

## ***WebLaw: A Subject Gateway to Australian Legal Resources<sup>1</sup>***

**Clare Cappa**

University of Queensland, (Coordinator, WebLaw Project)

**Sue Scott**

Law and Justice Foundation of NSW (Chair, WebLaw Project Steering Committee)

---

### ***WHAT IS WEBLAW?***

WebLaw is a co-operative web gateway to quality legal resources that are freely available on the Internet.

**[www.weblaw.edu.au](http://www.weblaw.edu.au)**

The aim of WebLaw is to provide efficient access to these resources for legal researchers, students, legal practitioners and non-lawyers with an interest in particular areas of the law. WebLaw is not primarily aimed at members of the public although it is freely available to anyone with Internet access.

In essence, WebLaw is a distributed cataloguing system. Participating organisations nominate an area of expertise and provide annotated links to quality resources in this area. Participating organisations adhere to common selection criteria and quality guidelines.

The fourteen participating institutions are Adelaide University, AustLII, Australian National University, Commonwealth Parliamentary Library, La Trobe University, Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales, Monash University, Murdoch University, National Library of Australia, University of NSW,

---

<sup>1</sup> This is an edited version of a paper presented at the 9<sup>th</sup> Special, Health and Law Libraries Conference, *Rivers of Knowledge*, Melbourne, 26–29 August 2001

University of Melbourne, University of Queensland, University of Sydney and University of Western Australia.

At the time of writing, a further five institutions had agreed to contribute records to the database. They are Bond University, Queensland University of Technology, the Federal Court, Flinders University and the University of Technology, Sydney. This brings the total number of institutions involved in the project to nineteen. Another eight institutions are considering contributing records.

WebLaw currently covers the following subject areas:

- Administrative Law
- ADR
- Banking & Finance
- Bankruptcy
- Children & the Law
- Citizenship and Migration
- Constitutional Law
- Corporations Law
- Criminal Law
- Criminology
- Cyberspace
- Environmental Law
- E-commerce Law
- European Union
- Family Law
- Government
- Health Law
- Human Rights
- Industrial Law
- Intellectual Property
- International Law
- Law of the Sea
- Legal Research
- Media & Telecommunication
- Native Title
- Occupational Health & Safety
- Privacy
- Property Law
- Sports Law
- Taxation
- Women & the Law

## ***SELECTION CRITERIA***

At this stage only resources that are freely available on the Internet are selected from a number of broad categories. These categories include key legislation, courts and tribunals and key decisions, professional and industry associations, government bodies, electronic journals, research reports, government inquiries and pathfinder sites. Sites are generally linked at directory level rather than at individual page level, e.g. a link is made to the Family Court home page rather than to every page on the Family Court site. If, however, there is an important resource within a site, such as a significant research report on the Family Court site, a direct link is made. Links are generally not made to plain language guides to the law.

The selection criteria are meant as a guide only and resources chosen will vary depending upon the subject area and the perceived needs of the target audience. At all times the contributor is encouraged to use their professional judgement and knowledge of the subject area and needs of the target audience/s when selecting sites for inclusion.

Internet resources are selected according to established and documented selection criteria. The *Collection Development Statement* for WebLaw is available at <http://www.weblaw.edu.au/standards.html>. This includes definitions of

- **Scope:** the parameters of the collection in broad terms, describing what is included and excluded from the collection,
- **Sources of Information:** academic, government, non-profit, personal homepages and commercial sites (but note the policy about intrusive advertising),
- **Audience:** resources should be selected to cover the needs of the target audiences, i.e. researchers, academics, students, legal professionals and lay professionals,
- **Geographic Coverage:** primary focus on Australian material but international resources which are of interest to Australian legal researchers are selected, and
- **Language:** primarily English.

