

WEB WATCH

Broken Promises

FindLaw's once-fine index is full of dead links.

By Robert J. Ambrogi

FINDLAW'S core is showing its age. Started in 1994 as an index of legal resources on the internet, FindLaw (www.findlaw.com) used that index as a foundation to build a range of resources for legal professionals, businesses and consumers.

But in recent years, FindLaw has let its index go to seed, failing to weed out dead URLs, update site descriptions or add new resources. The deterioration is so extreme as to call into question its usefulness as a primary resource for legal professionals.

Browsing FindLaw's index is like stepping through a time warp, finding a sepia-toned picture of legal resources as they once were. It is as if a moment came when FindLaw stopped the upkeep of its index. Regrettably, that moment seems to coincide with FindLaw's acquisition in Jan. 2001 by the former West, now Thomson (www.thomson.com).

At the time of the acquisition, a West statement said: "Everything that exists on FindLaw today ... will remain." It seems that, with respect to the index, West took that promise too literally.

FindLaw has had few greater cheerleaders than me. In both the 2001 and 2004 editions of my book, *The Essential Guide to the Best (and Worst) Legal Sites on the Web*, I gave FindLaw my highest rating of five stars, calling it "the best starting point for finding legal information on the web." But in recent years, I began to notice weaknesses in the index: more dead links, more out-of-date sites and few, if any, updates or additions. I started to receive notes from readers raising the same concerns and to hear others complain at seminars.

I decided to subject FindLaw's web index to some "site-checking" to verify the integrity of its links. The results shocked me. More than a quarter of all links I checked — 28.5 percent, were bad — dead or defunct sites, expired URLs, pages not found and servers not found. In one practice area, gaming law, more than



half the links were bad. Other key practice areas had a third or more of bad links. The best I found for a practice area was an error rate of 16 percent (international law). I found one link to a supposed legal resource that actually led to a porn site.

Of the links that remained "good," many were to out-of-date resources or bore descriptions that no longer reflected the site's content. Some were redundant, others simply irrelevant.

Were this some mom-and-pop collection, I'd not be surprised. But this is FindLaw, a subsidiary of Thomson, two of the biggest names in legal research. I expect the resources they provide to be timely and accurate. Instead I found links to Law Journal Extra!, discontinued in 1998, and to the Internet Law Library, closed in 1999.

I found little evidence that FindLaw is updating its index with more contemporary sites. Where, for that matter, are the blogs? Shouldn't any contemporary index include at least some of the leading blogs? I found only one link to a blog — that is no longer published.

My survey looked only at FindLaw's index of law-related websites. Elsewhere, FindLaw provides a great deal of valuable information, all at no cost to lawyers. Its libraries of primary law — cases and codes — are of enormous value to the legal profession. In recent years, it has also become a key source of legal news and commentary. But for professionals performing online research, it is important to understand the weaknesses in FindLaw's index, so they do not rely on it to their detriment.

In total, I checked 1,427 links. I found 406 to be bad — for a failure rate of 28.5 percent. In general, I considered any link to be bad that did not point to what it described. This included websites that no longer exist, 404 messages for pages not found, messages for servers not found and expired redirects.

Having gone through the process last year of updating my own book, I appreciate how much work is involved. To make it even more difficult, the web is ever-changing. But lawyers turn to an index such as FindLaw's in search of a shortcut to the best websites. Given FindLaw's pedigree, lawyers have every right to expect it to be timely and accurate. Unfortunately, it is not.

In another development, FindLaw just notified lawyers that it would no longer host free law firm websites and will remove existing sites from its servers on Aug. 1, citing technical difficulties and business constraints. It will, however, continue to provide paid web development and advertising services to lawyers.

THOMSON RESPONDS

After conducting my research, I spoke to Kyle Christensen, corporate communications manager for Thomson Legal & Regulatory. He acknowledged that FindLaw has fallen behind in keeping the index current, but he said that efforts are underway to update the information and that FindLaw would launch a redesigned and updated site before the end of the year.

