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Mobile Legal Research: Do we NEED an app for that?

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At the American Association of Law Libraries conference in July 2010, the Thomson Reuters exhibit booth included a section dedicated to mobile computing. Somewhat surprisingly, they did not feature apps for legal research. Instead the focus was on content designed for flexible display on multiple device types.

In the mobile computing section they had a Kindle, iPad, Blackberry, and iPhone primarily to show Westlaw in a browser (or Kindle's ebook format). In talking to people at the booth, it sounded like device-specific apps were not a market focus (perhaps a form of "*app*voidance"). Yes, Black's Law Dictionary was out on the iPad, but they did not show off anything more.

A month after the conference, Thomson Reuters launched the WestlawNext iPad app. Current marketing touts mobile access to WestlawNext that is suitable on four major smartphone platforms. At right is a screen shot from the native iPad app as well as WestlawNext in Apple's Safari browser. The iPad app does not let you send documents to your Kindle, and in fact does not let you download or print items directly, as shown in the highlighted screen element in each.

Using this as a starting point, below I suggest arguments *for* and *against* using apps for mobile legal research. The focus is not on a specific service or provider, but on the question of "app vs. browser."

Arguments in Favor of Native Apps

Device-Specific Controls
The Oyez project is a great place to find information about the Supreme Court, including recordings of oral arguments, histories of votes and information on the justices. On the iPhone, the Oyez app "Pocket Justice" packages selected Supreme Court content for quick browsing and interactive analysis. One of the most impressive features of the app is that oral argument transcripts are integrated with many of their corresponding recordings. This would be difficult to replicate on a browser.
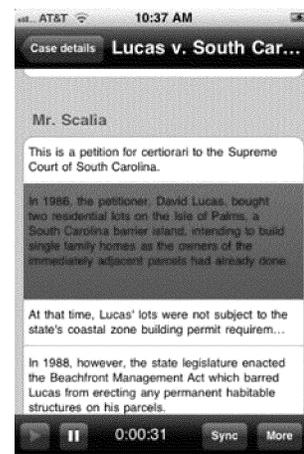

Above: Native iPad app. Below: WestlawNext in Apple's Safari browser.
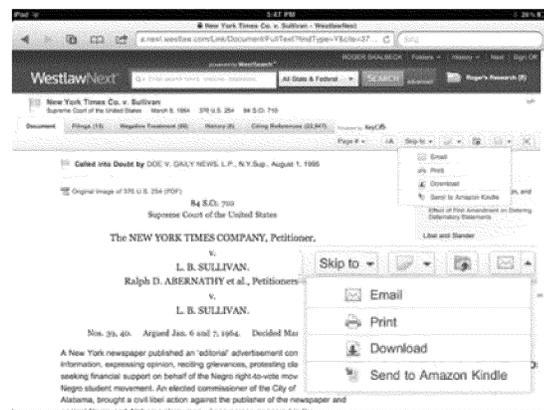
The Pocket Justice app also shows that curated content can be a great way to showcase important legal research sources.

Example: Pocket Justice from Oyez

Narrowly-Focused Tasks

Quick information access is the hallmark of most native mobile apps. If you have a narrow information need, it is often simple to answer a ready reference question or verify laws quickly. Also, if these needs are recurring, an app can be very helpful.

Two examples of narrowly-focused legal research apps include LexisNexis Get Cases and the FastCase app for the iPhone and iPad. Each provides quick access to important legal research content.

