

2005

Cool Web Sites

Mary Whisner

University of Washington School of Law

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.uw.edu/librarians-articles>

 Part of the [Legal Writing and Research Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mary Whisner, *Cool Web Sites*, 97 LAW LIBR. J. 721 (2005), <https://digitalcommons.law.uw.edu/librarians-articles/39>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Librarians' Publications at UW Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Librarians' Articles by an authorized administrator of UW Law Digital Commons. For more information, please contact cnyberg@uw.edu.

Cool Web Sites*

Mary Whisner**

In the process of exploring cool Web sites—those that make her sit up and take notice—Ms. Whisner also comments on the hazards of writing about Web sites generally, some ways to find cool sites, and keeping track of them once you do.

¶1 Geez, there are a lot of cool Web sites. Of course, there are also a good number of sites that are dull or poorly organized or downright infuriating, but in this essay I want to celebrate the cool ones.

What's a Cool Web Site?

¶2 A cool Web site is one that makes me sit up and take notice. It presents information (or opinion or images) in a new way. It is interesting or useful. It is the sort of site that I want to show a colleague or friend and say: "Hey, look at this! Isn't that cool?" A cool site need not be new. There are some I still think of as cool years after I first saw them¹—and there are some that have been around for years before my discovering them.

¶3 Coolness in Web sites is a shifting concept (much like coolness in basketball shoes or hairstyles). Early in our Web experience—a dozen years ago, say—it seemed cool when a business or organization had a Web site at all, and we were happy to get even basic information. Now we're surprised when a business, school, or nonprofit group *doesn't* have a Web site.

* © Mary Whisner, 2005.

** Assistant Librarian for Reference Services, Marian Gould Gallagher Law Library, University of Washington School of Law, Seattle, Washington.

1. *E.g.*, Library of Congress, A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates 1774–1875, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lawhome.html> (visited June 22, 2005). Even though I have known about this site for years, visiting it again to create this footnote led to a discovery: INDIAN LAND CESSIONS IN THE UNITED STATES, 1784–1894 (Charles C. Royce comp., 1899), available at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwss-ilc.html>, which includes detailed information about Indian land cessions, an essay about the legal issues, and sixty-seven maps. Convenient lists in the digitized version enable browsing by date, by tribe, or by state. This is cool. In this case, my coolness meter went off because my law school has a strong interest in Indian law. I will send the link to Robert Anderson, the director of the Native American Law Clinic, who is an editor of the forthcoming new edition of *Felix S. Cohen's Handbook of Federal Indian Law*. Something made me check our catalog, and I discovered that the library also has this in print. Web sites aren't all that's cool—it's cool to have the original book too!

¶4 Coolness in Web sites is also subjective (again, like coolness in fashion). What appeals to me—say, because of my interest in legal history—might not interest you at all. And what appeals to you—say, because of your interest in securities markets—might not speak to me. You might favor bright colors while my esthetic is blander; you might like a site packed with options while I'm happy with a site that just does a couple of things.

Hazards of Writing about Web Sites

¶5 Writing about cool Web sites in a print journal is risky. First, there's the irony of it all—in some people's eyes print journals themselves are so uncool that the only appropriate forums for discussing cool Web sites would be blogs, webzines, and so on. This obviously isn't a problem for me: I like print and am happy to write for this print publication. If you're reading this—even if you're reading it online—you must still find something about the medium useful.

¶6 A more significant risk is link rot—the well-documented phenomenon of URLs no longer being valid within a short time of publication.² I hope that the sites I mention here are stable enough that they will still be up when this issue of *Law Library Journal* appears—and even beyond. (Dare we hope for a couple of years?) But the link rot issue inspires me to list as my first cool Web site the Internet Archive (www.archive.org), with its fabulous Wayback Machine. If you are unable to pull up a Web site—or if it does not have a document or feature that it used to have—you often can use the Wayback Machine to find a captured version of the site as it was at some earlier time. For example, after typing the URL of my library's Web site (<http://lib.law.washington.edu>) into the Wayback Machine, I could nostalgically look back at the site as it appeared the first time it was archived (January 25, 1999), as well as on various other dates.

¶7 There are limits to the Wayback Machine, though. I tried to look at the State Department's Web site (www.state.gov) as it was at the end of the Clinton administration and got this message: "Robots.txt Retrieval Exclusion. We're sorry, access to <http://www.state.gov/www/dept.html> has been blocked by the site owner via robots.txt." It turns out that owners of Web sites can tell the Internet Archive not to capture their sites.³ I don't know how common this is. In an unscientific study,

2. See, e.g., Mary Rumsey, *Runaway Train: Problems of Permanence, Accessibility, and Stability in the Use of Web Sources in Law Review Citations*, 94 *LAW LIBR. J.* 27, 2002 *LAW LIBR. J.* 2.