FindLaw president and CEO Debbie Monroe has announced her retirement, Christensen said, and will be succeeded by Scott Kinney, currently FindLaw's vice president of strategic marketing, who previously worked with CBS MarketWatch. Kinney, reached right at LTN's deadline, said FindLaw has now repaired all the broken links by running them through a "bot" to check accuracy, and also pledged to address the updating issue.

Christensen said FindLaw focused in recent years on development of its corporate counsel section. The company has now applied resources towards updating and redesigning the overall site, he said, with the goal of adding new content, updating existing content and enhancing the overall user experience.

"The mission of FindLaw hasn't changed," Christensen said. "We want it to be a useful site." With respect to the index, he added: "We're on it, and we care."

FindLaw, he said, remains the most popular legal website, with 2 million visitors and 60 million page views a month, and among the top-500 most visited of any website. **LTN**

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Robert J. Ambrogi's "Law Sites" is the latest addition to the *law.com Blogs Network* (www.blogs.law.com).

A longer version of this story, with specifics about practice area links, is available on his blog, www.legaline.com/lawsites.html. E-mail: rambrogi@legaline.com.

WEB WATCH

Podcasting: CLE's New Wave?

Apple's iPods are ideal for short broadcasts.

By Robert J. Ambrogi

IT'S name evokes images of some sort of sci-fi fly fishing, but podcasting may just be the next big thing in CLE.

Think about all the hours you waste driving in your car, sitting on a subway or waiting at an airport. What if you could use that time to listen to up-to-the-minute and substantive broadcasts covering news from your practice area or jurisdiction? You won't hear it on NPR. You won't even find it on satellite radio. But you may someday soon get it through podcasting.

The "pod" in this context refers not to alien life forms but to the Apple iPod portable music player. Simply put, podcasting is a way of distributing digital audio files, usually MP3 files, for playback in an iPod or other MP3 player. Of course, you don't need an iPod to listen to podcasts — you can listen to them on your computer or burn them onto CDs.

Although still in its infancy, podcasting is becoming increasingly popular among bloggers, who have adapted the syndication tools used to distribute their written postings to allow them to record and distribute audio files.

Just as you would use a news aggregator to track the RSS or Atom syndication feeds of your favorite bloggers or news sites, you can use podcast aggregators to track and automatically download your favorite audio feeds.

The number of podcasts is growing rapidly, but, so far, only a handful cover law. Of course, podcasting has been around only since last summer. Odds are the number of law-related podcasts will multiply rapidly this year.

GETTING STARTED

So what is it? Wikipedia, www.wikipedia.org, defines it this way: "Podcasting involves the recording of internet radio or similar internet audio programs. These recordings are then made available for download to portable digital audio device. You can listen to the podcast Internet radio program while you are away from your computer or at a different time than the original program was broadcast."

Podcasting came about through the collab-

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“Podcasting is becoming popular among bloggers, who have adapted syndication tools to distribute audio files.”

orative efforts of Adam Curry, a former MTV VJ and popular blogger, and Dave Winer, founder of Userland Software and author of the RSS syndication protocol. RSS — for Really Simple Syndication — is the format that enables news headlines, blog postings and other web content to be sent automatically to news readers on local computers.

Winer created a method for attaching digital audio files to RSS feeds. Curry spearheaded development of open-source software to monitor these feeds for new podcasts and then automatically download and install them on a local computer or digital audio device.

The software, iPodder, is available as a free download at <http://ipodder.sourceforge.net>. It runs on Windows, Macintosh and Linux systems. Others have developed podcast aggrega-

tors of their own. A list of these programs can be found at iPodder.org, www.ipodder.org, Winer and Curry's website devoted to all things podcasting.

Having installed iPodder and with MP3 player in hand, you will want to begin immediately downloading all the law-related podcasts. Unfortunately, the pickings — at least as of this writing — are slim.

THE 'PLAWDOSPHERE'

Denise Howell, a Newport Beach, Calif. attorney/blogger who creates Bag and Baggage, <http://bgbg.blogspot.com>, is credited with having coined the terms "blawg" for law-related blogs and "blawgosphere" for the community of legal bloggers. More recently, Howell — whose blog frequently tracks developments in podcasting — coined the term "plawdosphere" for the community of legal professionals with podcasts. On Jan. 9, Howell became a podcaster. Her first program touched on finding the perfect cell phone and using it to record a podcast. She also reviewed the week's highlights from other blogs.

