

Finding not seeking: Law on the UK's Social Science Information Gateway

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Making sense of the legal Internet

Global expansion in both electronic publication and public service publication on the web now offers researchers a wide range of legal materials and law related resources. As a result the web is rapidly becoming the preferred source of information for users who resort to traditional hard copy materials only in the absence of reliable electronic alternatives. Unfortunately, despite continuing development of Internet search engines, a high percentage of the information available on the web is hidden, not indexed and not evaluated for quality, so law teachers, practitioners and students cannot always afford the time required to trace relevant sites and consider their authority, currency or coverage.

A co-operative project in the United Kingdom called the Resource Discovery Network (RDN) (<http://www.rdn.ac.uk>) is working to help resolve some of these quality issues and maximise the benefits of the Internet information revolution. The RDN is developing services to help people find the materials they need without wasting time searching and waiting.



The RDN provides effective access to high-quality Internet resources through a variety of quality filtering facilities tailored to the needs of subject communities in each of the key disciplines.

RDN Internet Resource Catalogues are built on inter-operable, open source web technologies, supporting descriptive databases using metadata formats, formal classification schemes, appropriate selection criteria, and expert evaluation by distributed teams of subject specialist editors.

The Social Science Information Gateway (<http://www.sosig.ac.uk>), one of the main portal services participating in the Resource Discovery Network project, aims to help users make sense of the Internet in the fields of business, social science and law. SOSIG guides users to reliable sources that are selected, evaluated, described and organised by people with proven information skills rather than web robots. SOSIG is a free collaborative service run and developed by the Institute for Learning and Research Technology at the University of Bristol (<http://www.ilrt.bris.ac.uk>), working

with a team of information and Internet specialists at a number of universities and institutes in the United Kingdom.

The SOSIG Internet Catalogue contains over 14,000 descriptive records of selected web-accessible sites and materials classified under more than 900 subject headings and supplemented by an automatic search tool linking to more than 100,000 other sites. The service facilitates access to resources such as: primary legal documents (legislation, law reports and treaties), governmental bodies and documents, professional organisations (such as bar councils and law societies) electronic journals, companies (including solicitors' and barristers' sites) and educational materials (such as items published by research centres and projects).

Indications are that the service is succeeding in attracting and supporting a growing number of users. Analysis of usage and access data has revealed that there are 1 million page accesses per month to SOSIG. Over 25% of this usage is from the UK. 97% of UK Higher Education Institutions link to SOSIG and there are 10,000 links to the SOSIG main page.

The Law Gateway and its services

The University of London's Institute of Advanced Legal Studies (<http://ials.sas.ac.uk>) has a leading role in developing the law section of the Social Science Information Gateway. A small team of librarians at IALS has been working, in partnership with the University of Bristol, to establish an important service for the legal community within the UK and internationally.

The Law Gateway (<http://www.sosig.ac.uk/law>) is a freely available web-based database of high quality legal information sources on the Internet. The service provides specialist guidance and ready access to global legal information resources, concentrating on sites that can support academic and professional work.



The service is designed with legal people in mind, aiming to help law students, lecturers, researchers and the legal profession with their studies, research and current awareness needs.

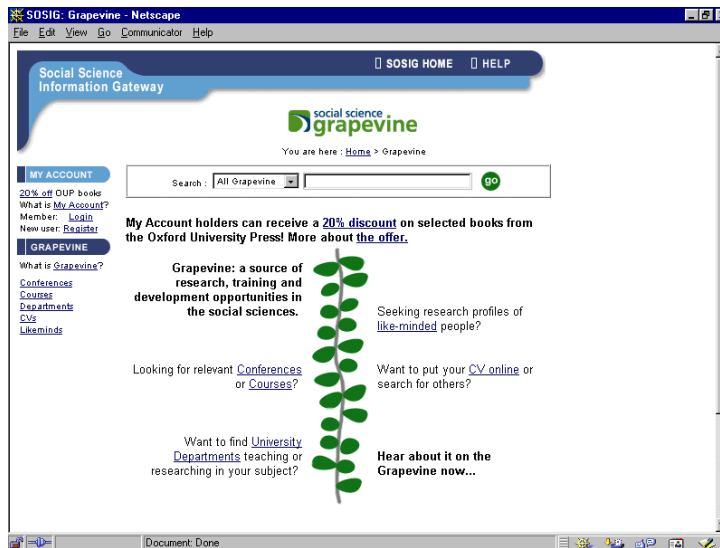
The Law Gateway offers expert descriptions and links to resource sites publishing primary and secondary legal materials and to specific documents of legal interest; helping to make it easier to find useful sites for a full range of countries and legal subject areas.



