Fall 2000

A Newcomer's Introduction to the Internet

Janet Fischer

Golden Gate University School of Law, jfischer@ggu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.law.ggu.edu/pubs

Part of the Legal Education Commons

Recommended Citation

2 Tech Guide For California Courts 6 (Fall 2000).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at GGU Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications by an authorized administrator of GGU Law Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jfischer@ggu.edu.
IN THIS ISSUE

An Interview With Judges Kenneth Lee Chotiner and William R. Chidsey, Jr. of the Los Angeles Superior Court ............................................................. 2
Two TechGuide Planning Committee members share their experiences in working to incorporate technological advances into their daily lives.

U.S. Supreme Court on the Web ............................................................... 4
A review of various sites that provide information about our highest court and up-to-the minute reports on its decisions.

A Newcomer's Introduction to the Internet .............................................. 6
San Mateo Law Librarian Janet Fischer outlines just what the Internet is and how to surf the Web.

DEPARTMENTS:
Letters to the Editor ................................................................. 5
At Home—Renting DVDs on the Web ............................................ 8
Tips & Tricks—Windows "Scrap" Feature, & Using Outlines in Microsoft Word™ .... 10
Q&A—Working With PDF Files, & Ergonomics on the Bench ................. 11
About the TechGuide Planning Committee and CJER ............... 15
EndNotes ............................................................. 16

GUIDE TO INFORMATION PRESENTED IN ARTICLES

General information or beginner technical level
Intermediate technical level
Advanced technical level
A Newcomer's Introduction to the Internet

By Janet Fischer, San Mateo Law Library

Being “wired” used to refer to the jangled nerves that come after drinking that fifth or sixth cup of coffee. Now, everyone is expected to be wired—connected to the Internet, that is. It seems that almost everyone has e-mail, every company has a Web page, and a growing number of people are beginning to think that if a thing cannot be found on the Web, it is not worth knowing. Those who don’t use the Internet on the job or at school, or who don’t have someone in their lives to introduce them to the intricacies of cyberspace, often find themselves at an increasing disadvantage. When people discuss the Internet, they smile and nod, but don’t really understand what it’s all about.

San Mateo County Law Library’s Internet Class

To address this problem, the San Mateo County Law Library developed a one-hour class, “Introduction to the Internet,” geared toward those who know nothing or next to nothing about the Internet. We offer the class once or twice per month, September through May. Over 200 judges, attorneys, and lay persons have attended this course over the past two years. Shortly after beginning the class, we were able to offer one unit of continuing education credit for Law Practice Management under the auspices of the San Mateo County Bar Association.

The Internet and the World Wide Web

Exactly what is the Internet and the World Wide Web? Although we often use the terms interchangeably, they are not the same. The Web is, more or less, a series of electronic locations (called sites or pages) with information on them. These locations are accessed via the Internet, a system of government, university, scientific, commercial, and private computer systems that communicate with each other through telephone lines, cable, optical fiber, microwave, and satellite links. In its simplest description, the Internet is a global network made up of smaller networks, although one commentator has said, “This is like saying that the space shuttle is a thing that flies”. The Internet allows an individual to communicate with, and access information on, many computers around the world. With a projected 142 million users this year in over 70 countries and over 50 million Web sites available, the Internet has become the communication and research medium of choice for many people.

Internet Protocol (IP)

We access information on the Internet using a variety of methods called protocols, which are standard formats read by the computer. The Web is only one of several methods, although it is the one most commonly used today. Gopher, usenet, telnet, and ftp (file transfer protocol) are other methods. We also use the Internet to transmit e-mail. Every location on the Internet has a unique address, called an IP, or Internet Protocol address. While computers read numbers, humans read language, so we use URLs (Uniform Resource Locators), which are text names that represent the IP address. When users request a site, their Internet Service Provider (or ISP) converts the URL to the IP address, similar to a telephone number, thereby telling the system where to go. The format of the address indicates its protocol; all Web addresses begin with http, which stands for “hyper-text transfer protocol.”

This gets confusing because software today makes most of this transparent to the user. Our browser software does most of the work for us. We launch the browser, in most cases either Netscape or Internet Explorer, which in turn instructs the modem (or other type of connection) to connect us to our ISP. When we type a Web address in the location bar, most of us omit http because the browser automatically defaults to the http protocol and plugs that in for us. The browser will use

“With a projected 142 million users this year in over 70 countries and over 50 million Web sites available, the Internet has become the communication and research medium of choice for many people.”
the other protocols when requested. The same software can also provide access to our e-mail with a click or two of the mouse.

**Domain Names and What They Tell Us**

When you enter an Internet address, the computer is told to retrieve specific data from a specific server. Web addresses are case sensitive and long, because the server needs to find an exact match in its database, and the text can be almost any length. Most Web addresses are very logical, e.g., `www.law.cornell.edu` connects to the Cornell Law School Web site. If an organization's address is not known, an educated guess can usually find it. If you want to find the CNN Web site, for example, try `www.cnn.com`. While Web addresses are case sensitive and the address must be entered exactly as given, many organizations buy a variety of permutations of their domain name and link them all to their home page. Typing `cnn.com`, `CNN.com`, `www.cnn.com`, and `www.CNN.com` will get you to the same place, although to the computer these are actually four different addresses.