Among lawyers, the most consistent podcaster is J. Craig Williams, also a lawyer in Newport Beach, Calif., who writes May It Please the Court, www.mayitpleasethecourt.net. Williams creates at least one podcast virtually every working day.

His podcasts mirror his written postings, commenting on the day's legal news and offering observations about the practice of law.

In fact, Williams is so committed to podcasting that he recently set up a process for listeners to post their own audio comments, much like blog readers post written comments. They call a phone number listed on Williams' blog and record comments. Audio files with the comments are sent by e-mail to Williams, who posts them on his blog.

You can find links to Williams' podcasts directly on his blog, or subscribe (using iPodder or something similar) to one of two syndication feeds Williams maintains for his podcasts.

Another legal podcaster is Ernest Miller, who is a fellow of the Information Society Project at Yale Law School. He writes The Importance of ... blog, found at www.corante.com/importance. Miller has recorded a series of podcasts on The Importance of ... Law and IT, at www.itconversations.com/series/lawandit.html.

His podcasts, which run 30 to 45 minutes,

cover recent developments in topics such as the INDUCE Act and the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. His programs are structured like talk shows (or CLE programs), featuring lawyers as guest panelists with whom Miller discusses the topic at hand. IT Conversations also is home to other podcasts about legal issues.

Bret Fausett, a technology attorney in Los Angeles who maintains the blog Lertext, <http://blog.lextext.com>, offers podcasts of a different sort. Through the site Internet Pro Radio, www.internet.pro, Fausett makes available radio programs he has produced featuring an eclectic selection of his favorite music — ranging from Dwight Yoakam to Steve Earl to William Shatner.

But recently, Fausett skipped the music to offer a podcast explaining the law of podcasting music — in other words, how to podcast RIAA music lawfully under license.

PODCAST DIRECTORIES

As of this writing, this is the universe of lawyers who podcast. But there are many other podcasts available, some professionally produced — such as Morning Stories, www.wgbh.org/morningstories, from a Boston public radio station, or On the Media, www.onthemedial.org, from National Public Radio — others delightfully unpolished.

To find podcasts, begin with these directories:

- All Podcasts, www.allpodcasts.com. A searchable index of podcasts that also organizes titles under a rudimentary categorical index.
- Audio.WebLogs.com, <http://audio.weblogs.com>. Lists the 100 most recent podcasts.
- DownloadRadio.org, www.downloadradio.org. A directory of radio programs available as podcasts.
- iPodder.org, www.ipodder.org. A directory of podcasts arranged by categories, including law.
- iPodderX Podcast Directory, <http://iPodderX.com>. A searchable directory that is also indexed by category. It includes listings for law.
- PodcastAlley.com, www.podcastalley.com. Lists podcasts by genre, but has no category for law.
- Podcast Central, www.podcastcentral.com. An underinclusive and uncategorized list of podcasts.
- PodCasters.org, www.podcasters.org. General information on podcasting, with a short list of podcast feeds.
- Podcasting Directory, www.podcastdirectory.com. A list of podcasts.
- Podcasting News, www.podcastnews.com. Includes a directory of podcasts by category, including law and government.
- Podcast.net, www.podcast.net.

A directory of podcasts arranged by topic, it includes “Politics and Government” and “Crime and Law.”

• PodFly.com, www.podfly.com. Calling itself “The Podcasting Portal,” it includes a topical directory of podcasts, but no headings related to law.

• Potkast.com, www.potkast.com.

A nicely organized topical directory of podcasts, but with no categories for law.

Portable audiocasts for lawyers are nothing new. At least one company, LawCast, www.lawcast.com, has offered

subject-specific legal news programming for years on cassettes and CDs. But podcasting, like blogging, offers both immediacy and personality — features prepackaged audio recording can never duplicate.

Is it the future of CLE?
Time will tell. **LITN**