize. The site is searchable via a search engine, but savvy researchers tend to use the EUR-LEX database.

**EUR-LEX**  

This free site serves as a portal to EU documents in all of the official EU languages. Many documents are available in multiple formats, such as HTML, TIF, and PDF. EUR-LEX is easy-to-use and includes, among many types of materials, the full-text of the founding treaties, legislation, opinions, resolutions, and case law.

**European Union in the United States**  
[http://www.eurunion.org](http://www.eurunion.org)

The site of the EU’s Delegation in Washington, D.C. is geared toward Americans and is an excellent resource for EU information. Use the particularly useful online guide *Accessing European Union Information* at [http://www.eurunion.org/infores/resguide.htm](http://www.eurunion.org/infores/resguide.htm) as a primer on the institutions and publications of the EU. This guide also provides links to numerous online sources of EU material.

**Fletcher School’s Collection of Multilateral Treaties**  
[http://fletcher.tufts.edu/multilaterals.html](http://fletcher.tufts.edu/multilaterals.html)

This ongoing project by the Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy at Tufts University makes
available the texts of international multilateral conventions and other instruments. The collection
is organized into the following subjects: Atmosphere and Space, Flora and Fauna (Biodiversity),
Cultural Protection, Diplomatic Relations, General Human Rights, Marine and Coastal, Other
Environmental, Trade and Commercial Relations, Rules of Warfare& Arms Control, and Gulf
Area Borders. The vast majority of texts date from the second half of this century, but the
collection also includes historical texts, from the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia to the Covenant of
the League of Nations.

Global Legal Information Network (GLIN)
http://www.loc.gov/law/glin

This database of official foreign laws and regulations is maintained at the Library of Congress.
Although the full text of official laws and regulations is only available to contributors (generally
government entities), some law libraries are associate members and can provide limited access to
the texts. Anyone can sign into the system as guest and view the bibliographic records, which
include citations and summaries. The database is searchable by jurisdiction, subject, date, and
type of legal instrument. The texts are available in their original language, while the summaries
are in English and occasionally in a second language.

Hieros Gamos
http://www.bg.org

Hieros Gamos, the self-proclaimed “Comprehensive Legal and Government Portal” is the
creation of the Lex Mundi consortium, comprised of more than 125 independent law firms from
around the world. The researcher can search by subject, run a search through the entire site, or
run a search through multiple legal sites. Hieros Gamos is truly comprehensive, including nearly everything from international indexes to law journals to employment guides. Look for information and links on foreign governments, international organizations, and a plethora of legal subjects (international and domestic). Especially useful are the *Doing Business Guides* written by member firms about the business law in their respective countries.

**International Court of Justice (ICJ)**  
[http://www.icj-cij.org](http://www.icj-cij.org)

This official site of the World Court is available in English and French. Includes decisions of the ICJ, the Court’s docket, basic documents, court publications, press releases, and biographies of the justices.

**NAFTA Secretariat**  

The Secretariat maintains this site with the full text of the North American Trade Agreement, dispute resolution reports, additional NAFTA resources, and links to other NAFTA sites.

**Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development (OECD)**  

OECD’s official site provides a wealth of documents, statistics, press releases, and communications between OECD member countries.

**United Nations**  
The UN’s official site is packed with documents, press releases, links to UN agencies and related entities. The site also includes the UN Treaty Collection, a reasonably-priced subscription database providing access to the thousands of treaties deposited with the United Nations.

University of Minnesota Human Rights Library
http://www.umn.edu/humanrts/

This is a comprehensive, easy-to-use site for human rights documents. The site provides a metasearch engine for searching multiple human rights Web sites with one search query. It also includes text of documents from major human rights organizations, including the UN Human Rights Commission and the Inter-American Human Rights System. Look here for treaties, bibliographies, educational materials, and much more.

World Intellectual Property Organization
http://www.wipo.org

WIPO’s official site includes the text of intellectual property treaties administered by the organization along with numerous other documents, guidebooks, studies, press releases and indexes. A free Intellectual Property Digital Library Web site provides access to various intellectual property data collections currently hosted by WIPO.

World Trade Organization
http://www.wto.org

The WTO site is an excellent source for full-text trade documents, panel reports in dispute resolutions, press releases, articles, guides, statistics, and other trade-related publications.
IV. Electronic Discussion Lists and Bulletin Boards

Often, the best research resource is a colleague knowledgeable in the jurisdiction or subject. The Internet provides valuable assistance in locating and communicating with these “people” resources. Examples include e-mail listservs on topics ranging from international legal research in general to substantive discussions of specific topics, such as international environmental law. Use the chapter on “Lists, Newsgroups & Networks” in the *ASIL Guide to Electronic Resources for International Law* at [http://www.asil.org/resource/lists1.htm](http://www.asil.org/resource/lists1.htm) to identify relevant fora and for guidance on subscribing and posting messages. Additional legal listservs and subscription instructions are available at “Law Lists” maintained at [http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/law-lists](http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/law-lists).

V. A Note re Foreign Language Materials on the Web

Many of the foreign and international materials found on the Web are available in English. However, for those available only in a foreign language not understood by the researcher, many search engines now provide an automated translator. AltaVista was the first search engine to provide this useful tool. Babelfish, available at [http://babelfish.altavista.com](http://babelfish.altavista.com), is an automated translation service that allows the user to enter either plain text or a Web address and specify which translation is desired (e.g., Spanish to English, English to German, etc.). The languages currently available are: Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, and Spanish. Because the service is automated, the translations are nowhere near perfect, but they can still be useful in determining the gist of a site. Google, available at [http://www.google.com](http://www.google.com), also
provides automated translations.

VI. Using Search Engines to Locate International Organization Sites

When using a search engine to locate materials of an international organization, it is useful to limit your search by the domain “.int” which only applies to Web sites maintained by international organizations such as the United Nations. For example, a query in AltaVista of domain:int terrorism will only retrieve Web pages with the .int domain. Most search engines also allow for restriction by language, which may come in handy if the researcher only wants foreign legal materials in the original language.