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The User Experience of the Internet as a Legal Help Service: *Defining standards for the next generation of user-friendly online legal services*

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ABSTRACT

This Article presents empirical research about how the Internet is currently failing laypeople who are searching online for legal help to their life problems and what a future agenda of user-centered standards and practices for better legal help on the Internet could be. It first examines the existing literature about how the Internet can best be used as legal resource and the status quo of legal help sites. Then it surveys and examines negative consumer reports and reviews of legal help websites. Finally, it presents the first study of how laypeople search for resources to resolve a legal issue, how they scout and assess legal help services online, and their feedback on which existing legal help sites they consider to be the most usable, the most trustworthy, and the most valuable. This data is useful to propose new best practices about how these tech-based services can best serve laypeople, in terms of usability, quality of service, and protection of the users' interests. It also confirms the importance of the Internet as a legal help service and highlights the need for more research and development on better online legal help sites that fit laypeople's needs and preferences.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Introduction	398
	A. Why a Focus on User Experience as a Metric?	402
	B. This Study’s Goals and Offerings	404
	C. Structure of this Study	407
II.	The Design Research Approach	409
III.	Literature Review: What We Know About How People Use Online Legal Services	411
	A. A New Era of Online Legal Services	411
	B. People Are Using the Internet to Find Legal Services	413
	C. The Poor State of Current Online Services	415
	D. How Laypeople Use Online Legal Services	417
IV.	Findings From Online Consumer Complaints About Legal Websites	422
V.	Questionnaire & Task Study of How Laypeople Tackle Legal Challenges on the Internet	429
	A. Participants	431
VI.	Key Findings of the Study	432
	A. Workflows	434
	B. Past Use of the Internet for Legal Help	435
	C. Workflow in Response to Fictional Legal Issue.....	437
	D. Key Takeaways of Workflows	440

- 1. The Internet Is the First Response, Specifically for a Handful of Functions 440
- 2. Google Search Is the Portal to Internet Legal Resources 440
- 3. The Jurisdictional Factor Is Not Always Considered..... 441
- 4. Defining User Needs, From Users’ Failpoints During Workflows..... 442
- 5. User Needs Emerging from Frustration with Past Legal Searches Online..... 442
- 6. User Needs from Failpoints that Arose During the Survey Searches 445
- E. Preferences and Evaluation of Sites 447
 - 1. Comparison of Different Sites’ Offerings 448
- VII. Takeaways from the Findings 457
 - A. Summary of User Requirements for Online Legal Services 457
 - B. Key Takeaways 459
 - 1. Takeaways for Online Legal Service Providers 460
 - 2. The Need for New Branding and Search Initiatives 462
- VIII. Conclusion..... 464



I. INTRODUCTION

Technology has entered the world of legal services and promises to improve how people access and navigate the justice system. Practitioners and scholars are calling for development of tech-based, interactive resources that help laypeople navigate their legal problems.¹ Legal futurist Richard Susskind points to the possibility for online legal services to democratize access to legal services.

It is early days to be sure, but within a small number of years these [online legal service] systems will be commonplace in helping non-lawyers to recognize when they need legal help and to select the best sources of advice, as well as in actually offering them practical guidance.²...

[These online legal services] will make the law available to people who would otherwise have no affordable sources of legal help. This I call the realization of the ‘latent legal market’ — those countless occasions in the lives of many people when they need legal help and would benefit from legal help but, until now, they have been unable to secure this assistance (whether to resolve, contain, or avoid problems, or indeed to afford them some benefit). Online legal service, therefore, will liberate the latent legal market.³

¹ *E.g.*, James Sandman, Rethinking Access to Justice, Remarks at Hawaii Access to Justice Conference (June 20, 2014); Thomas Clarke, *Litigant Portals Provide a New Approach to Help Self-Represented Litigants*, in TRENDS IN STATE COURTS, 41–43 (2015); William E. Hornsby, Jr., *Gaming the System: Approaching 100% Access to Legal Services Through Online Games*, 88 CHI.-KENT L. REV. 917 (2013).

² RICHARD SUSSKIND, TOMORROW’S LAWYERS: AN INTRODUCTION TO YOUR FUTURE 90–91 (2013).

³ *Id.* at 91.

