

Columbia Law School Launches Free Database of U.S. Court Decisions

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Aiming to make federal case law fast and easy to search, more accessible to the public – and free – Columbia Law School and the University of Colorado Law School have launched a Web site called AltLaw.org, which has the potential to transform the national landscape of case law resources.

AltLaw.org contains nearly 170,000 decisions dating back to the early 1990s from the U.S. Supreme Court and Federal Appellate courts. The site's creators, Columbia Law School's Timothy Wu and Stuart Sierra, and University of Colorado Law School's Paul Ohm, said the site's database would grow over time.

Wu, a professor who specializes in telecommunications law, said he started to build AltLaw.org because he wanted a way to quickly search through court decisions the same way that the public now can review an array of information through such Internet search engines as Google and

Yahoo.

“It’s been more than 10 years since the start of the Internet revolution, and case law is one area that has not budged. Somebody has to take the initiative,” Wu said. “We want to open the law to the public.”

Wu said he envisions AltLaw.org having a diverse audience – journalists, the public, lawyers who want to avoid the hundreds of dollars per hour in fees for proprietary law databases and legal scholars who need quick and searchable access to cases at home or on the road. One of the assets to AltLaw.org’s design is that it is fast and simple to use, Wu said.

Ohm wrote the thousands of lines of code that download cases to AltLaw.org from more than a dozen court Web sites each night. He said the data comes from the courts themselves, and AltLaw.org is designed as an extremely open platform so that others can take the raw material and use it in various ways.

“This is what we call the ‘law commons’ part of the design,” Ohm said. “The touchstone of AltLaw.org is openness, and this means that not only will users be able to search cases, but they’ll also be able to make copies of all of the cases in our database to reuse or remix in any way that they’d like.”

AltLaw.org is a joint project of Columbia Law School’s Program on Law and Technology, and the Silicon Flatirons Program at the University of Colorado Law School.

Source: Columbia University

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