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Practicing Law Librarianship: A Wiki Wiki (Quick) Introduction to the Wide World of Wikis

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Whenever wikis come up in conversation, everyone seems to have the same question:

“What’s a wiki?” Is it the shuttle bus at the Honolulu Airport? A mountain in Alaska? A major league baseball player?

All of these happen to be wikis, according to Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki_%28disambiguation%29). On the Internet, however, a wiki is a powerful content management application that law libraries can use for research and to organize their own projects. Ward Cunningham, the creator of the first wiki, defines it as “[t]he simplest online database that could possibly work” (http://wiki.org/wiki.cgi?WhatIsWiki).

More specifically, a wiki is “a server-based collaborative tool that allows any authorized user to edit Web pages and create new ones using nothing more than a Web browser and a text entry form on a Web page,” say Brenda Chawner and Paul H. Lewis in their article, “WikiWikiWebs: New Ways to Communicate in a Web Environment” in the March 2006 Information Technology and Libraries. The term is based on the Hawaiian word “wikiwiki,” which means “fast, speedy; to hurry, hasten; quick, fast, swift,” as defined by Bo Leuf and Ward Cunningham in The Wiki Way: Quick Collaboration on the Web.

The most well known wiki is undoubtedly Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org). This online encyclopedia features more than 3.8 million articles—more than a million of which are in English. Anyone can edit the entries in Wikipedia by clicking the “edit this page” tab at the top of the screen. Under the “history” tab, users track the evolution of articles and perhaps even revert content to an earlier version. Wikipedia also features a “discussion” tab, where users can debate issues raised in the encyclopedia’s entries. Researchers can use the search box to easily find entries and then find related articles using hyperlinks. Other wikis generally feature these same resources, although they may use different terms.

Like e-mail, shared folders, and discussion servers, wikis are a form of online collaboration, explain Leuf and Cunningham. Wikis are designed to use the strength of collective intelligence to organize all that is known about particular topics. Working together, wiki writers can analyze a topic in detail, correct any errors, and update information. Wikis are not carefully crafted sites for casual visitors, but instead involve visitors in “an ongoing process of creation and collaboration that constantly changes the Web site landscape,” write Leuf and Cunningham.

While wikis’ use of collective knowledge is often seen as their greatest strength, this reliance is also their greatest weakness. Malicious users sometimes edit entries with deliberately false information, as happened last year when one contributor to Wikipedia edited a biography to fallaciously link its subject to the Kennedy assassination, according to Janet Kornblum in the December 7, 2005, edition of USA Today (www.usatoday.com/tech/news/techpolicy/2005-12-06-wikipedia-truth_x.htm).

Worse, some wikis have been inundated with WikiSpam. This form of spam includes wiki entries that are added for the sole purpose of advertising. Legitimate content is replaced with commercial links similar to those now found in blog comments and online guestbooks, according to Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Spam).

Wikis in Research

Recently, an article in Reference and User Services Quarterly analyzed Wikipedia according to the criteria set out by the late Bill Katz in Introduction to Reference Work. Not surprisingly, the online encyclopedia “does not stand up well to the kind of scrutiny typically applied in evaluation of reference resources,” writes Danny P. Wallace and Connie Van Fleet in “The Democratization of Information: Wikipedia as a Reference Resource” (Reference & User Services Quarterly). That said, Wikipedia and similar wikis could be used for research, if with some caution. Wikis can quickly locate extensive background material, can lead to useful resources in other venues, and can thoroughly analyze current events. The discussion section of a wiki article focusing on a subject of recent interest may be as enlightening as the entry itself.

Researchers looking for general information might find Wikipedia useful. Many wikis, however, focus on more specific topics. Wikinews (http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Main_Page), for example, provides background information and resources for current events. Wikitravel (http://wikitravel.org/en/Main_Page) includes thousands of destination guides. Other wikis focus on favorite bands, popular television shows, and even recipes.

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to the Wide World of Wikis

application for research and to organize projects

by Deborah Ginsberg

Until recently, few wikis focused on law or legal issues. Even today, there are not many legal wikis, and some still lack content. Even so, legal wikis are steadily growing, and even those that are small are worth examining.