The content section of the *Collection Development Statement* sets guidelines to ensure high quality content. Quality measures to be considered when selecting resources include

- **Validity:** the degree of objective truth of the data on the site using criteria such as clear identification of the source of the content, the author's affiliation and credentials, and ready availability of contact details,
- **Accuracy:** the correctness of the content and subject expertise,
- **Authority:** this may be discernible through details about the creator of the site, the reputation of the creator, the location of the server and how many other sites are linked to the target site,
- **Completeness:** this precludes sites that are 'under construction',

- **Currency:** both the extent to which the content of the site is up-to-date, that is, reflects current trends, and the date on which the site was last updated,
- **Accessibility:** includes site design, navigational ease, readability, usability, Bobby-Compliance, ease of downloading and printing. Advertising should not be obtrusive or distracting, and
- **Relevance:** Resources should contain substantial content. For example, only journals that are available in full text or with meaningful abstracts should be included. Where there are two similar sets of resources the higher quality resource should be selected. Links to other listings of sites should be made sparingly and annotated to indicate that this is what is being linked to.

### **QUALITY**

Central to WebLaw is the concept of adding value through the selection of quality, annotated resources sorted into categories, rather than simply being a list of hundreds of unsorted links. The use of annotations is an important element in assisting searchers to assess whether a resource will be of benefit to them. The aim is to increase searcher efficiency by reducing scrolling and reducing the number of clicks that searchers need to make.

One of the key ways of achieving quality is through the commonly agreed selection criteria as discussed in the previous section. Other quality measures include review by academics and/or practitioners with expertise in the subject area, review by other WebLaw participants, review by the project manager, six-monthly checking of the accuracy of links and regular addition of new resources.

### **HISTORY OF WEBLAW**

Understanding how WebLaw came into being is important for understanding how it operates and why it has been successful. WebLaw was very much a ground-up initiative in response to a need. A number of organisations found that maintaining a wide range of Internet subject guides to the law was difficult and time consuming. For example the Law and Justice Foundation of NSW maintained a series of 'practice collections' in a variety of areas of the law, but found that they did not have the staff resources to keep these up-to-date

Preliminary discussions were held between Sue Scott (Law and Justice Foundation of NSW), Kathy Maguire (Law and Justice Foundation of NSW), Carolyn Kearney (Sydney University) and Clare Cappa (University of Queensland) to discuss the possibility of developing a cooperative solution to this problem. They developed the concept of a 'web ring' whereby each organisation would nominate an area of expertise, develop a subject guide in this area and link to each other. Participating organisations would agree to adhere to common selection criteria, quality guidelines and a standard look and feel, while at the same time maintaining their own organisational branding.

A number of organisations which had developed web subject guides to the law were contacted. Nine organisations including university libraries, the Law and Justice Foundation of NSW, the Parliamentary Library and the National Library expressed an interest.

Sue Scott from the Law and Justice Foundation of NSW acted as project manager and was responsible for organising meetings, maintaining communication between the members, and developing and monitoring timelines. A number of meetings were held in conjunction with major conferences to discuss and refine the concept. An email discussion list was established by Murdoch University. The process was very much an evolutionary one with the subject areas, selection criteria and 'look and feel' evolving in response to feedback. As the project became more well-known additional organisations joined.

By July 2000 we had a structure whereby each organisation maintained their own page on their own site, while at the same time having a common 'WebLaw' structure. This included the WebLaw logo, a table of contents and a predictable order and name for categories, e.g. Family Law (Law and Justice Foundation of NSW) and Industrial Relations (University of Sydney)

Despite the success of WebLaw it suffered from a number of limitations. It wasn't possible to search across sites, it wasn't possible to carry out targeted searches, there was no way of checking links across sites and there was no way of alerting users to new resources which had been added to the database. Also, the Law and

Justice Foundation was unable to commit to providing project management past July 2000.

## **WEBLAW STAGE 2**

The Weblaw project received a major impetus with the successful application for a Research Infrastructure Equipment and Facilities (RIEF) grant from the Australian Research Council (File no. R00107860). The indicative funding provided was \$100,000 in addition to contributions from the collaborating institutions. The funding was for 2001.