iPhone Examples:
LexisNexis Get Cases and FastCase
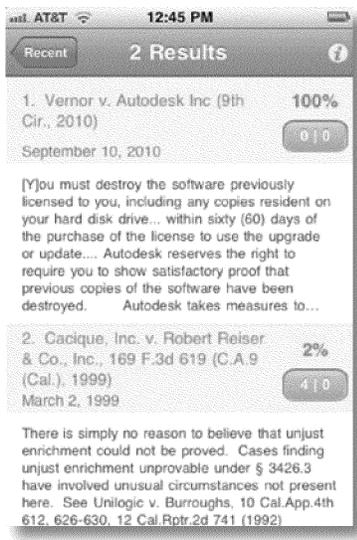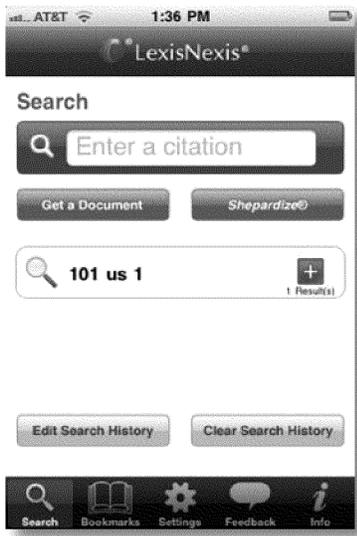
Local File Storage

Storage on most smartphones often exceeds several gigabytes of space. Though media files and photographs could compete for use of this space, there should be plenty of space left for locally-stored data. Most legal information is textual, so even a few megabytes could easily contain hundreds if not thousands of pages.

Two examples of apps using local storage include Black's Law Dictionary and Law Stack. Law Stack is a platform for accessing legal texts, including those they sell (*e.g.* $20 for Title 20 of the CFR). Because all data is stored locally, there are no data transmission concerns and you can do anything you might do with an electronic book, including search text and bookmark entries.

Arguments in Favor of Browser-Based Research Tools

Multi-Tasking
Performing legal research is a task frequently done in tandem with multiple sources and tools. Efficient legal researchers need to be able to switch between sources and copy/paste quotes into word processing, email or between electronic texts. With a native app like WestlawNext for the iPad, copying text to paste into a note or email message ends your session, interrupting workflow. Surprisingly, even after multi-tasking was added to the iPad, WestlawNext even stops the audio in native Apple music playback.

Admittedly, multi-tasking is more efficient on almost any laptop than it is on the iPad, so multi-tasking for now is an argument against most complex mobile research tasks.

Uniform Source Interaction
Once you are used to tools available in a web browser, it is difficult to interact with the same content in another platform. Whether using Safari on an iPhone or even Internet Explorer on your desktop, you can quickly get used to the way to interact with content. When common interaction options are missing in an app, this can be frustrating.

A common iPhone interaction is "pinch to zoom" in Safari to read content more closely. Unfortunately, interaction options in mobile apps often differ from those available in a browser on the same platform. For instance, on the iPhone neither the Wikipedia app nor the FastCase app let you zoom in on text or rotate the screen to view in landscape mode.

Hypertext Links

When legal research tools are viewed in a browser, it means they can exist in a platform where the entire web is available. Certainly Lexis will not link to statutes from Cornell's Legal Information Institute. Nonetheless, legal research tools inevitably link to things on the Internet.

When you experience this content in a browser, there is no need to hand off requests from an app to a browser and back again. Your research can flow as easily from source to source in a mobile web browser as it does on your desktop.

Bookmarks

Bookmarks are a fundamental feature of most browser programs. They give you fast access to sites you find one day and want to access again in the future. Unfortunately it is not possible to synchronize bookmarks between your desktop and mobile phone easily. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that native apps do not support browser bookmarks in any fashion.

Long-term: Plugins and Extensions

Mobile web browsers still lack many features of their desktop companions. They generally do not support tabbed browsing and there are few, if any, plugin applications or extensions. Eventually we may see mobile browsers provide as many functions as you see in Google's Chrome browser or Mozilla's Firefox. When that day comes we may have many more reasons to use legal research tools in the browser.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the question remains whether we NEED native apps for legal research. The perhaps unremarkable answer is both yes and no. We need instant access to focused content and custom interaction that is currently best provided in apps developed for a specific platform. At the same time, efficient researchers need the flexibility and predictability of information available through a web browser, whether mobile or not. LLL