One of the most recently created law wikis is WikiLaw (www.wikilaw.org), which "hopes to develop a free legal resource for the world at large, with its initial focus on United States law." The site does not have a specific plan to add content but simply asks, "Please find an area with which you are familiar, click edit, and start adding content." A few areas, like the section covering administrative law, already have content. But because it is very new, much of the site's pages are empty.

Another recent addition to legal wikis, Wikilaw (with a lowercase "l"), features more formally structured content and goals. Its creators hope to tap into the collective knowledge of the world's millions of lawyers (http://wiki-law.org/mwiki/index.php?title=Main_Page). This knowledge is broken into subject areas, such as a dictionary, a section for state statutes, and a section for forms. Wikilaw also hosts Wiki Democracy, a project that invites participants to answer, "If there were no laws in the United States, what laws would you impose on America?" Additional Wiki Democracy sites include the United Kingdom, Canada, and Utopia, according to the site. Like the first WikiLaw, this wiki does not yet contain a great deal of content; however, the site was completely restructured in late April 2006 to include many new features like blogs and law firm profiles.

JurisPedia (www.jurispedia.org) is a legal wiki that features articles on the law of other countries, as well as the law of the United States. Articles are available in several languages, including French and Arabic. Because JurisPedia is an open wiki, however, researchers should carefully evaluate any information found there. For example, at the time this article was written, JurisPedia's article on abortion in the United States was biased towards one side of the debate ("Abortion (us)" http://en.jurispedia.org/index.php/Abortion_%28us%29).

Wex (www.law.cornell.edu/wex/index.php/Main_Page), from the Cornell Law School's Legal Information Institute, is one of the best examples of a "collaboratively built, freely available legal dictionary and encyclopedia." Wex's content is already quite extensive. More importantly, Wex uses only authors that are deemed qualified, according to the site's "Editorial contributions" (www.law.cornell.edu/wex/index.php/Editorial_contributions). While this means that Wex is not as democratic as other wikis, it is presumably a more reliable reference source.

Wikis in Libraries

Ultimately, libraries may find wikis are best used not for research but to organize resources and projects. While wikis are not new technology (the first wiki server was created by Ward Cunningham in 1994), only recently have libraries recognized them as useful tools.

Some libraries, like the Butler University Libraries, are using wikis to provide services to their patrons. The Butler WikiRef (www.seedwiki.com/wiki/buter_wikiref) organizes the libraries' electronic resources in a wiki format. Patrons are encouraged to not only use the wiki to find databases and other Internet sites, but also to comment on their experiences. The librarians at Butler hope to use the information gathered from this wiki to analyze which resources patrons find most useful.

Other libraries are using wikis to create intranets and organize internal documents. For example, the University of Connecticut Libraries has created a wiki for its information technology resources (http://wiki.lib.uconn.edu/wiki/Main_Page). Articles encompass everything from basic Outlook instructions to creating a blog. By placing these resources in a wiki, staff can easily find solutions to IT issues, as well as quickly update content and add new information. Those libraries that do not wish to share proprietary information can put their wikis behind firewalls or passwords.

Universities have also started using wikis, most notably in the classroom. One professor assigned his students the arduous task of writing their own textbook, a job made much easier by structuring the text around a wiki. Students in later semesters were then able to easily revise and update the online textbook, according to "The Wiki Factor," by Phillip Evans, published in the January/February 2006 issue of BizEd.

While not many law schools have official wikis, some law students have created unofficial wikis for their fellow classmates. Students at Wake Forest University School of Law, for example, have started a wiki to post sample exams, case briefs, class notes, and study guides (within

The Wide World of Wikis

Butler WikiRef
www.seedwiki.com/wiki/buter_wikiref

Edit This
http://editthis.info

JotSpot
www.jotspot.com

JurisPedia
www.jurispedia.org

LawLibWiki
www.editthis.info/lawlibrary/index.php/Main_Page

Seedwiki
www.seedwiki.com

University of Connecticut Libraries' Staff Wiki
http://wiki.lib.uconn.edu/wiki/Main_Page

Wake Law Information Exchange
http://wakelawexchange.org

Wex
www.law.cornell.edu/wex/index.php/Main_Page

WikiLaw
www.wikilaw.org

WikiMatrix
www.wikimatrix.org

Wikinews
http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Main_Page

Wikipedia
www.wikipedia.org

WikiTravel
http://wikitravel.org/en/Main_Page

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the confines of the school's honor code, of course). The Wake Law Information Exchange (http://wakelawexchange.org) offers many benefits to participating students, not the least of which is a free back-up system. “My laptop was stolen last semester and all of my school work was gone,” confesses the wiki's founder. “Luckily I had just uploaded everything I had onto this site one day before my house was broken into. Because I had backed up my files on the site, I was able to recover it all.”