3. An FAQ explains:

The Standard for Robot Exclusion (SRE) is a means by which web site owners can instruct automated systems not to crawl their sites. Web site owners can specify files or directories that are disallowed from a crawl, and they can even create specific rules for different automated crawlers. All of this information is contained in a file called robots.txt. While robots.txt has been adopted as the universal standard for robot exclusion, compliance with robots.txt is strictly voluntary. In fact most web sites do not have a robots.txt file, and many web crawlers are not programmed to obey the instructions anyway. However, Alexa Internet, the company that crawls the web for the Internet Archive, does respect robots.txt instructions, and even does so retroactively. If a web site owner decides he/she prefers not to have a web crawler visiting his/

I tried a few sites and also got this message with www.ford.com—but not with www.un.org, www.usdoj.gov, www.cia.gov, www.enron.com, www.boeing.com, or www.apple.com (want to see how they described the Powerbook in 2001?).⁴ So this is a cool site—but it won't work every time.⁵

¶8 Another hazard of writing about cool Web sites has to do with authority. Who am I to say what sites are cool? I am online a fair bit each day, it's true, but I do not pretend to be a great Web maven. Plenty of people know a lot more than I do about legal information on the Web, Web site design, search engines, and more. This is not false modesty. The more knowledgeable people I allude to are not just techno-geeks off in Silicon Valley or Redmond—other librarians in my own department are more Web savvy than I am,⁶ as are law librarians I know from around the country.⁷ But my response to this issue is: why not? Although not a great authority on the topic, I do have a few observations that I think are worth sharing in print.

¶9 A significant challenge in offering a sample of cool Web sites is selection. There are so many, which should be highlighted? Here, I'll try to focus on ones that are useful to me as a law librarian, setting aside those that might be cool but are unlikely to be needed at work.⁸ Second, I'll exclude some cool sites that I think

her files and sets up robots.txt on the site, the Alexa crawlers will stop visiting those files and will make unavailable all files previously gathered from that site. This means that sometimes, while using the Internet Archive Wayback Machine, you may find a site that is unavailable due to robots.txt (you will see a “robots.txt query exclusion error” message). Sometimes a web site owner will contact us directly and ask us to stop crawling or archiving a site, and we endeavor to comply with these requests. When you come across a “blocked site error” message, that means that a siteowner has made such a request and it has been honored.

Internet Archive Wayback Machine, FAQs, <http://www.archive.org/about/faqs.php#2> (last visited July 10, 2005).

4. While recommending the Internet Archive for research—including such practical tasks as finding *superseded court rules*—Steven M. Cohen cautioned readers about sites that block the Archive, either through Robots.txt or by request. He gave the New York State Web site as an example. Steven M. Cohen, *Remember the Internet Archive for Historical Research*, LLRX.COM, Apr. 1, 2002, <http://www.llrx.com/features/internetarchive.htm>.

A couple of times other oddities appeared when I was trying different URLs in the Wayback Machine. For instance, when I tried to look at www.courttv.com from a few years ago (April 21, 2001), the Wayback Machine showed me a page that had the current date at the top (June 21, 2005), but stories from four years ago as the contents of the page.

5. Although robots.txt prevents researchers from seeing the old State Department Web site using the Wayback Machine, there are other ways to get that information. The State Department itself has a Permanent Electronic Archive of Information Released Prior to January 20, 2001, <http://www.state.gov/index.html> (last visited Aug. 1, 2005). And the Electronic Research Collections, <http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/> (last visited Aug. 1, 2005)—“a partnership between the United States Department of State and the Federal Depository Library at the Richard J. Daley Library, University of Illinois at Chicago”—also includes an archive of State Department documents from 1990 to 1997.
6. For example, Cheryl Nyberg and Jonathan Franklin.
7. For example, Diane Murley (Southern Illinois University), Stephanie Davidson (University of Illinois), and Sabrina Pacifici (BeSpacific and LLRX).
8. I think, for instance, of the site a friend recently shared with her teenage nephew and me: Fredryk Phox, Napoleon Dynamite Soundboard, <http://www.albinoblacksheep.com/flash/ndsound.php> (last visited June 21, 2005). But, come to think of it, in reference work all kinds of crazy things come up and sometimes we do need to find some pop cultural material we previously thought would *never* be needed. Maybe someone *will* ask me—or you—for a brief sound clip of dialogue from *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* (Fox Searchlight Pictures 2004).

nearly every law librarian already knows about—for instance, Thomas,⁹ GPO Access,¹⁰ and AALLNET.¹¹ Third—and this is my final criterion—I’ll just mention a few that I happen to like and leave it at that, with no claim that these are the coolest sites or a representative cross-section of cool sites.

