

## ***Current Awareness from the User's Perspective: A Survey of Harvard Legal Academics***

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As librarians we tend to forget that for a number of people computers are merely incidental to their work. Investors, financial advisors, journalists and accountants, to name a few occupations, research Internet and online information daily as part of their work routines. For others, the time and learning curve required to include technology in their day can be counterproductive to their thinking and output. As information explodes into unmanageable proportions, it is important to consider this 'silent majority' of users when designing current awareness features. Has this learning curve flattened yet and is the information valuable enough to the extent that a user can afford the time taken to explore it? Or is it specific information, i.e. a case, or a section of legislation, that wins the day? On the other hand is the curve steepening as systems become more complicated and information more amorphous? Many, discovering the usefulness of email, are examining other resources as to whether they are of equal value and simplicity.

What of surveys of the kind discussed in this article? Should we not wait until technology catches up? A year since this survey, the Internet is more sophisticated, faster and more useful. Reading the newspapers is smoother and audio and video attachments are available if desired. Talking to a Chinese law student who came to the United States to pursue a graduate law degree, I learned that her university of choice was determined by its web site, where she found further information regarding the ranking of the university and its fees, which were a major part of the decision making process.

This survey examined the basic current awareness needs of the Harvard Law Faculty, i.e. information that could be accessed on a personal basis. At Harvard, professors have a need for interdisciplinary information and write in a number of areas other than law and on a number of levels, e.g. for academic publications, for the press and for the lay public. In addition, their personal interests are as multi-faceted as their work needs.

What of Westlaw and Lexis? Westlaw and Lexis do have current awareness services but unless these are used on a daily basis the information becomes too much to digest easily. Again, they are difficult to tailor for certain subject areas. Another issue is that if these services are not used continually the steps necessary to access the service are not easy to remember. A representative of one of the companies was of the opinion that this did not matter because enough commercial customers used the services. It should be noted that many of the professors in the survey used either Lexis or Westlaw, but only two respondents used both services. This may be true of students as well.

Interestingly, some services wanted by the Faculty were those wanted by students and other library staff, namely:

- information on, and linkage to, relevant Internet sites;
- legal research instructional material available from web sites;
- newsletters;
- new books - access to publishers' catalogs online;
- information on electronic sources; and
- automation of the creation of bibliographies

The following is an extract from the report, *Current Awareness Survey: Harvard Law School Library*, a survey that I undertook in 1997. As several people have requested my findings, I have included the results of my survey but have omitted my recommendations and conclusions.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Harvard Law Faculty current awareness service consists of the photocopied contents pages of United States law journals and a monthly list of new acquisitions produced by contract outside the Harvard Law Library by Peter Ward.<sup>1</sup> The latter service, *Harvard Law School Library Recent Acquisitions* is a monthly commercial list of all new titles catalogued by the Harvard Law School Library. Both services are in paper format. In addition the Faculty have access to Library Liaison staff, Reference staff, Secretaries and Research Assistants, who provide them with documents, articles, books and computer assistance to assist them in their research. The paper services are time consuming to produce, incomplete and often cumbersome to research.

A commercial current awareness service to journals is not a viable option as Harvard subscribes to many more journals than any of the commercial alternatives. The Peter Ward Acquisitions List is bulky, with inadequate subject headings. It is also often not current. In addition, Harvard Law Library has two thousand foreign and international law journals that are not indexed in the standard sources. Therefore the Harvard Law Faculty are not accessing all relevant information. It was decided to undertake a survey in order to evaluate the basic current awareness needs of the Law Faculty. Several members of the Faculty were impressed that the Library Administration were concerned about their current awareness needs and expressed appreciation for our conducting this survey.

### **OBJECTIVES**

The purpose of my project was:

- To examine new media and modern technology in order to develop a new current awareness service for the Law Faculty.
- To better utilize the current OPAC and the next generation OPAC that would be in place in two years time.

<sup>1</sup> Catalog of current law titles, 1989, no 1-, William S. Hein & Co., 1989-, Buffalo, N.Y., and Catalog of new foreign and international law titles, B Ward & Associates, 1989-, Ann Arbor, Mich

- To produce a new publication or publications that would fill the gaps left by *Current Index to Legal Periodicals*<sup>2</sup> and other sources. These new publications would be indices to materials in Law and Economics, Legal History, Legal Philosophy, International and Comparative Law, Islamic Law and East Asian Law. The intention would be to deliver these services by email or by posting to a website.

