

Internet Newsletter for Lawyers - Irish Extra

Edited by Delia Venables

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A Review of FirstLaw

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FirstLaw (www.firstlaw.ie), the brainchild of Bart D. Daly, BL, is a must for anyone who needs access to an up-to-date, reliable source of Irish primary legal material on a regular basis.

Bart Daly is very well respected in Ireland as a legal publisher. He committed himself to providing Irish primary materials in electronic format when they were unavailable elsewhere. He was also instrumental in reviving the "Pink Sheets" which is an index of Supreme Court and High Court written judgments. These are available for 2001 and 2002 free of charge from the opening page of the FirstLaw web site.

Unreported Judgments

Thomas O'Malley, in *Sources of Law: An Introduction to legal research and writing* (2nd edition, 2001), said:

"Accuracy, currency and comprehensiveness are the hallmarks of good law reporting. Irish law reports have a good reputation for accuracy, but the same cannot be said of their currency, less still of their comprehensiveness."

All judgments are unreported judgments until they appear in a law report series and even for those judgments that are reported, this may take some time. A judgment is chosen for reporting because it contributes to the development of the law. However, many important Irish judgments remain unreported. Lexis gives access to Irish unreported judgments from 1985 but these are not comprehensive.

Although FirstLaw only gives access to the reports from 1999 onwards, they are timely and they are comprehensive. Usually they appear within one to two weeks of them being made available from the Courts Service. They also include a head note of the case, which provides added value for the user.

FirstLaw contains, from 1999, unreported, written judgments of the Supreme Court, High Court, Court of Criminal Appeal, and Court Martial Appeal Courts. Selected Circuit Court judgments are also available. The coverage also includes Competition Authority decisions, selected Employment Appeal Tribunal decisions and European Court of Justice decisions. In addition to the superior courts, these other decisions are becoming important in the development of case law. A larger archive of these judgments would prove invaluable.

Legislation

Acts and Statutory Instruments are available from 1999. Coverage is complete and an abstract of each Act or SI is provided. This is a useful feature and distinguishes it from other available online sources of legislation. Although fuller archives are freely available elsewhere on the Web, FirstLaw, being updated daily, does have the advantage of being up-to-date.

Current Awareness

The Daily Update updates case law, legislation and news items on a daily basis. The news service provides national and international news articles. Again a brief summary of the content of the article is provided with a link to its full text. The full text of the article further provides a link to its original source. If the original source is a subscription service further access is not available without having a subscription.

Welcome to FirstLaw.

Our [Current Awareness](#) service tracks and digests legislation and judgments from January 1999:

- Judgments: Supreme Court, High Court, Court of Criminal Appeal, Court Martial Courts, (selected) Circuit Court and (selected) Employment Appeals Tribunals
- Acts
- Statutory Instruments
- Competition Authority Decisions
- Appeal Cases of the Revenue Commissioners
- Irish and international legal news

Enrol for a ***free trial*** and a username and password will be emailed to you.

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FirstLaw is an electronic online subscription service that gives access to Irish primary legal materials. It is a niche product and although it may not have access to a major series of law reports or major legal journal titles, and coverage may not include US or other common law jurisdiction content, it provides access to the basic materials required by Irish legal practitioners. FirstLaw gives access to the statutes and statutory instruments from 1999 and unreported judgments of the superior and other courts from 1999. It also provides a Current Awareness service that tracks and digests legislation, judgments and relevant national and international news articles. It is updated daily and is backed up by a weekly email alert service. The week's content is emailed to subscribers every Monday and Wednesday.

The News service appears to cover back to late 2001. It is not specified how far back it does go. Although not very scientific, by trawling through the results pages of a search for a common term, I established 2001 as being the probable date. It would also be useful to know what news sources are being covered. The option of a personalised/customised service might also prove attractive.

User Friendliness

Despite its very useful content, the look and feel of FirstLaw has been underdeveloped and thus the service loses as a result. In my opinion, there is a need for more guidance and directional information for the user.

The Welcome to FirstLaw page although giving some information on the service, does not give the impression that the user is at the opening page of the service. The **Next** button at the bottom of the page looks as if it is taking the user into an application for a free trial of FirstLaw rather than into the main pages of the service.