The promise is that there can be a new generation of online legal products and services that allow laypeople to find and pursue legal help. There are calls for technology to increase the capability of civil legal service providers to meet the legal needs of all people.⁴ Practitioners advocate that more intelligent legal technology be built, so that both lawyers and laypeople can increase their capacity to solve legal problems and address the access to justice gap.⁵ Johnson trumpets the potential for online tools to allow laypeople to access legal services and letting them “overcome their fears of dealing with lawyers and the potential complexities of legal issues,” so they can access help “at their own pace [and] control the scope of both their legal issue and the legal assistance they receive.”⁶ These changes in technology will offer “an alternative source of affordable legal services [and can] help fill the gap left by overburdened and shrinking legal aid groups.”⁷ The vision is that online websites and tools will let any person with an Internet connection find legal information, figure out her specific issue, and navigate the legal process to resolution.⁸

Additionally, the hope is that online legal services will help more laypeople access legal services than currently do. Scholars expect that tech-enabled services will open up access to people who currently have difficulty accessing legal services, including those in rural areas, without free time during standard operating hours, with mobility limitations, or without private transportation.⁹ Additionally, tech-based legal help offers many advantages over face-to-face service, including scalability for

⁴ E.g., John Greacen, *Introduction*, in *Using Technology to Enhance Access to Justice*, 26 HARV. J.L. & TECH. 243, 243–44 (2012).

⁵ E.g., Anna Ronkainen, *Software Usability and Legal Informatics*, 8 (2012), http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2162380.

⁶ Chris Johnson, *Leveraging Technology to Deliver Legal Services*, 23 HARV. J.L. & TECH. 259, 268–69 (2009).

⁷ *Id.* at 281.

⁸ See Jane Ribadeneyra, *Web-based Legal Services Delivery Capabilities*, in *Using Technology to Enhance Access to Justice*, 26 HARV. J.L. & TECH. 246, 246–47 (2012).

⁹ E.g., Nigel J. Balmer et al., *Just a Phone Call Away: Is Telephone Advice Enough?*, 34 J. SOC. WELFARE & FAM. L. 63 (2012).

service providers and convenience, immediacy, and lower cost for lay users.¹⁰ Further, there is a need for new ways to engage and support people with legal help, especially as recent studies indicate that many people with civil justice issues do not reach out to experts, such as courts, lawyers, law librarians, or otherwise, for help with their issues.¹¹

Some groups are developing tools that may fulfill this promise of increased access to legal help. The Legal Services Corporation sponsors the Technology Innovation Grant Program to fund new technology-based legal aid programs.¹² The ABA supported 14 different access to justice projects from 2012 to 2013 to implement online legal services for laypeople.¹³ Several nonprofits and for-profit businesses have developed websites, mobile apps, and other software tools that aim to serve laypeople's legal needs.¹⁴ Law schools have clinics, courses, and hackathons through which students create concepts and prototypes for new models of legal services to increase access to

¹⁰ *See id.*

¹¹ *See* REBECCA L. SANDEFUR, ACCESSING JUSTICE IN THE CONTEMPORARY USA : FINDINGS FROM THE COMMUNITY NEEDS AND SERVICES STUDY 11 (2014).

¹² All of the LSC's grantees and past projects are listed on its website *Technology Initiative Grant Program*, LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION, <http://www.lsc.gov/grants-grantee-resources/our-grant-programs/tig> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

¹³ The ABA access to justice innovation and expansion grants are listed on their program's site *ATJ Innovation and Expansion Grant Resources*, AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION, http://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_aid_indigent_defendants/initiatives/resource_center_for_access_to_justice/resources---information-on-key-atj-issues/grants.html (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

¹⁴ *See* Ribadeneyra, *supra* note 8, at 247–56 (describing court and legal aid websites, interactive resources and remote assistance, document assembly, and e-filing online services); Abhijeet Chavan, *Mobile Strategies for Legal Services*, in *Using Technology to Enhance Access to Justice*, 26 HARV. J.L. & TECH. 267, 272–73 (2012) (summarizing the many new mobile apps for delivery of legal services); Ronald W. Staudt, *All the Wild Possibilities: Technology that Attacks Barriers to Access to Justice*, 42 LOY. L.A. L. REV. 1117, 1127–28 (2009) (describing document assembly technologies and other innovations servicing the needs of laypeople connected to the Internet).

justice. These hackathons and classes are devoted to coming up with new ways to deliver legal services to laypeople.¹⁵

However, there are open and pressing questions about the capacity, effect, and quality of this new generation of tech-enabled legal services aimed at laypeople, such as what are the standards and best practices for these online resources and tools to ensure that they fulfill the promise of increasing access to justice. Simply putting legal information and resources online will not by itself increase laypeople's access to it. The information must be presented in usable and user-friendly ways so that it will be of value to people beyond experts like lawyers and law librarians.¹⁶