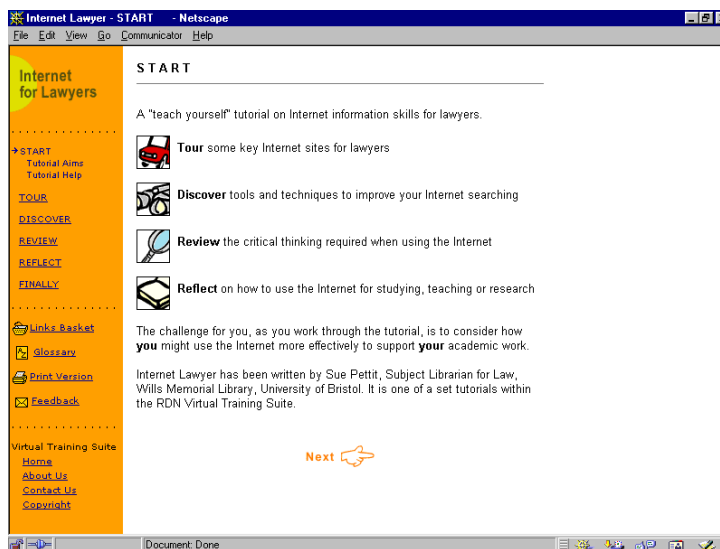
The sites are organised into jurisdictional and topical sections, emulating a legal research library and giving appropriate weight and ease of access to the primary materials stating the law and secondary materials commenting on law that are the substance of legal research. Within each section users can elect to display resources alphabetically by title or alphabetically within pre-defined types or categories such as Documents: Legislation. They can link directly to the resource or consult a descriptive record to consider the appropriateness of that resource to their work.



Additional service components have been added to the Gateway to help build links between different members of the legal community in different areas of law and in different countries. "My Account" and "Grapevine" are optional features that allow users to register personal and professional details on the Gateway, publish information about conferences or courses they are organising as well as their own cv or research interests. An e-mail notification service helps registered users keep track of new additions to the Gateway in self-selected areas of subject interest.



The Gateway also links directly to an interactive tutorial called "Internet for Lawyers". The tutorial outlines ways to conduct legal research with practical examples on how to test the quality of legal materials on the Internet.



Involvement with the SOSIG Law Gateway project has been demanding and rewarding. Intensive efforts at the IALS in the first year have concentrated on developing the structure and content of the service. An enthusiasm for the venture and belief in its value allowed us to exceed targets in resource evaluation, record creation and make useful progress in developing the gateway as an effective national resource for global legal research.

Functionality - Using the Law Gateway

The service is establishing itself as a teaching aid for lecturers and law course tutors. Feedback has shown that the Gateway is being used to complement teaching and study programs and assist with inter-disciplinary research.

Encouraging international interest in the project has highlighted the importance of a sound technical infrastructure, appropriate methodology, and distributed editorial expertise.

SOSIG utilises the ROADS (Resource Organisation and Discovery in Subject-based Services) (<http://www.roads.lut.ac.uk>) suite of web database software and tools, providing the necessary technical infrastructure for a project on this scale. ROADS was originally developed as part of the UK Electronic Libraries Programme (eLib) by a consortium including the Institute for Learning and Research Technology at the University of Bristol, and the UK Office of Library and Information Networking at the University of Bath, with the bulk of the software development being done by the Department of Computer Science at Loughborough University.