Beyond the opening page there are no help buttons or directional instructions on screen to point the user on their way. Other than the information provided on the first page there does not appear to be information on the content or coverage provided by FirstLaw.

Searching

Once past the Welcome page, one can access the search function directly by clicking on the **Search** link in the panel on the left of the page. All documents may be searched or Acts, SIs or Unreported judgments may be chosen for searching separately. The Acts, SIs and Unreported judgments may also be viewed or searched by clicking on their link, also in the panel on the left of the page.

The **Advanced** search option is probably the better option to choose for searching. The link to access this is on the basic search page. The advanced search allows the user to refine their search by type of document, by date, by FirstLaw ID, by court, by Judge, abstract or case title. Here it is possible to include spelling or word variations or link it to the thesaurus. It is also possible to retrieve documents by relevance or by date and to use the Boolean operators "and" and "or".

It is also possible to specify the number of documents retrieved. This is set to 25 by default. This is a useful option if only the most relevant documents are required but beware, by leaving this set at 25, only 25 will be retrieved. It does not mean only 25 will be displayed per page.

From the basic search screen I feel there is a need for more help and guidance. Tips on entering search terms would prove useful to the user. From the basic search screen it is not clear whether the usual search functions such as Boolean operators (and, or, not), word stemming, truncation and so on are supported. Only when searching from the **Advanced** search page is it clear that these functions are available.

On carrying out a search, a list of successful hits appears on screen. Again I thought more information could be provided for the user. For example, it does not say how many documents were retrieved or how the results are displayed. In the Advanced search one can choose to display results by date or by relevance but from the basic search screen this is not clear. Results are sorted by relevance and to the left of the list of results a small grey

square is displayed. By hovering the mouse over this square the relevance percentage appears.

Conclusion

FirstLaw may not have the scope of content or coverage of some of the larger services, but what it does provide is directly relevant to the Irish legal profession. Its reliability and currency are its particularly strong features.

At approximately one-third of the price of some of the larger services it does provide value for money. In fact some of the information such as the "Pink Pages" is free. In addition, only when one goes to view a document is one required to log on, thus it is possible to see what is there, including some basic information about the document, without actually being able to access it.

For access to an extremely reliable and up-to-date service, directly relevant to Irish legal practitioners, FirstLaw is the one to have.

Nuala Byrne has been the Law Librarian of the Director of Public Prosecutions in Dublin since 2001. The Library is on two sites, with 6 staff members. Before that, she was Business Librarian at Dublin City University. Email nbyrne@dppireland.ie.

Context launches Irish Reports and Digests on the Web

Following an agreement with The Incorporated Council of Law Reporting for Ireland, electronic publisher Context Limited has added another prestigious case law series to its online legal research service, Justis.com (www.justis.com).

Electronic Irish Reports and Digests, also available as a Justis CD-ROM, covers over 80 years of the most authoritative Irish case reports.

The Irish Reports contains the full text of published cases dating back to 1919, longer than any other electronic series of Irish case reports. It is the most comprehensive series of reports, covering decisions of major importance of the superior courts of Ireland. The reports are compiled by practising barristers and are cited authoritatively in Irish courts and tribunals.

The Irish Digests provides a summary, including catchwords and headnote, of each case reported in The Irish Reports, Northern Ireland Reports, Irish Law Reports Monthly, Irish Law Times Reports, Irish Jurist Reports and Irish Law Journal.

Context's Projects Director, Bernadette Jansen Op De Haar, said: "This new online service represents another important milestone in our continuing fruitful collaboration with the Incorporated Council. It is the only way to access a digital archive of Irish case law spanning almost 85 years and combines the authority of the Council's reporting with the speed and accuracy of searching in Justis."

Electronic Irish Reports and Digests reproduces the familiar appearance and correct pagination of the printed version, and printouts from the database are readily accepted in Irish courts. The database can also be searched in conjunction with other Justis titles, such as CELEX and The Law Reports.