Finding Out about Cool Sites

¶10 I often seem simply to stumble across a cool Web site. I see a link, I click, I click again, and who knows how but there I am at a cool site. Or I am looking for something—a study, a report, a film, an image—and one of the results of a Google search is a cool site (which might or might not provide the item I seek).

¶11 Word of mouth is important. Colleagues and patrons often introduce me to cool sites. Sometimes they share them electronically, sending URLs in e-mail messages. Recently, for instance, my colleague Peggy Jarrett forwarded a message from GOVDOC-L announcing the University of North Texas Libraries’ wonderful archive of Congressional Research Service reports.¹² This site is cool because it provides easy access to great content that is otherwise hard to locate. Just a short time later, Peggy sent another announcement of a site with CRS reports, this one hosted by the Center for Democracy and Technology.¹³

¶12 I also learn about cool sites from my colleagues when I hear them speak. I think it was Cheryl Nyberg who first told me about TinyURL (<http://tinyURL.com>).¹⁴ This service lets anyone plug in a long, cumbersome URL—say, <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=000&invol=02-102>—and get a new, shorter URL (in this case, <http://tinyurl.com/4p4qf>). Maybe that wasn’t dramatic enough. Consider this transformation: I entered

9. Library of Congress, Thomas: Legislative Information on the Internet, <http://thomas.loc.gov/> (last visited June 24, 2005) (includes federal bills and legislative history).
10. United States Gov’t Printing Office, GPO Access, <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/index.html> (last visited June 24, 2005) (*Congressional Record*, *Federal Register*, *United States Code*, and more).
11. Am. Ass’n of Law Libraries, AALLNET, <http://www.aallnet.org> (last visited June 24, 2005) (association news, chapter and SIS Web pages, member directory, back issues of *Law Library Journal*, and more).
12. Posting of Valerie Glenn, vglenn@library.unt.edu, to GOVDOC-L@Lists.psu.edu (June 20, 2005) (on file with the author) (announcing Congressional Research Service Reports (<http://digital.library.unt.edu/govdocs/crs>)).
13. Posting of Jim Jacobs, ss3@weber.ucsd.edu, to GOVDOC-L@Lists.psu.edu (June 27, 2005) (on file with the author) (announcing Open CRS: Congressional Research Reports for the People (<http://www.opencrs.com>)).
14. Who produces cool Web sites? Why? Is it business? service? political advocacy? passion? creative expression? The reasons vary, of course. Some begin as teaching aids—a way to provide materials to students—but grow into a labor of love and a service to a much larger community. See *infra* note 18 and accompanying text (describing Prof. Douglas Linder’s Famous Trials site). Other sites relate to the sponsoring organization’s mission—for instance, when a government agency makes its documents available to constituents.

In evaluating Web sites, I try to figure out affiliations, but I can’t always do it, and TinyURL.com is one instance. I don’t know why TinyURL’s producer operates the site, but it’s cool and it works, so there you go.

http://web2.westlaw.com/Find/Default.wl?SerialNum=2003452259&FindType=0&CaseCite=123+S%2ECt%2E+2472&CaseSerial=2003452259&AP=&rs=WLW5.06&docname=123S.Ct.2472&fn=_top&utid=%7bD476B7F6-A51D-4863-983D-4FC1CEE7F1A6%7d&mt=LawSchool&vr=2.0&sv=Split&rp=%2ffind%2fdefault.wl&RLT=CLID_FQRLT2411306&TF=756&TC=1&n=1

and got a new, “tiny” URL (<http://tinyurl.com/a9n9y>) that is significantly more manageable.

¶13 Both of these links (or all four, if you count the tiny URLs) are to the opinion in *Lawrence v. Texas*.¹⁵ For many purposes, the official citation (539 U.S. 558) works well. At least, it works for those of us who know about case citations. But if you wanted to send an e-mail message to a layperson, it might be easier to send the first link, i.e., the link to the case on Findlaw. The second long URL links to the case on Westlaw. A user who clicks on the link first sees the Westlaw login screen and must enter a password, and then the case appears, as if the user had used the Find command. Of course, a link like this can also be handy.