#### ***METHODOLOGY : HARVARD LAW FACULTY SURVEY***

The methodology focused on exploring the use of the current services, and required conducting a survey of the Law Faculty as accurate information and statistics on the use of the current awareness services were not available. Approximately half of the Harvard Law professors (32 out of 70) were interviewed. The method for selection was by recommendation by both Library and Faculty members with some random and outside selection. The survey concentrated on individual research needs and the ability of members of the Faculty, who have varying degrees of computer expertise, to use the Library, i.e. electronic resources.

Some of the questions to be examined within the survey were:

- What use was made of the contents pages and acquisitions list and to what degree were they helpful?
- Would an electronic version be acceptable?
- Was the Document Delivery Service useful? Could it be improved?
- What was the Law Faculty's source of citations?
- Were extra copies of certain titles necessary?
- How many indraft papers were read?
- How many papers were read for the Appointments Committee?
- What was required from a current awareness service?
- What were the Faculty's basic needs?
- What additional subject information was needed?

The survey focused on basic Faculty current awareness requirements. Questions in the following six areas were posed:

- Use of the contents pages of law journals circulated.
- Use of the Harvard Law School Library Recent Acquisitions List.
- Preferred format of the above.
- Document Delivery satisfaction.
- Interdisciplinary current awareness needs.
- Additional current awareness needs.

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<sup>2</sup> The *Current Index to Legal Periodicals*, a not for profit current awareness service, is published by the Law Librarians and Staff of the Gallagher Law Library, University of Washington, Seattle. It is a weekly publication which provides subject indexing and access to 475 U.S. law review journals and other law journals.

### ***Production and Circulation of Photocopied Contents Pages of U.S. Law Reviews***

The Secretary, Harvard Law School Library, is responsible for the photocopying and distribution of the contents pages of U.S. law reviews. There are 160 people on the mailing list and of these, 10 are people outside Harvard. The time taken from receipt of the journal to circulation is two weeks. The cost of production is approximately \$2,200 per annum. During a sample check it was found that not all of the major journals intended for circulation of contents pages are recorded in the appropriate field in the Harvard University catalog, Hollis. It is also some years since a review of journals distributed was undertaken.

### **Are the contents pages of law review journals read?**

The majority of the Faculty members interviewed read the contents pages of law review journals, but were interested in trying an electronic version. However, their stated preference was for the paper copy, distributed on a weekly or fortnightly basis.

Of 32 professors:

23 read the contents pages

6 did not read but 4 would use if electronic version in place

3 read them sporadically

Of the professors who did not read the contents pages, one was a legal historian for whom receiving current information was not an issue. He did not mind waiting until the articles were indexed by commercial sources. These indexes are published approximately three months after publication of the journals. Another was experienced in using electronic resources and gained his current information from services such as electronic listservs, email discussion groups and relevant websites.

### **Preferred format of contents pages of law review journals**

The majority of the professors who read the contents pages said that they preferred them in the current format as they were easy to read at meetings, bus stops, etc. and were an item that could be packed into a briefcase and read on a journey. One person responded that the service provided a good prompt merely by its arrival.

Two of the professors stated that they were unsure as to whether the contents pages of all of the journals were routinely photocopied. They suspected that the service was not systematic and that at times some titles were omitted from the list. They were interested in finding out how many journals were photocopied and requested a listing of the titles.

### **Customized service for contents pages**

When asked about the possibility of receiving a customized service, several stated:

- that they have problems with subject headings when researching articles generally, e.g. conflict of laws (private international law), environmental law dealing with property, etc., and that this could cause problems with a personalized approach; and
- the majority, too, were not in favour of a customized service because they liked to know on a general level what was being written on various aspects of law and what their colleagues were writing about. They noted that although an article may be passed over on first glance it may prove valuable at a later date. They said awareness that an article exists on a particular topic is useful.

There was unanimous agreement amongst the professors who were asked to take part in a trial to assess an electronic current awareness service.

### **Harvard Law School Library Recent Acquisitions**

*Recent Acquisitions* is a commercial list of all new titles processed by the Harvard Law School Library during the month indicated. This list is produced from cataloguing tapes generated by the RLIN automated cataloguing system and rearranged by Peter Ward, Inc. into subject areas.

One hundred copies are distributed to Faculty and Staff at a cost of US\$350 per month. As it is bulky, out of date, and as stated below, not easy to use, it is ideally suited to an electronic medium.

