

By Carole Levitt and Mark Rosch

Finding Facts on the Internet on Nonlegal Topics

Medical research, product data, and statistics are all widely available and often free

The practice of law involves the interplay of legal issues and facts, and for lawyers factual research can be as important as or more important than legal research. While some facts can be obtained through client interviews and discovery, other facts must be obtained through research. For a personal injury attorney, the subject could be anatomy. For a products liability attorney, the subject could be how a product was designed and manufactured. The Internet is extremely well suited to fact-finding in these areas.

For medical research, for example, the best place to begin is the Gateway site of the National Library of Medicine (NLM). The site (<http://gateway.nlm.nih.gov/gw/Cmd>) allows visitors to search and retrieve abstracts and citations from over 12 million medical journals, articles, books, and conference notes, going back to the mid-1950s. As the site's name—Gateway—implies, the information is derived from multiple sources, including MedLine/PubMed, OLDMedline, ClinicalTrials.gov, and consumer health publications. For a

cursory review of a medical topic, it is often enough to read abstracts for free, but for more in-depth learning, one needs to read complete articles. To obtain them, a visit to PubMed Central (at www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov) may prove fruitful, because the site lists 120 medical journals that can be accessed for free. If the desired articles are not available at PubMed, researchers can return to Gateway and place an order.

Sometimes finding the right official at a regulatory agency is what is needed. Facts about every legislative, judicial, and executive agency of the federal government—from a description of what the agency does to the names and contact information for officials and staff—can be found in the U.S. *Government Manual*. The official handbook of the federal government is online at <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/gmanual/browse-gm-02.html>.

When a science-related matter is part of a case, a consumer publication or educational resource can be a good way for an attorney to obtain a rudimentary understanding of a scientific matter, and introductory resources can be found to help attorneys explain scientific concepts to jurors. The MadSci Library (at www.madsci.org/libs/libs.html) is one of the better resources for introductory information in biochemistry, clinical microbiology, immunology, chemistry, and physics, among other areas. The site is part of the Young Scientists

program of the Washington University School of Medicine and is aimed at improving science literacy among school-aged children. No researcher should dismiss this site because it is geared toward students. In addition, one can pose a question via e-mail by clicking the Ask-A-Scientist link.

Statistics

An attorney can always make use of a statistic to prove or disprove an argument or to illustrate a point. From the Census Bureau to the FBI, the most insatiable gatherer of statistical information is probably the U.S. government. Fed Stats is a useful site for federal statistical information (www.fedstats.gov). Searching can be undertaken by topic, key word, or agency name, and searches can be limited to regions. The choice of topics range from agriculture to weekly wages. If a researcher is helping with a wrongful death case involving a worker on a fishing boat, Fed Stats can provide data for a report about the number of fishing industry workers who die at sea and the types of accidents that claim their lives. The report can impress a jury with how dangerous it is to fish for a living.

Transportation research is another source of valuable information for attorneys, from those dealing with cases involving an automobile, aircraft, or railway crash to those trying to find the opposing party's assets (especially very large assets, such as an aircraft). The U.S. Department of Transportation's TranStats-Intermodal Transportation Database (www.transtats.bts.gov) con-

tains ample information on all modes of transportation—even bicycles and pipelines. To discover if an opposing party owns an aircraft, researchers can search the FAA Aircraft Registry Database (<http://162.58.35.241/acdatabase>) by an owner's name. If there are no results, a search by an aircraft's registration number (if known) can provide the name and address of the last owner in the United States, which may be helpful information if the opposition is suspected of transferring assets.

Sometimes the facts needed to make or break a case appear in the least expected place: the opposition's Web site. In one case, an attorney was consulted by the parents of a child who had been injured on playground equipment. The attorney wondered if the equipment was designed defectively, and a quick look at the defendant's site provided him with the specifications of the equipment. Another search on the Internet for competing playground equipment manufacturers provided the attorney with those manufacturers' equipment specifications. It was immediately obvious to the attorney that the defendant's design was very different from those of the others, helping him to decide that the case had merit without even spending the money and time to locate and consult with an expert.

Most attorneys do not have Erin Brockovich to dig up local records regarding environmental hazards, but any attorney can access the vast resources of environmental information on the Internet. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) site,

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Envirofacts (www.epa.gov/enviro), provides access to several EPA databases, some of which are updated nightly. The information focuses on activities that affect air, water, and soil quality in the United States. The site's Quick Start feature allows one to search by zip code as well as city or county and state to find information on facilities that are regulated by the EPA. For a nongovernmental survey of the environment, the Natural Resources Defense Council site (www.nrdc.org) offers brief and in-depth discussions of environmental topics and provides links to other Web sites for more information. The site also includes a glossary of environmental terms.

International Information

With the continuing rise of economic globalization, even attorneys who do not practice international law may need to know how to gather information about foreign countries and markets. For example, an attorney may need to research which countries have the most stable governments or best infrastructure or who may be an appropriate counsel for a client who needs representation in a foreign country. One of the best resources about other countries is the *CIA Factbook*, and an online version is now available for free at www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html. Detailed information in 9 categories is presented for each of the 200 countries profiled. The categories range from the country's geography, people, government, economy, and communications to its transportation systems.

To search for foreign attorneys by practice areas, one can use Martindale-Hubbell online (www.martindale.com). By clicking the Location/Area of Practice tab, one can create a search as specific as one for law firms in Copenhagen with a business law practice and with 100 or more members, at least one of whom speaks English. To know the appropriate time to contact a Danish law firm, go to the World Clock Web site (www.timeanddate.com/worldclock), where one can discover the current time in over 500 foreign cities. This site can also be used to convert the date and time of a local event into those of a foreign city.

Attorneys either know the law on a given legal subject or know where to find it, but they also have to know about topics outside the law. This usually involves gathering factual information about topics one knows next to nothing about. With all the factual information one can gather from the Internet, it is possible to learn enough quickly to assess the merits of a case or to find the right statistic to make a point with a jury. The Internet affords attorneys the ability to conveniently access these facts day or night, often for free. ■

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