A domain name is the unique name that identifies a computer or group of computers at a given location. The domain generally includes the name of the organization (e.g., CNN), and an ending that indicates the type of organization, institution, or business that sponsors the site. The ending is called the top level domain, and the current top level domains are:

- .com for commercial organizations
- .gov for governmental organizations
- .org for generally nonprofit organizations
- .edu for educational institutions
- .mil for military sites
- .net for personal, network, and commercial providers

Besides these, there are also country domains such as .uk for the United Kingdom, .jp for Japan, etc. All Web sites must fit into one of these top level domains. The domain also gives a clue as to the reliability of the site. For example, information on travel safety in a particular country may be more reliable from an .edu site than from a .com site. Soon we will see additional top level domains, such as .firm, .store, .law, and .arts. Just as the number of telephone area codes have had to be split and expanded, so the number of top level domain names will need to grow.

**What's on a Web Site?**

A Web site may be very simple, similar to a brochure, with some general information on a particular topic, product, or company. Web pages can also be quite complex, and along with text and graphics can include audio and full motion video. What makes a Web page unique are the hypertext links embedded in the files. These are the words, phrases, or icons that when clicked on take us to a different page containing more related information. The Web has become very popular due to the development of user-friendly, graphical software, allowing nontechnical people to navigate it with relative ease, as well as the increasing amount of information available on it.

The Web keeps us from reinventing the wheel. For example, if the local bar association has posted the local rules of court on its Web site, the court's site need not post it; instead, the court's site would simply have a link to the site where the information is already available.

The Web allows us to access important and timely information around the clock every day of the week. Increasingly, slip opinions are becoming available on various court sites. The full text of United States Supreme Court cases, the United States Code, and most state codes are available online as well.

Most university libraries have very useful Web sites, and are a great place to start a legal search. See TechGuide Vol.2, No. 1, p 8 (Summer 2000). The federal government is in the process of developing a site called FirstGov, which will provide access to all government documents and legislation (www.firstgov.gov/). Of course, individuals can also create their own Web sites, with a variety of personal information they think everyone should know about them and links to favorite sites.

**Navigating the Web**

There are many ways to surf the Web. After launching your browser, you can type a Web address in the location bar, press Enter, and wait for the page to come up. Adding Web addresses to the Bookmarks in Netscape, or Favorites in Internet Explorer, saves time on the next visit to cyberspace; instead of typing in the address again, the user can just click on the bookmarked address. The most basic navigation simply entails clicking on the links that transfer you from one Web page to another.

There are literally millions of Web sites, with varying degrees of usefulness. A variety of search engines assist users in finding what they need. Think of a search engine as a card
Interview
(continued from page 13)

That’s why I find the TechGuide so valuable. Judges are sharing their technology expertise with their brethren. They are learning from each other. I also learned quickly that you can make a computer, or a system, do what you want it to do. When I encountered the “it can’t be done” syndrome, my instinct was that those who said that were wrong. Experience has proved they were.

Judge Chidsey: Many of us, especially those from the carbon paper era are reluctant to use the available technology. As I’ve gotten braver I have found that the use of technology has greatly enhanced both my professional and personal life. I would encourage others to move beyond their fears and anxieties, ask for help, and learn to enjoy the benefits of technology.

As with most new things, there is a learning curve. The learning curve for most applications these days, however, is slight. Software developers want to make their products as user friendly as possible. Ease of use generates sales and that is their common goal. This all inures to the benefit of the user. Entry level learning courses are available through CJER. Most adult education programs provide a full range of learning opportunities. Take the opportunity to expand your horizons. You will be really surprised how much fun it can actually be.

TG: Thanks so much for taking the time to do this interview. And thanks for all the support and feedback you’ve given us as members of the TechGuide Committee.

A Newcomer’s Introduction to the Internet
(cont’d from page 7)

catalog of the Web. Search engines can be a subject-oriented guide, such as Yahoo! (www.yahoo.com) or Findlaw (www.findlaw.com), or they can be mechanical, such as Alta Vista (www.altavista.com) or Google (google.com). A search engine is the best place to start when you don’t know exactly where you want to go on the Web. See TechGuide Vol. 1, No. 2, p 2 (Fall 1999). Also, most major law schools have excellent Web sites for legal research.

Another search tip is to change the preferences on the browser so that after logging on, the first page that appears is more useful than the home page of Netscape or Microsoft. Starting at the home page of a legal search site such as Findlaw, or Law.com, or the site of your favorite law library will facilitate your research.

Not All Information Is Free
Most Web sites give users access to information without charge. However, generally organizations that charge customers for information do not distribute it free. Fee-based sites, such as Loislaw (www.pita.com) or VersusLaw (www.versuslaw.com), provide access to proprietary material. Lexis and Westlaw also provide access to their databases on the Web (using one’s own account information, of course). Also, keep in mind that not everything is on the Internet. For example, the online information currently available for the Congressional Record and Federal Register goes back only to 1994.3

Validity of Information on the Web
A major problem in doing research on the Web is source authority. Anyone can put up a Web page. There is no editorial control beyond the standards of the site itself. Generally, sites such as the Government Printing Office, other government sites, and the sites of major universities are as reliable as their print products. Be wary, however, of using cases, statutes, or interpretations from “Jack’s Home Page,” or any Web site put up by a group with a mission that is not clearly indicated.

Internet providers continue to refine their services, making it easier for nontechnical people to “get wired.” There’s nothing wrong with that, but understanding a few of the basics of the Internet helps a great deal when you find yourself lost in cyberspace.

Footnotes
2 The Internet Corporation For Assigned Names and Numbers, http://www.icann.org/general/faq1.htm#gtlds.
1 GPO Gate, University of California, http://www.gpo.ucop.edu/dbsearch.html.