Of 32 professors:

- 8 use Acquisitions listing
- 5 use it sometimes but would prefer an electronic version
- 19 would use if in electronic format

The responses to the question of whether the acquisitions listing of new books was useful were mostly negative. Eight professors read the Acquisitions Listing with another three stating that they endeavored to browse it but not very successfully. Apart from one person, all said that they would prefer the service to be delivered in another format. An electronic, customized format that would provide shorter lists of new books on a more frequent basis, and in broader subject groupings was suggested.

### **Document Delivery**

As expected, citations requested were derived from a variety of sources: the current awareness services, articles, law reviews, pre-publishing, telephoning people, networking, Hollis, Lexis, Westlaw, bibliographies, newspapers, electronic listservs, email discussion lists and websites.

All expressed satisfaction with the Document Delivery Service stating that they thought it was excellent. In addition, several of the secretaries contributed by saying how helpful the service was and commented on the smooth running of the operation.

Other findings included:

- People surveyed tended to use either Westlaw or Lexis but only two used both services.
- To date not too many papers were read for the Appointments Committee – reading tended to be sporadic.
- Citations were given to secretaries who in turn sent them to Document Delivery.
- An email response would be helpful.
- There was a preference for some articles to be downloaded to email rather than photocopied.

Harvard Law Library spends 80 hours a week on filling Faculty document delivery requests and 90% are satisfied in-house. The remaining 10% of requests are generally found to be requests for items already in use in the Harvard libraries and approximately 25% are interdisciplinary needs.

### ***Basic Legal Current Awareness Needs Not Met***

Legal current awareness needs that are not met according to the survey response are in the areas of international and foreign law.

### ***Additional Current Awareness Needs Not Met***

A substantial number of professors had a need for information outside the law, in disciplines such as economics, philosophy, political science, history, feminist studies (philosophy, social issues), mediation and arbitration, psychology, sociology, medical studies, cultural studies and language, human rights and government agencies information. Requirements for articles of a more general nature were noted to include material on disabilities, fair rent and debt recovery.

Further specific subjects requested by individual faculty members included: law and society, German civil procedure, international/foreign law, German law, international/comparative law, cultural studies and language, international politics, foreign policy, economics and trade law, music, Department of American Studies information, international securities regulation and securities law.

Many respondents made extensive use of other Harvard libraries, especially the Widener Library, with several people using the Kennedy School of Economics current awareness service.<sup>3</sup>

Some additional suggestions and Faculty needs were:

- A second contents pages issue be included containing interdisciplinary material e.g. finance and economics, management and business, human rights, etc
- That current awareness services from other faculties be included in the Law School's current awareness service.
- Notice of significant sources of information in their fields on the Internet.
- Short abstracts on relevant websites.
- How to find government documents on the Internet.
- How to find Federal regulations on the Internet.
- Bibliographies - basic bibliographies on specific areas of law. (Also accessible from a website.)
- Information on new books
- Book reviews, e.g. from the New York Times (Due to the number of books published it was suggested that reviews and the name of the reviewer would be helpful.)
- Graduate Program Doctoral Theses - to be made accessible and available before they are published.
- Bibliography of published indexes in foreign and international law.
- Open access to the Public International Law Collection.
- Two people added that although they were aware of the majority of resources in their areas, it was reassuring to have the information confirmed by a librarian.

Several professors expressed their appreciation of this exercise.

<sup>3</sup> Again, a photocopied contents pages current awareness service, of the journals held by the John F. Kennedy School of Government Library

### *Current Awareness - New Databases, Internet Sites.*

Many expressed an interest in being alerted to relevant electronic resources.

One professor echoed others in summing up his needs as follows:

- Notification of new databases relevant to his work, Internet sites, etc.
- Short bursts of training for the above - needs to be co-ordinated - what for, how used, short abstracts
- "Quick and dirty" training manuals covering basic commands, how to log on, how to access information, how to download, print, how to log out. In many instances a page would suffice.

He stressed the amount of time that it takes to learn new systems, and that, although he was computer literate, learning these resources cut deeply into his time. He gave the example of how people teaching new systems are not aware of the needs or the level of experience of the user.

Other suggestions from this professor included:

- Production of ongoing guides.
- Librarians to teach legal research to students, who in turn teach to other students. (Useful in teaching Moot Court classes and may make for better taught students.)
- Research training not just including law. A broader scope is necessary. Better research training is needed to enable students to research, or at least be aware of, other resources. He thought that students tended not to be aware that other disciplines had major indexes or databases

Further recommendations from the Faculty were:

- Assistance and recommendations with new software and databases.
- Bibliographic databases - assistance and advice on building a bibliographic database and downloading from Hollis.
- Assistance with downloading email to own database.
- Internet training.
- Listing of people who can be contacted for training and help when needed
- Advice and support on web browsers.
- Information on options for managing information.
- How to set up files in Westclip
- How to set up bookmarks.

