Integrated legal information retrieval – new developments and educational challenges
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In the last decade, lawyers have come to rely on digital information sources in almost every aspect of their work. Traditional information sources such as books and journals have to a large extend been replaced by their digital counterparts. Many law firms have already responded to this development and have abandoned their paper libraries in whole or in part.[1] This transfer from paper to digital legal information has made it necessary also to adapt the way in which legal research is conducted. Not only because digital resources are often organized differently and make use of various specific 'disclosure mechanisms', but also because the increasing 'completeness' of the digital collection (the great majority of new or re-issued publication being available digitally) opens up for entirely new ways to conduct legal research.

The latter is specifically true if efforts are made to combine as many relevant sources as possible, not only 'open access' ones but also, for instance, periodicals and books from commercial publishers. This objective, sometimes referred to by the term 'content integration' or 'content aggregation', not only simplifies searching (in one large collection instead of several smaller ones) but also makes it possible to cross-link information in several ways and even to implement certain forms of 'conceptual information retrieval'. Examples of the latter include the automatic classification of documents and the searching for documents 'similar to' one that was already retrieved.[1] Furthermore, the filing of search results and the inclusion of signaling mechanisms (which point out new additions to the content to users, for instance based on previous queries) can be brought to a new level in systems like these.

Making use of such more advanced options requires specific skills. Many law schools already offer 'information skills' courses to their students.[1] These usually cover the basics – which data collections are available, how does keyword search work, how can results be refined, how can a retrieved document be saved or printed – but often skip the more advanced functions. In itself that is understandable, especially because such more advanced functions often require a certain level of familiarity with the wide range of different sources available within modern integrated disclosure systems, which undergraduate students might not yet possess. But it is not just that, even experienced lawyers sometimes have trouble using advanced search tools. They know exactly what they are looking for, but lack knowledge about certain technical aspects of searching, and therefore get suboptimal results.

Given all this, it is essential both to improve education with respect to the use of advanced disclosure systems for digital legal content, and to continue efforts to make these systems – not only the basic functions, but also the most powerful options – easier and more straightforward to use. Examples of both will be given in this contribution.