In the current push to build new and better legal resources there is not yet a set of principles and findings to guide this development which could ensure that resources are being deployed wisely and the products being developed are serving the needs of the target lay users. This Article proposes that as this new generation of tech-enabled services are created to address the access to justice gap, the voice of the laypeople in the form of their preferences, needs, fears, frustrations, and workflows must be central to setting out the requirements and

¹⁵ Stanford Law School runs classes, workshops, and hackathons on designing new modes of legal services through its Legal Design Lab. LEGAL DESIGN LAB, <http://legaltechdesign.com> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015). Georgetown Law School offers a class on Technology, Innovation, and Law Practice, in which students build legal apps and compete in Iron Tech Lawyer. *Iron Tech Lawyer*, GEORGETOWN LAW PROGRAM IN LEGAL TECHNOLOGIES, <http://www.law.georgetown.edu/academics/centers-institutes/legal-profession/legal-technologies/iron-tech/> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015). Michigan State Law has the Reinvent Law Laboratory in which students design new legal service models and draft business plans for them. *Reinvent Law Laboratory*, MICHIGAN STATE LAW SCHOOL, <http://reinventlaw.com/> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015). Loyola New Orleans has students build new legal aid technology products. *The Technology and Innovation Clinic*, LOYOLA COLLEGE OF LAW, NEW ORLEANS, <https://loyolalawtech.org/> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

¹⁶ David R. Newman & U. Doherty, *Making the Law Accessible to Non-Lawyers: Effects of Different Kinds of Expertise on Perceived Usability of Online Legal Services*, 27 BEHAV. & INFO. TECH. 423 (2008).

standards for these services. These factors can all be captured by one central metric “user experience.” To measure the quality of online tools and sites, user experience can be a key quality metric that assesses whether they meet the needs, abilities, mental models, and behaviors of the “users” or the target audience that are meant to be served by them.

A. Why a Focus on User Experience as a Metric?

User experience is a metric that is not common in legal services compared to the metric of what outcome is achieved (*i.e.*, is a person able to find legally correct information or is she able to achieve the most favorable resolution for her case). This Article posits that user experience must be valued in legal services as a key metric to complement outcome-based metrics. It is already a common metric and strategy in other fields from business¹⁷ to health care. User experience is not as simple as does a person “feel good” while using the legal service or does the service “look good.” Rather, user experience is defined as whether people are engaged with the service—meaning, are they able to understand it, can they use it intuitively, and do they find enough value in the service to spend time (and perhaps also money) on it.¹⁸

The definition of user experience bleeds into the question of outcomes. If a service does not have a good user experience, then the user might not use it correctly or efficiently. The user might also disengage from the service if they find it too confusing, challenging, or seemingly without value for them. A bad user experience can frustrate a user, prevent them from receiving services that they understand and can navigate with

¹⁷ HUMAN FACTORS INTERNATIONAL, *THE BUSINESS VALUE OF UX: TAKING ROI TO AN INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL* (2014), <http://info.humanfactors.com/acton/attachment/4167/4167:f-0146/1/>.

¹⁸ See Effie L-C. Law et al., *Understanding, Scoping and Defining User Experience: A Survey Approach*, PROCEEDINGS OF THE SIGCHI CONFERENCE ON HUMAN FACTORS IN COMPUTING SYSTEMS 719 (2009) (exploring the concept of user experience in full, from the perspective of human computer interaction and design professionals).

confidence, and might derail them from continuing on the path of finding legal help. It could also have spillover effects in which the one person shares their bad experience with networks of friends and family and then they in turn are discouraged from seeking out legal help. User experience is important to the person's journey of getting to a "legal outcome." Bad user experiences can prevent people from reaching any outcome at all or may lead them to do so in an inefficient and off-putting way. The quality of the user experience is important both to the legal outcome and to the user's sense of confidence, procedural justice, and fairness of the system.¹⁹

A user experience-driven quality metric can encourage higher engagement, comprehension, and follow-through with legal services. Otherwise, the danger exists that these new services will be built for the needs and preferences of the service providers (*e.g.*, the courts, the legal aid groups, or the vendors) rather than the laypeople they are intending to serve. Without a user-centered perspective, the services may ultimately fail to attract or support people in need of legal help.