¶14 Recently I heard Kerry Fitz-Gerald speak at a Bridge the Gap program sponsored by the Seattle University and the University of Washington law schools. I made a note of a cool Web site she showed that alerts readers to the hazards of the chemical compound dihydrogen monoxide (www.dhmo.org). Visitors to the site learn that this colorless and odorless compound can cause death if inhaled, is a component of acid rain, and is a factor in any number of maladies and hazards. Truly alert readers, however, figure out that dihydrogen monoxide is H₂O and is not all bad. The site is a good teaching tool, using humor to make the point that it is important to be skeptical about what we see on the Web.¹⁶

¶15 In her presentation Kerry also showed Regulations.gov (www.regulations.gov), a cool site that brings together pending regulations from all agencies. This has been around for a while,¹⁷ but I hadn’t gotten around to looking at it. It’s cool to be able to search for regulations that have been proposed and are open for comment by subject (say, salmon) and get them all at once, without having to go agency by agency (Fish and Wildlife Service or National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, for instance).¹⁸

15. 539 U.S. 558 (2003). United States Supreme Court cases like *Lawrence* have been available in multiple locations for a long time—for instance, 123 S.Ct. 2472, 156 L.Ed.2d 508, 71 USLW 4574, 03 Cal. Daily Op. Serv. 5559, 2003 Daily Journal D.A.R. 7036, and 16 Fla. L. Weekly Fed. S 427, just to lift the citations from Westlaw’s version of the case. And now some cases can be found on many different Web sites.

16. People can be taken in by the site. See William Wan, *Hoax Soaks Aliso Viejo; City Officials Fall for an Internet Prank and Draft a Law to Curb the Risks of Dihydrogen Monoxide*, L.A. TIMES, Mar. 13, 2004, at B1.

17. See Cindy Skrzycki, *U.S. Opens Online Portal to Rulemaking; Web Site Invites Wider Participation in the Regulatory Process*, WASH. POST, Jan. 23, 2003, at E1.

18. This reminds me of Science.gov, <http://www.science.gov> (last visited June 30, 2005), where users can set up searches to alert them of new documents on a variety of government Web sites. I tried “coho salmon” as a test and from time to time I get an e-mail message telling me about something new.

¶16 Finally, there are more structured ways of learning about new sites, such as checking blogs and Web sites that post news. One that I subscribe to is Cornell Law Library's InSITE (www.lawschool.cornell.edu/library/Finding_the_Law/insite.htm), a biweekly e-mail newsletter that reviews interesting law-related sites. I am always behind on my e-mail, but I have found that these reviews have a good shelf life: if I sit down and read a dozen reviews at once, the sites that were reviewed months ago are still there and still worth looking at. Back issues are archived, and InSITE also has a searchable database of reviews—and so it, itself, is a cool Web site.

Sharing My Finds

¶17 Just as I benefit from my colleagues pointing out cool sites to me, I try to share cool sites I come across. This winter I searched our state legislature's bill information page (<http://www.leg.wa.gov/wsladm/billinfo1/bills.cfm>) for bills on several topics. I went back to the site a couple of times to see if there had been action on the bills I'd found. And then one day I saw a little box I hadn't noticed before: "Bill Tracking—Create personalized lists of bills you wish to track through the 2005–06 legislative process." This turned out to be a very cool service (<http://leginfo.leg.wa.gov/billtracking>), just introduced in 2005. It enabled me to create several lists of bills (one for health care, one for evidence, etc.); I just had to log in to see, each time, the latest action on each bill. I was so pleased with this discovery that I sent out a few messages—first to my fellow reference librarians and then to the Law Librarians of Puget Sound and to our faculty. (Wouldn't it be great if Thomas offered something similar?)

Cool Sites with Old News and New

¶18 One site I like to show people is Douglas Linder's Famous Trials.¹⁹ Professor Linder has assembled material relating to forty famous trials—from Socrates to Lenny Bruce, Lizzie Borden to the Chicago 7. On this site you can read trial transcripts and see pictures of the participants. Overview essays and timelines put the documents in context. And you don't have to stop with what's on the Web site, for Linder also gives links and bibliographies to lead you to mountains of other material on the cases. This site is a wonderful source for high school and college students casting about for information for their papers, as well as law students and law professors interested in legal history. It's very entertaining browsing for librarians, too.

19. Douglas O. Linder, Famous Trials, <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/ftrials.htm> (last visited June 24, 2005). I've shown it in different contexts: in a class session for an English class on law and literature, to patrons in the reference office, and in a blog. Posting of Mary Whisner to Trial Ad Notes, <http://trialadnotes.blogspot.com> (Feb. 15, 2005, 11:00 PST).

