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WHERE'S WALDO? FINDING WEB SITES FROM THE PAST

Michael Whiteman

Dateline: Jan. 20th, 2009. President Elect Obama becomes President Obama, and the Bush White House is history, but not only the Bush White House, but the Bush White House web site as well. What happened to all that information? How does one find it again?

Disappearing information on the Internet is an especially vexing problem. Government actors (federal, state and local) increasingly turn to the Internet as the place to post information, and then forget about it. When new government actors arrive they remove information and replace it with new information. Where can one find the old information? For attorneys information is a valuable commodity, and legal researchers need to know what was said at a particular point in time. If that information has gone into the ether, and there is no print counterpart, what does one do?

This dilemma has been partially answered by a non-profit group's web site known as The Internet Archive. The Internet Archive is an online repository for old web sites. Like a public library this information is available for free to all who come seeking knowledge of the past. Through use of a tool known as the Wayback Machine legal researchers can find web pages as they existed at various periods in time.

If a legal researcher needed to see what an agency had on their web site at a particular point in time they could use the Wayback Machine to see a version of a web page from any period of time back to 1996. To use the Wayback Machine a legal researcher simply plugs in a URL (web address) into the search box and the

Wayback Machine will bring up a calendar of links from which the legal researcher could select to view what that web site looked like on that particular date. The web sites that appear may be either partial pages or full pages depending on the completeness of the archived information.

So if a URL no longer works because it has changed or the web site has simply been taken down, a legal researcher could enter that URL into the Wayback Machine and voila the web site appears. If the URL or web site searched for, that was once full of useful information, is no longer there, don't give up hope, visit the Internet Archive and try the Wayback Machine. (Bell bottom pants are optional!)



www.archive.org

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