The collaborating institutions are the University of Queensland, the Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales, University of Sydney, University of Melbourne, Murdoch University, Adelaide University, National Library of Australia, Australian National University and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library. Representatives from each of these institutions form the Project Steering Committee which is largely responsible for policy and planning decisions. In addition, there is a Local Implementation Committee, comprised of University of Queensland library management. The University of Queensland provides project management.

In addition to the original nine RIEF Grant partners, there are also a number of 'Contributors' (the full list of WebLaw participants is provided in the introduction above). All organisations sign an agreement which specifies requirements and sets out the intellectual property arrangements for the project.

### ***Gateway architecture***

The second stage of WebLaw is based on a central database model. Representatives from participating institutions log on to a central server (housed at University of Queensland) and create and edit metadata records onto the database. Metadata for each resource is added via a predesigned template. A search on the WebLaw homepage will result in a search of the database and presentation of the search results according to an agreed template.

### ***Resource description***

All selected resources are described according to fixed and documented metadata in order to enable structured searching. The metadata is structured in well-defined semantic fields, as opposed to free-text annotations. The Justice Sector Metadata Scheme was selected for use by the WebLaw project.<sup>2</sup>

All resources are indexed according to the LIAC (Legal Information Access Centre) subject classification scheme.<sup>3</sup> It is envisaged that additions will be made to the basic LIAC thesaurus in response to the specific needs of the various subject areas.

### ***RESPONDING TO CUSTOMER NEEDS***

Research into customer needs is essential for the WebLaw gateway to evolve into a proactive solution to information overload. This research will be carried out in a range of ways including focus groups, interviews with researchers, analysis of suggestions sent to the website, online surveys, analysis of website usage statistics and peer assessment.

### ***FUTURE FUNDING***

WebLaw, like many Australian gateways, has been funded for a limited period of time from a Commonwealth government grant. The challenge now is to find alternative sources of support, either cash or in-kind, to allow the database to be maintained and to grow in response to customer needs. The three models generally accepted as being available are sponsorship, consultancies and a subscription-based service.

There are various pros and cons associated with each of these alternatives. In the final analysis, if the WebLaw gateway lives up to its potential to be an essential resource for the Australian legal research community, the impetus to keep it viable will continue. For this reason the effective promotion and success of this second stage of WebLaw during the next six months is crucial.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.lawfoundation.net.au/olap/guidelines/metaintro/html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.lawfoundation.net.au/olap/guidelines/subjects.html>



## **COOPERATIVE PROJECTS – SOME OBSERVATIONS**

In conclusion, we would like to share some of our observations about cooperative projects with you. Cooperation, whether it be in the form of partnerships, strategic alliances, or networks is becoming increasingly common. A number of factors have led to this: decreased resources, increased potential for cooperation as a result of the web, improved communication and the blurring of boundaries between the government, universities and private industry.

Cooperation has demonstrable benefits and can lead to better quality outcomes and increased efficiencies. The reality is, however, quite often different from the rhetoric and it is worthwhile being aware of some of the issues involved before establishing a cooperative project. Based on our experience with this project, we identified the following factors as contributing to the success of WebLaw. We also outline several of the challenges facing a cooperative project of this nature.

### ***What helps?***

The WebLaw project has been relatively trouble free. We believe that the key to this success has been flexibility, common goals and an iterative approach.

### ***A Sharing Culture***

There has been a great willingness to share and work collaboratively. This may be because of the sharing 'culture' of librarians, demonstrated through projects such as the Australian Bibliographic Network and the National Union Catalogue. Librarians are also accustomed to dealing with common standards for describing information. This culture does not necessarily exist in other industries.

### ***Flexible, iterative approach***

As previously discussed WebLaw evolved. It did not begin with a set of rules that everyone had to follow. This allowed participating organisations to feel that they could help to shape the project. Flexibility is essential to the success of cooperative projects and there needs to be a willingness to adapt to the needs of others. This ties in with a culture of sharing and recognising that the benefits of cooperation outweigh the disadvantages.



### *Communication*

Consistent, effective communication is *essential* to success of a cooperative project for a number of reasons. It is important to keep the project in the forefront of people's consciousness – everyone has their own workload and deadlines to meet and the tasks associated with a cooperative project will often be given lowest priority. It is also important to deal with problems as they arise.

