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THE EMPEROR HAS NO CLOTHES: WHEN FREE INTERNET INFORMATION CAN COST YOU AND YOUR CLIENT

by Iain Barksdale

The new emperor has promised us quick, easy, and relevant searching of the Internet; a wealth of free information at our disposal. For the most part, Google delivers on its promise. The search algorithms used by Google look at all of the information on a web page in order to determine the relevance to the entered search; no longer can unscrupulous web masters fill hidden areas of their pages with non-relevant or extra keywords to boost a page's position on the list of sites displayed. Despite the fact that Google works so very well in listing relevant sites and can point one to a plethora of free information, legal and otherwise, you get what you pay for and Googling information can cost in the end.

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Problem #1: Information overload. There are currently over eight billion pages indexed by Google, and even precise, well-designed queries can return hundreds of thousands of hits. Despite Google's improved ranking of web pages one still must directly review many of the returned hits to find the best source of the sought information, and sometimes what one is looking for are several pages in on the Google search return pages and it takes some time to scan through several

pages of hits to find the most relevant information. Often specialized information can be found more quickly at a specialized web portal, such as Thomas or FindLaw, or on a subscription database, such as LexisNexis or Westlaw.

Problem #2: Site quality. Although Google tends to return sites with fairly good information quality in regards to the entered search terms, this is no guarantee of site quality. The best, most relevant information in the world is of no use if it cannot be easily accessed. A site could have excellent information and links from other similar and important sites pointing to it, but could have extremely poor navigation tools, no search function, or simply be provided in a visual style that makes the page virtually unreadable. Arriving at a site that lacks quality once again leads to the wasting of precious time.

Problem #3: Site reliability and authority. There is no automated ranking for site reliability or authority, and top ranked sites retrieved by Google or any other search engine may not satisfy either of these criteria. Reliability

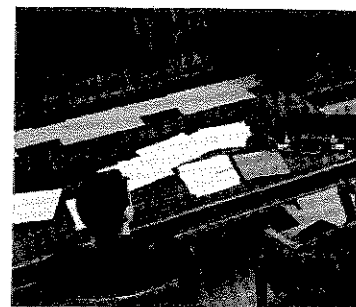
and authority must be determined on a site-by-site basis, and is not always readily apparent. Some sites simply lack any information regarding the authorship of the page, or where the information was initially obtained. One of the only simple ways to divine reliability and authority is via the .gov domain designation. Only government sites are allowed this designation and despite this assurance there still might be quality issues at hand.

Problem #4: Site currency. Generally how up-to-date a site is also not readily apparent from Google search results; however, one can use the advanced Google search options and restrict results to recently updated pages. However, this still does not necessarily guarantee results with up-to-date information. If a website's design is updated, then Google will show that site as being current in the results, although no information may have been changed at all. Often the only way to discover the currency of a page is to hope that the author has provided information about when the content on the page was updated. Information that is not current is the bane of all in the legal profession, as well as clients.

A solution: Human selected links. Although Google is an excellent search engine that garners relevant results for searches, it cannot offer results that are visibly of high quality simply based on page ranking. The overall quality of a website can only be investigated and judged by a human being with some expertise in the topical area of interest. Many academic law libraries have a solution in place: human selected legal links; a selection of websites that are logically grouped together and vetted for quality. By using such prepared link pages one may save time wasted by searching through Google search results for quality legal information on the web. Other site such as FindLaw, Thomas, GPO Access, and other legally tailored sites with human selected links should also be considered as first steps in finding legal information on the web in an efficient manner that can save money for attorney and client alike.

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