ROADS is a set of free, open source software and standards designed specifically for Internet gateway development. ROADS is written in Perl to run on any UNIX or LINUX based system. WHOIS++ and Z39.50 are used to link distributed databases and provide interoperability between services. The software provides for reliability and systematic update, including essential facilities to identify duplicate records, check the currency of links, track and repair broken links, prompt for record review and generate search statistics.

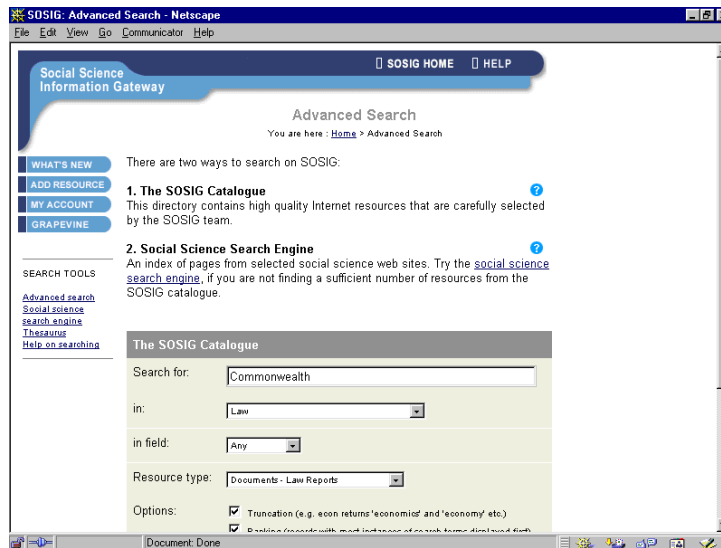
Browsing and Searching

A strength of the Social Science Information Gateway lies in the integrated range of search and browse features offered to users. ROADS enables the system to combine subject specific search options with classified browsability. Users can extend their awareness of a topic, review items of the same type or discover related materials in adjacent subject fields as well as pinpoint particular documents or texts.

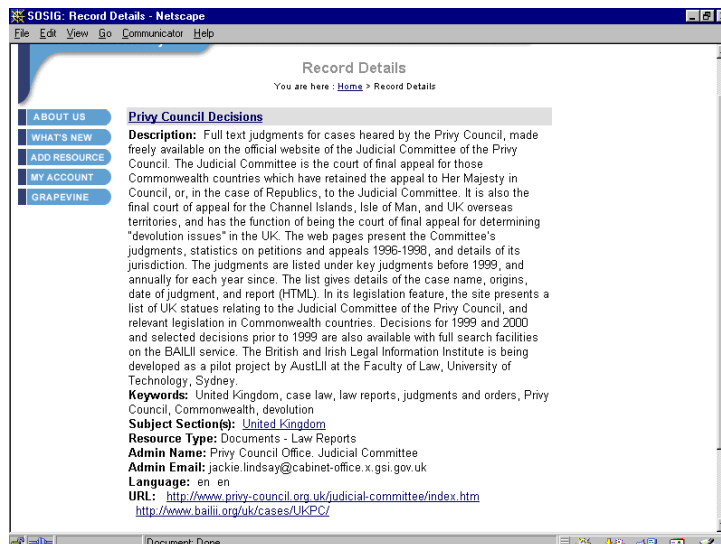
Major browse sections in the Law Gateway include: United Kingdom law, European Union law, Other Individual Jurisdictions, Law by subject area and General law. Users can gain an overview of the size and scope of the service, aided by a hierarchy that helps navigate back and forth from parent sections to subsections.

We know that researchers are very familiar with making bibliographic searches of online library catalogues and have applied this approach when searching the Internet via favourite search engines. The SOSIG Law Gateway provides its own search options. A goal of the service is to offer legal researchers search facilities with more precision and relevant subject coverage than can be achieved with Internet-wide search engines, so people spend more of their time finding and using materials and less time searching and testing results.

