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Web Watch: The 10 Best Sites of the Decade

By **Robert J. Ambrogi**

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Happy 10th anniversary, Law Technology News. To mark the occasion, I was asked to devote this issue's column to a review of the 10 best legal Web sites of the last 10 years.

My initial thought was: Could I ever narrow the field to 10? But another thought quickly followed: Can I come up with even 10 that deserve such an honor?

Internet years are like dog years – a decade is a long time. And it was 10 years ago that I started writing a column about lawyers and the Internet. As I looked back, I kept returning to a handful of sites that shared one characteristic – each in its own way defined a genre, setting the bar for others that followed.

When I thought of "best" that way, it became much easier to narrow the field. Perhaps the better word is "influential." They may not all be "best" by today's standards, but each substantially influenced how lawyers use the Web.

Findlaw, www.findlaw.com. If you could bookmark only one legal site, it would have to be FindLaw. What started in 1994 as a list of Internet resources prepared for a librarians' workshop grew into the best starting point for finding legal information on the Web. Its core has always been the free Findlaw Guide, a comprehensive index of links to practice resources, caselaw, codes, legal associations, law reviews and more. Today, nearly three years after its purchase by West Group, it is more polished and diverse, but it is still free to use and remains the best starting point for finding legal information on the Internet.



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Legal Information Institute, www.law.cornell.edu. Cornell Law School's Legal Information Institute pioneered legal publishing on the Internet. Started in 1992, its mission was to experiment with using hypertext to publish legal materials online. It established the first law site on the Internet in 1992 and the first legal Web site in 1993. To facilitate use of the site, it developed one of the first Windows-based Web browsers, Cello.

It quickly became the leading site for distribution of Supreme Court opinions and later added decisions of the New York Court of Appeals. Over the years, it published a host of significant legal documents on the Web, including the U.S. Code, the Federal Rules of Evidence and Civil Procedure, and the Constitution. It continues to innovate today.

GPO Access, www.gpoaccess.gov. The Web site of the U.S. Government Printing Office, GPO Access set the standard for Internet access to government resources, publishing an exhaustive collection of federal materials online long before most were available anywhere else on the Web, and continuing to lead the way today. Early on, it was the source to turn to for the U.S. Code, the Federal Register, the Code of Federal Regulations, the Congressional Record, and countless other legislative and executive branch documents. Other government sites have been notable for their pioneering contributions – in particular Thomas and the Securities and Exchange Commission's EDGAR – but GPO Access stands out for its scope and innovation.

Law Journal EXTRA! and Counsel Connect. These two sites started as rivals, eventually merged and have now morphed into American Lawyer Media Inc.'s law.com. (ALM is the publisher of Law Technology News.) Both started as paid, dial-in services – Counsel Connect in 1993, followed by LJX a year later. But in 1995, in a move daring at the time, LJX took a fundamental turn, moving from dial-up to the Web, dropping its subscription, and offering the bulk of its content free. It would be another year before CC would begin its more gradual transition to the Web. By then, LJX had established itself as the premier legal news site, with articles from the National Law Journal, the New York Law Journal, and elsewhere, along with more than 30 practice-area sections and the most extensive collection at the time of federal appellate opinions.

But Counsel Connect, while also a news site, offered something that LJX could never replicate – a true online community. With its membership limited to lawyers, CC proved that the Internet could bridge state and national boundaries and unite lawyers in a community defined only by their common profession. It offered a range of content, but what made it a daily habit were its vibrant discussion groups, some organized around practice areas, some around interests, and at least one – Cracker Barrel – around sheer frivolity. As CC's then-president Mark Obbie put it in 1995, CC was an online community of lawyers "engaged in good, smart discussion." (Another disclosure: LTN editor Monica Bay worked at Counsel Connect during this time period.)

Ironically, near the end of 1997, the companies that owned LJX and Counsel Connect merged under the mantle of American Lawyer Media Inc. Soon, both services consolidated, initially as Law News Network and eventually becoming law.com.

VersusLaw, www.versuslaw.com. Not long after its 1995 launch, Web research service VersusLaw adopted the

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slogan, "Revolutionizing the way America does law." This was no exaggerated boast. In an era when online legal research still required expensive and cumbersome dial-up access to Westlaw and Lexis-Nexis, VersusLaw pioneered use of the Web to offer lawyers an alternative. At the time, it was the only place on the Internet where a lawyer could find housed under one roof decisions of the Supreme Court, all federal circuit courts and all 50 state appellate courts. In fact, it was the only place anywhere on the Web to find many of these courts' opinions. Most revolutionary of all, it was free. Today, it is no longer free, but at \$9.95 a month, it remains a good deal.

Advertising Law Internet Site, www.advertisinglaw.com. This site showed firms that content, not puffery, is key to success on the Web. In 1994, Lewis Rose, a partner with the Washington, D.C., firm Arent, Fox, Kintner, Plotkin & Kahn, decided to join the 10 or so lawyers with Web sites. The page he put up was little more than his resume, with links to articles he had written about advertising law. One day it occurred to him to flip the site to make it more interesting. He put the articles up front in place of his resume, and named it "The Advertising Law Internet Site."

"I think I was the first person to put up a horizontal site," Rose later told me. In Feb. 1995, PC Computing magazine came out with its first-ever listing of the top 100 Web sites, rating his 16th – the only law firm on the list. Rose has left Arent Fox, but the firm maintains the site. Other firms soon applied the lesson this site taught: content is key. (Another disclosure: my new employer, Jaffe Associates, has done work with Arent Fox.)

ABAnetwork, www.abanet.org. The Web site of the American Bar Association has been innovative since the day it debuted in 1995 and continues to be so today. It fulfills the requirements of an association site, of course, providing core information on membership, committees, officers and events. But it aspired to be more than a simple association site, to serve, instead, as a central resource on the law for both lawyers and consumers. At once practical and imbued with a sense of public service, it is a model for other national and state bars to emulate.

LLRX, www.llrx.com. Since its 1996 launch, LLRX, an innovative Webzine for legal professionals, has remained on the leading edge, spotting new trends, zeroing in on key developments, and often being first to report important news. The free site is updated monthly with insightful feature articles and regular columns on legal research, technology and management. Contributors include law librarians, attorneys and legal technology consultants.

It offers a rich archive of past issues and specialized research libraries and practice centers, and has long been legal professionals' best guide to the Internet.

Legalethics.com, www.legalethics.com. Look at this simple site today, and it may not be obvious that it was a trailblazer, setting a standard for public service among legal sites on the Web. In 1995, when the Internet remained a great uncertainty, it was created with a mission to help lawyers understand the unique ethical issues this new medium posed. It tracked state and local ethics rulings relating to the Internet, and maintained a comprehensive collection of ethics-related links – all at a time when these materials were not available elsewhere online. All this was done not to market some product or service, but to help lawyers be better lawyers and to help clients be better served.

Robert J. Ambrogi, a lawyer in Rockport, Mass., has joined Jaffe Associates as a vice president. (This is his final issue as managing editor of Law Technology News.) br> E-mail: rambrogi@legaline.com.
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