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Law Libraries and Options Galore

by Gail F. Zwirner

As I listened in October to news coverage of Americans struggling with access to the Affordable Care Act insurance exchanges, I thought about the communications challenges in instructing library users on all the research options we have today. We are in information overload, and more than ever researchers need help to determine the most effective research strategies.

When I discuss with my law school students their best option — perhaps a print source, Internet, or paid online services — I ask them to think about how they will use the information and what sources are available to them.

- Will the client pay for online searches?
- Does the researcher need a treatise that is accessible in one vendor's service but not in another?
- Does the researcher need an official source to submit for an exhibit?
- Will the researcher need 19th or early 20th century sources that are available only in print?
- Does the researcher need to use the appropriate source for citation to satisfy Bluebook standards?
- Does the researcher need to read a recent law review article to catch up on the latest issues in a certain practice area where an Internet or online option will work?

Let me illustrate my point with a couple of examples. A practitioner called the reference desk saying he was having trouble finding a Virginia decision that ruled a person cannot burglarize his own home. He was using a free database of Virginia case law. I thought a secondary source would be a good starting point and told him I would call him back. I pulled *Criminal Offenses and Defenses in Virginia*, one of the Virginia Practice Series titles, and found the answer in a few seconds. When I looked at the footnote for the authority, I found the decision was from 1884. The database the attorney was using did not have the depth of coverage to find that decision. I returned the call and suggested he use the print

source or its availability in Westlaw. He called me back to say he succeeded.

In another example, a law review draft article included references to hearings. The student needed a source for a proper citation. There are many online options for legislative history, but in this case, the best source was the microfiche that reproduced the official print source of the hearings that included the pinpoint pagination. Of all the recommendations I make, microfiche is not the most popular, but in this rare case, it was the only option.

We librarians deal daily with online vendors competing to add more databases. One online vendor claims that its system contains more than 36,000 databases. The challenge for law librarians is to remember which vendor has added which sources. Most researchers become proficient in one system, despite law librarians' efforts to cross-train law students on various systems. Seasoned researchers can make obvious links from a Lexis publication in print to the Lexis online version, West to Westlaw, and BNA to Bloomberg. But the logic of going to LexisNexis to find a Matthew Bender treatise escapes recent generations of researchers unaware of the connections between the publishing houses. Tell a library user that Practising Law Institute materials have moved from Westlaw to Bloomberg and the regular response is, "How do you keep up with all these changes?"

Six Virginia librarians provide a range of articles for this issue on topics including a survey of the Virginia and Federal judiciary on appellate research lessons, sources on e-discovery, researching ethics issues, research apps, a historic piece about the 150th anniversary of the Virginia/West Virginia debt issue stemming from West Virginia independence, and in special honor of the 40th anniversary of the Virginia Law Foundation, a review of its indispensable CLE handbooks, hands down favorites among Virginia's practitioners.