Developments in Irish Firm Sites by Siobhan Heaney

A number of Irish law firms have given their websites a face-lift over the last few months. (For web site addresses of the firms described here, please see the web version of this article at www.venables.co.uk/n0307irishfirms.htm)

Four of the country's largest firms - A&L Goodbody, Arthur Cox, William Fry and Matheson Ormsby Prentice all have revamped their sites. All are well designed, easy to navigate and, in most instances, updated on a regular basis.

Their design is faultless - crisp, clean, easy to navigate and to read online. The only problem with these sites is the fact that none of them have any distinguishing features. What these firms do have in common is a complement of highly qualified and expert staff and impressive premises, but none of them have used their websites as an opportunity to differentiate themselves from their competitors. The results are faultless, well-designed, content-heavy sites with a very high 'yawn factor'. Their websites have seemed to converge in style to such an extent that these firms could be mistaken as part of the same practice! Has there been a merger between these firms that we don't know of?!

Unlike some of the large UK firms, none of the bigger Irish firms provide deal room or 'client only' access facilities. (Arthur Cox did, at one stage have such a facility, but this is no longer evident on their revamped site). This is no surprise given that there has been a significant slow-down in corporate activity in Ireland in the last year with the consequent reduction in work in this area of practice for the larger firms.

More Developments

McAleese & Co is a new Dublin-based legal practice, established in September 2002. Their website is a simple and straightforward site that is easy to navigate and is full of content. While the site has a black background which can sometimes be difficult to read online and to print it still provides a good example of how a small firm's site can be effective and eye-catching.

The publicity page of this site has a number of newspaper articles and radio interviews with principals of the firm. This is an interesting feature, and one which makes a lot of sense, given the firm's wealth of expertise in the area of media law. It provides a good example of how even the smallest of firms can leverage their knowledge base as a marketing tool. The site is full of content such as legal reviews and case digests, but this is hidden away on each of the practice profile pages rather than being made available as a separate link from the home page.

A distinctive feature of this site is the section giving the solicitors' profiles. Instead of just using photographs to complement each profile, the firm have instead used cartoon caricatures. This not only distinguishes the site and the firm as one with a different approach, but also provides a welcome dash of humour with no negative impact on the credentials or expertise of the firm.

A round of applause to McAleese & Co for daring to be different!



Hayes solicitors have recently launched their website to coincide with their change of name from Hayes & Sons. Again, this is a content-heavy site with plenty of articles on a variety of legal topics.

Ivor Fitzpatrick have redesigned their website, which is a substantial improvement on their previous site. It is clear, easy to read and navigate and continues the noticeable trend of placing legal news and updates on the homepage.

JA Sinnott of Enniscorthy, a small firm whose site has consistently been updated with legal content, has a new website. They have made the decision to place their legal news updates on the site's homepage with the facility to subscribe to their newsletter and receive it by email.

Two small to medium-sized firms in Dublin have redesigned their sites in the last year. Both TP Robinson and Kilroys have decided that content is king and placed up to date articles on legal developments to the fore of their sites. Both also provide an e-zine or mail subscription facility if you wish to receive the updates by email. Kilroys, like some of the larger firms, places links to recent articles and updates on the site's home page. Their K-Zine is a newsletter on legal developments relating to e-business and is sent out in html format which is also available in a printable format on the site.

O'Donnell Sweeney has one of the few flash legal websites of which I am aware. (Binchys Solicitors also have a flash-designed site but this hasn't been updated with any significant content in nearly three years!) There is also an html version of the site. While I am sceptical about the use of flash technology, the site is well designed and easy to navigate. The pages are clear and uncluttered, with pop-up screens. Watch out for the staff photographs which move slightly and can be a little disconcerting! Content-wise it has news and publications which are kept up to date on a regular basis. The 'ODS for Clients' link is not a deal-room facility but instead is the location for storing articles on recent cases and legal developments of interest to clients of the firm. If you stick to the html version of the site you will find it easy to navigate and read.

Conclusion

It would seem that law firm websites in Ireland have reached a plateau with little development in the way of web-based legal services or client-only access facilities. This is perhaps not surprising given the slow-down in corporate activity in Ireland and the taming of the Celtic Tiger. However, it would be good to see some firms, particularly larger ones with more resources, using their websites as a means of differentiating themselves to a greater extent than they are currently doing.

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