A search box with a range of sophisticated features is included on each browsing screen. Users can type one or more terms in the search box and click go. The search is dynamic, adjusting its scope according to the section or subsection in which it is initiated. A search may be restricted to the Law Gateway or extended to the complete SOSIG Internet catalogue.



Advanced options enable users to search for law specific resources. The search form can be modified to search for a particular type of resource such as Legislation or Law Reports. Users can make field specific searches, create queries using basic Boolean logic operators, adjust truncation settings and employ alternative terminology from a specialist legal thesaurus.



Users value the descriptive records outlining the qualities of the sites, uncovering hidden materials, sources of legal texts, online commentaries and official reports. Words in the description are included in the default search of the gateway, helping users to trace less obvious material from less likely sources. A full record option confirms the authority and quality of the source, giving quick access to e-mail and contact details for those responsible for the site.

The description helps users make decisions about the appropriateness of the site to their work. The site description explains the nature of the resource, the format in which the information is presented and says whether it forms part of a series or wider collection. It tells the user who is providing the information and why. The description also indicates the subject coverage and content of the site with a note of geographical or temporal limits and details of any special operational features such as plug-in software requirements or restricted areas and charging implications.

In the first year registered users of the "My Account" facility have been particularly interested in resources relating to: human and civil rights, criminal law and

criminology, European Union law, social welfare law, UK law, International law, employment law, environmental law, commercial law, intellectual property law and women and law.

The project has enjoyed interest and support from groups such as the City Legal Information Group (CLIG), Socio-legal Studies Association (SLSA) and Arbeitsgemeinschaft für juristisches Bibliotheks- und Dokumentationswesen (AjBD) whose members are increasingly aware of SOSIG as a trusted source for law, as well as social science and business resources. A presentation at the International Association of Law Libraries (IALL) conference in Dublin in August 2000 has been followed by collaboration in principle and practice with AustLII's World Law service, Cornell's InSITE service, and the American Society of International Law's EISIL project.

Future developments

Ongoing advice and support from our growing user base within the UK and enthusiastic international responses have underlined the importance of the new service and provide renewed momentum and purpose to the work ahead.

Our planning for the next 12 months will build on this success, focusing especially on reaching new users and discovering their needs for efficient Internet research tools in the field of law. With the core features in place we are entering an exciting stage for the project. We plan to extend our range, to increase coverage and usefulness, to raise further awareness of the service and stimulate further interest and input from academic, government and professional lawyers and their students.

A team of specialists at the University of Birmingham recently joined the SOSIG project to develop a new subject section dedicated to European Studies that will complement the Law Gateway's coverage of European Union and European nation state sources.

The ascent of web technologies and digital sources, supported by the development of local websites and WebPac library catalogues provide an opportunity which we plan to pursue in the next phase of the project. We will be exploring options for WebPac integration offered by Z39.50 technology. The aim will be to enable users to search on a library catalogue for onsite material in the home library and then elect to extend the same search to the Law Gateway to discover and link to relevant materials on the Internet. Such a facility would bring the Law Gateway closer to its users and enable them to make use of Internet resources in the context of local print and electronic sources, enabling them to appreciate and utilise the full range of materials available on library shelves and via web workstations.

SOSIG is already working with a number of UK organisations to develop cross search facilities with other databases. The result will enable SOSIG to be searched with: COPAC (Combined OPACs of major UK universities <http://copac.ac.uk>); IBSS (International Bibliography of the Social Sciences <http://www.lse.ac.uk/IBSS/>); REGARD (Database of the ESRC awards <http://www.regard.ac.uk>); and ZETOC (British Library's current awareness services <http://zetoc.mimas.ac.uk/>)

In an age of increasing international information transfer, socio-legal action and economic and political globalisation, we believe that the SOSIG Law Gateway will be well placed to help researchers to find the most relevant, accurate and up-to-date resources and ensure that the expansion of the Internet continues to have a positive impact on the professional life and work of UK and international legal communities.

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A guide to the Law Gateway is posted on SOSIG as PDF files in colour and black
and white versions (http://www.sosig.ac.uk/about_us/user_support.html).