The means of communication needs to be appropriate. Email is very effective for general announcements and procedural communication but not as good for discussion and feedback; face-to-face meetings and teleconferences are much better for this. If there is the slightest whiff of dissent, don't touch email – get on the phone immediately.

### *Support from management*

It is vital for each participant to have full management support and to build responsibilities for the cooperative project into job descriptions. If this isn't done there is a risk that the work on the cooperative project will not be seen as real work. In the case of WebLaw the management of the participating institutions have been very supportive.

### *Branding*

Branding is a difficult area. In this era of competitive funding institutions need to be able to point to a project as one of their achievements. Organisations need to feel that the contribution they make is adequately acknowledged. Unfortunately this can often result in 'logo overload' and disagreements over the level of contribution. On the flip side, one of the beauties of cooperation is that for far less effort an organisation can still claim ownership.

### *Critical mass*

Success builds success. Management will be much more supportive of a successful project and others will want to join you. It's worth putting in the extra effort in the beginning to make sure that the project builds this critical mass.

### *Project management*

We believe that it is very difficult to manage large-scale cooperative projects without a designated project manager. A designated person needs to be responsible for ensuring that deadlines are met, information is communicated, the project is promoted and problems are addressed as they arise. This does not need to be a full-time position, but it does need to be built into someone's duties.

### *Challenges*

#### *Meeting deadlines*

One of the most difficult issues to deal with in carrying out cooperative projects is that participants tend not to meet deadlines. This is most probably because participants have their own work to do – they may be enthusiastic and want to participate but their own deadlines always intrude. The project manager often has limited authority to make people meet deadlines. Some of the strategies we have used to overcome this problem include making sure there is high level support for the project from each participating organisation, building this factor into timelines, having differing real and publicised deadlines, and having a high level of patience and understanding.

#### *Quality*

Ensuring the quality of the overall product is difficult when a number of different organisations are responsible for the content. Once again the project manager often has limited control over the process. A range of strategies can be used to address this including training, feedback, peer review, and checks undertaken by the project manager. Ultimately there needs to be clear guidelines that must be met and clear consequences if they are not. It is important to address this issue, as quality is a significant element in the success of a cooperative project.

### **CONCLUSION**

The strengths of WebLaw lie in its cooperative nature and the fact that it is evolving in response to need. WebLaw has the potential to evolve into the key gateway to secondary legal resources for Australian legal researchers. Put simply, WebLaw hopes to do for secondary legal material what AustLII and SCALEPlus

do for primary legal material – provide free, accurate and timely access to Internet resources from a single web address.

We welcome feedback from WebLaw users. If organisations are interested in knowing more about the project, or becoming a WebLaw contributor, please contact:

**Clare Cappa**

University of Queensland,  
Coordinator, WebLaw Legal Gateway Project  
Ph: (07) 3365 2252  
Email: [c.cappa@library.uq.edu.au](mailto:c.cappa@library.uq.edu.au)

or

**Sue Scott**

Law and Justice Foundation of NSW,  
Chair, WebLaw Project Steering Committee  
Ph: (02) 9221 3900  
Email: [sscott@lawfoundation.net.au](mailto:sscott@lawfoundation.net.au)

## ***BIBLIOGRAPHY***

Cribb, Gulcin; Taylor, Chris and Van Kempen, Nicole 2001, 'From Subject Gateway to Dynamic Web Space: the Evolution of the Australasian Virtual Engineering Library', *Information Online 2000*, Sydney, 16–18 January.

Taylor, Chris 2001, 'Gateways: a cottage industry going places?', Presentation at ALIA, *Untangling the Web*, State Library of Queensland, 8 August.

Pitschmann, Louis A. 2001, *Building Sustainable Collections of Free Third-Party Web Resources*, Digital Library Federation, Washington, D.C.

National Library of Australia, *Australian Subject Gateways Forum*, <http://www.nla.gov.au/initiatives/sg>, last accessed 20 August 2001.