### *Interdisciplinary Current Awareness Needs*

Economics, philosophy and political science information proved to be major needs in the current awareness program. It is strongly recommended that the program include access and training for commercial current awareness services in these areas, many of which are in electronic format. A librarian with an economics degree or economics research skills would be highly desirable as part of the Reference team.

### **CURRENT AWARENESS**

It is recommended that the inhouse photocopied Contents of U.S. Law Review Journals be continued but in addition the service *Current Index to Legal Periodicals* (CILP), published by the University of Washington, be implemented on a trial basis.

CILP indexes 475 U.S. legal journals, with full tables of contents for all journals indexed, and 100 broad subject headings for articles. It is a weekly electronic service that can be distributed via email to faculty subscribers. A paper edition is also available. A newer service, SmartCILP, offers customized email to users and Faculty members can request specific subject information and journals.

An alternative electronic service on offer is the University of Texas Law Library's service which is offered in two parts - current awareness direct to an email address, and archives kept for three months and accessible from a website. The website includes, at a separate website address, English language foreign law reviews contents pages. The archival contents pages can be accessed by keywords

Further work includes comparing the list to the University of Washington's list with a view to incorporating the additional U.S. law journals not indexed by the University of Washington in order to make it a comprehensive service.

It is essential to introduce any new services smoothly and the introduction of CILP needs to be on a one on one basis. CILP is evaluating the ability to choose a separate listing of the most cited law journals. However, it is apparent from the survey that the Law Faculty read more diversely than in their specific subject areas and, in the case of US law, indicated that they wish to have notice of all law reviews

*Harvard Law School Library Recent Acquisitions List:* Peter Ward is developing a web-based product that should be available shortly. He is also doing profiling by broad subject categories and may be able to work with provisional records instead of fully catalogued records. It will be worthwhile to re-assess this service when available.

An inhouse committee has been set up within the Law Library to assess the problem of current information regarding new acquisitions. It will examine the feasibility of users accessing recently catalogued books in Hollis. Once services are in place, a current awareness web page should be developed with appropriate links to relevant major sites.

#### ***Current Awareness Services in Electronic Format***

In addition to the above recommendations there are other electronic current awareness services that should be considered on a personal basis and made available to the Law Faculty through the Liaison Program. In many cases individual instruction will be required.

Below is a listing of some of the electronic services:

- Westlaw's WestCLIP
- West's Legal News
- LEXIS Eclipse
- LEXIS-NEXIS Tracker
- LEXIS-NEXIS PubWatch
- UnCover Reveal/Topical Alerts
- UnCover Express
- OCLC ContentsAlert
- OCLC ContentsFirst
- OCLC ArticleFirst



- Legal Resource Index
- Index to Legal Periodicals
- Hollis Plus
- CILP electronic and paper versions
- SmartCILP
- Washlaw Web
- Tarlton Law Library website: <http://Tallons.law.utexas.edu>. (The archives for the U.S. law reviews are located at: <http://tarlton.law.utexas.edu/tallons/contentu.htm>)
- English-language foreign law reviews may be found at: <http://tarlton.law.utexas.edu/tallons/contentf.htm>.

#### **World Wide Web Sites**

It is also important to include relevant World Wide Web sites for consideration in a current awareness program. A few examples can be found below:

- Hieros Gamos - The Comprehensive Legal and Government Site – [www.hg.org/hghome.html](http://www.hg.org/hghome.html)
- Emory Law Library Electronic Reference Desk – [www.law.emory.edu/LAW/refdesk/toc.html](http://www.law.emory.edu/LAW/refdesk/toc.html)
- The World Wide Web Virtual Library (Law) Indiana University School of Law-Bloomington – [www.law.indiana.edu/law/v-lib/lawindex.html](http://www.law.indiana.edu/law/v-lib/lawindex.html)
- Internet Publications of the Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School – [www.law.cornell.edu/](http://www.law.cornell.edu/)
- D'Angelo Law Library (University of Chicago) has a useful foreign and international law page – [www.lib.uchicago.edu/LibInfo/Law/](http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/LibInfo/Law/)

#### **Government Information**

- [www.law.vill.edu/Fed-Agency/fedwebbloc.html](http://www.law.vill.edu/Fed-Agency/fedwebbloc.html)