¶19 Another cool site for legal history is a project of Stanford's Robert Crown Law Library, in collaboration with Professor Barbara Babcock and her students. The Women's Legal History Biography Project (www.law.stanford.edu/library/wlhbhp) presents information about hundreds of women lawyers. Many of them were the first women to practice law in their states; others (such as Janet Reno and Ruth Bader Ginsburg) are still active. Some entries have citations to articles and other sources; others go further and have papers written by the students. Clicking around, I even found two articles I was not aware of about University of Washington alumnae whom patrons (outsiders and staff) ask about from time to time.²⁰

¶20 Is careful historical analysis too stodgy for you? Would you rather know what the buzz is *now*? A very timely site is the Annotated New York Times (<http://annotatedtimes.blogrunner.com>). Definitely not affiliated with the *New York Times*, this site lists stories from the newspaper and links to the blogs that link to those stories. Browsing through this is a way to see what stories are getting attention and what people are saying about the topic. For instance, one day I saw a story about a Supreme Court case that was handed down the day before and then skimmed several bloggers' reactions to it. It's cool—but it can also be something of Venus's flytrap, luring in unwary readers and never letting them out. When I just want a slice of legal news—with the reactions of opinionated bloggers—I look only at the site's pages that are limited to "Suits and Litigation" and "Decisions and Verdicts."

Keeping Track of Handy Sites

¶21 There was a time in the mid-1990s when I kept a blue plastic card file at my desk. When I came across a cool Web site, I'd write the URL and a description (at least the name of the organization that hosted the site) on a four-by-six-inch card and file it in the box. That system didn't last long. It was slow writing down the URLs. And the Web sites proliferated—how big would that plastic box have to be to hold cards for the sites I regularly visit now?

¶22 Fortunately, I don't need index cards anymore. For one thing, URLs have gotten easier to remember. Do I want the United Nations? I enter www.un.org. The *Seattle Times*? www.seattletimes.com. Moreover, even when the URLs aren't so obvious, other tools are now available that are more powerful and easier to use than the index cards. I have my own bookmarks, of course. (Some of the bookmarks I use the most are internal—e.g., for my own department's calendar on my library's

20. Judith W. Rosenthal, *Bella Weretnikow: Seattle's First Jewish Female Attorney*, COLUMBIA MAG., Spring 2004, at 6, available at <http://washingtonhistory.org/wshs/columbia/articles/0104-a1.htm> (Weretnikow was in the first graduating class, in 1901); David J. Danelski, *Lucile Lomen: The First Woman to Clerk at the Supreme Court*, 23 J. SUP. CT. HIST. 1 (1999), available at <http://www.law.stanford.edu/library/wlhbhp/articles/LucileLomen.pdf> (Lomen, class of 1944, clerked for William O. Douglas). Of course the stories of women from elsewhere are interesting too—but our alumni office doesn't ask us about them.

intranet.) Even handier than my own bookmarks are the links from my library's own Web site (<http://lib.law.washington.edu>), which I use as my home page. Am I looking for Washington bills, U.S. Supreme Court opinions, or HeinOnline? No problem, they are all linked from this page, and I can get to them in a couple of clicks. I don't need to bother keeping track of all those sites because my colleague Cheryl Nyberg does it for me—and for everyone else who uses our site. If I don't have a bookmark or a link from our Web site, I have search engines, notably the incredibly popular Google. If I remember the right bits about a cool site I saw, I can get back to it using Google.

¶23 Much more could be said about keeping track of what we find. In fact, some researchers at the University of Washington's Information School have a project called "Keeping Found Things Found" that explores this. Not surprisingly, the project has a cool Web site.²¹

Conclusion

¶24 My first idea for this celebration of cool Web sites was simply to discuss a handful. But as I toggled between my draft and my Web browser, I kept running into questions: What did I mean by cool? Was this a good project for a piece in a print journal? How would I pick my sample? Where do I find these sites anyway? Addressing these and other questions turned out to highlight a lot of my favorite sites, from a very practical site for tracking bills to sites with legal history. Maybe some of my favorites are also favorites of yours—and maybe I've been able to introduce you to one you weren't familiar with.

21. Info. Sch., Univ. of Wash., Keeping Found Things Found, <http://kftf.ischool.washington.edu> (last visited June 21, 2005). The site includes publications and presentations reporting on the team's various research projects. E.g., Harry Bruce et al., *Keeping and Re-Finding Information on the Web: What Do People Do and What Do They Need?*, in ASIST 2004: PROCEEDINGS OF THE 67TH ASIST ANNUAL MEETING: MANAGING AND ENHANCING INFORMATION: CULTURE AND CONFLICTS 129 (Linda Schamber & Carol L. Barry eds., 2004), available at http://kftf.ischool.washington.edu/re-finding_information_on_the_web3.pdf.