Creating a Wiki

Like Weblogs, wikis can be created using a variety of applications. Before creating a wiki, libraries should review the available software. Wikimatrix (www.wikimatrix.org), an online assessment tool, invites users to compare many wiki applications in detail.

Important considerations when selecting an application include where the wiki is to be hosted, who will have access to the wiki, and how technologically savvy the wiki's users are. Many open-source wiki applications, such as MediaWiki (the application used by Wikipedia) are available free of charge. Installing these applications, however, can require a great deal of technical expertise and possibly even a dedicated server.

Fortunately, many wikis can be created directly on the Internet through sites that host wikis (called "wiki farms"). EditThis (http://editthis.info) offers users free wikis using the MediaWiki application. Seedwiki (www.seedwiki.com) uses its own application to create free open public wikis. The company charges for closed private wikis. JotSpot (www.jotspot.com), offering one of the more graphical interfaces available for a wiki, is one of the easiest applications to use. The site's users can create a free public or private wiki with up to 20 pages and five users. JotSpot charges for larger wikis and user groups.

Some wiki applications allow their users a great deal of authority control, which is often essential when designing wikis for managing internal documentation. JotSpot, for example, not only allows users to create private wikis, but it also allows the formation of user groups that have different levels of access.

One of the more daunting features of wikis is their syntax. Wiki advocates often tout that users do not need to know HTML to edit a wiki. In many cases, however, users must instead learn special wiki syntax, such as using single brackets ([ ]) to create links to outside resources and double brackets ([[ ]]) to create links to other pages in the wiki and to create new pages. Worse still, wiki syntax is not consistent across wiki applications; instead of brackets, some wiki applications use CamelCase—putting together two capitalized words—to designate a new page in the wiki. Fortunately, many wiki applications, including JotSpot and Seedwiki, now include powerful online editors that work like word processors.

The Future of Law Libraries and Wikis

The second question that arises when discussing wikis is, what can they do for us? Wikis assist with research and organize library projects. But can they do more?

Law librarianship is in a unique position to take advantage of all that wikis have to offer. Wikis that attempt to gather everything that is known about the law, while an interesting concept, may not work very well in the long run. Wikis' inherent lack of authority would keep many researchers away from general law wikis. Moreover, such wikis would be in competition with well-established and quite extensive commercial databases.

Legal research wikis, on the other hand, would be of great use to our patrons. They could be used in academic libraries to teach research concepts. They could be used in law firm libraries to showcase underused resources. Some day, we should all share our collective knowledge of legal research and law librarianship in a Wikipedia-like resource, each of us contributing with our particular area of expertise.

Deborah Ginsberg (dginsberg@kentlaw.edu) is the electronic resources librarian at the Illinois Institute of Technology Downtown Campus Library, which serves the Chicago-Kent College of Law. She spoke about wikis at the 2005 and 2006 AALL Annual Meetings. She also created a wiki for law libraries, LawLibWiki, available at www.editthis.info/law/library/index.php/Main_Page.

Showcase the Library, Too

Of course, you can (and should) use these holidays and anniversaries to highlight interesting facts about your library as well. These facts can easily relate to the theme at hand, such as notable subject-based collections or online databases. Alternately, you can compare your library then with your library today. How many librarians were employed at your library then as compared with today? What was the education level of librarians then compared with today? What was the price of a book then compared with the price of a database today? The possibilities are endless.

Strategies for different audiences will naturally differ. But it is important to remember that our audiences—be they lawyers and pro se patrons, law professors and law students, or judges and clerks—are generally more interested in the substance of law than the idiosyncrasies of information management. In marketing ourselves, we should remember the values and goals of our intended audience and fashion our PR activity around their values and goals, not our own. Although that may seem obvious, it is often too easy to design PR materials that appeal to librarians, but puzzle others.

The most important thing to recognize is that these holidays and historical anniversaries open the door to the library. They are upbeat celebrations that catch people's attention and bring them to the library. It is up to us to make the best use of the positive connection we create. Now that we have their attention, what do we want to tell them?

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