The concept of user experience is increasingly salient in conversations about legal help, innovations for access to justice, and technology.²⁰ The California Judicial Council recently sponsored a conference, *Beyond the Bench*, which brought together all kinds of legal and social service workers interested in improving the family law systems in the state.²¹ They focused the conference on the concept of user experience. The Legal Services Corporation Technology Innovation Grant (LSC TIG) group chose "user experience" as their plenary session topic in

¹⁹ See John A. Clarke et al., *Usability is Free: Improving Efficiency by Making the Court More User Friendly*, FUTURE TRENDS IN STATE COURTS 76 (2011) (discussing how the Los Angeles County Court system has given priority to the metrics of user-friendliness and usability in order to improve outcomes for court litigants, especially self-represented ones).

²⁰ *E.g.*, Clarke, *supra* note 19.

²¹ The Judicial Council of California, *BEYOND THE BENCH 23: USER EXPERIENCE* (2015), <http://www.courts.ca.gov/btb2015.htm> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

January 2016 conference.²² Legal actors recognize that it's not only getting legally correct information presented to people but crafting experiences for people that engage them, are intuitive, and give users a sense of confidence, smoothness, coordination, and effectiveness of the service.

B. This Study's Goals and Offerings

This study offers an initial set of research findings that define what these user experience standards are. These findings and resulting standards can guide how online legal services can be created to be useful and usable to lay audiences. It is part of a larger design research undertaking aimed at studying and creating innovations in how laypeople access legal support. This Article provides fundamental insights and specifications that lay the groundwork for future design and development initiatives in which these new kinds of services can be built, implemented, and tested according to these quality metrics. Aside from promoting better interventions, the study aims to focus discussion, funding, and development of legal services around user experience as a key metric.

The study begins from a human-centered design perspective, examining the experience of laypeople in the legal system with a focus on what their current workflows and needs are and what they find usable, useful, and valuable. Are legal information and resources easily found, easy to use, and with meaningful content for laypeople, and how do people define what a quality "user experience" with a legal help site is? Beginning from this perspective, the Article proposes that organizations creating new online legal help tools should do so only after understanding who their target audience is and what this audience wants functionally and experientially from a tool. The user research should guide the technology development.

²² Legal Services Corporation, *2016 Technology Innovation Grant Conference Schedule*, TECHNOLOGY INNOVATION GRANT CONFERENCE (2015), http://www.lsc.gov/sites/default/files/attach/2015/12/2016TIGConference_PrintSchedule.pdf.

Online legal service providers—from courts to startups—should know who their lay users are and understand users' approaches, requirements, and workflows so that the services they develop prove valuable, address the users' needs, and will actually be used.

This Article focuses on the user experience of a particular type of lay user: lower-middle class, Internet-savvy users with a high school education and good command of the English language. Further research needs to be done by academics, courts, and other legal actors to define the needs and preferences of other types of users. Of particular interest for improving access to justice will be study of the user experience of people with limited technological skills, with minimal knowledge of the English language, or with less than high school education. These populations are particularly challenging to serve through online legal services, but further study of their expectations, needs, and preferences could indicate what promising online service models for them could be. For now, this initial study focuses on the population that is easiest to reach through the instrument of online studies: those who are well-versed in how to use the Internet and have a strong grasp of English and thus who are apt to sign up to take an online survey.

This Article defines standards—in the form of **user requirements and guiding principles**—for developing Internet-based legal help resources with good user experience. They are based on this initial demographic and can be expanded with further research on other user groups. These requirements and principles will be useful to anyone building, supporting, or evaluating the new generation of access to justice technology. These standards also can be used to evaluate and improve existing online legal resources. Specifically, these standards include:

- **User needs** that lay out what any legal help tool must do or have, and what it must not do or have, in order to effectively get a user to a good outcome;

- **User preferences** detailing what laypeople ideally would want in order to have an engaging and satisfying experience of a legal service;
- **Common workflows** that define the steps that users currently use to solve their legal problems and which define the targets for future interventions;
- **Failpoints** observing the problems and frustrations that exist with status quo online help services in order that they can be improved and avoided;
- **Trust-markers & other engagement factors** that document how users assess the trustworthiness of a site and what else they look at while deciding whether to engage with it; and
- **General insights** into what makes an online legal help tool valuable, usable, or user-friendly.

These specific research findings feed into a more general set of findings that can be useful in creating and improving online legal help resources. First, these findings help us to **understand the user experience**. Research-informed development will serve laypeople better, ensuring that the legal help tools that are built fit the mental models, the needs, and the constraints that users have. These findings will ensure that new legal tools will be more engaging and valuable.

Second, the research **sets an agenda** for new development. By defining the status quo of users' workflows and identifying users' frustrations and needs, it lays out targets for what needs to be changed and gaps that new services could fill. It points to what kinds of interfaces and tools will best serve different types of users and thus indicates what priorities for development should be.

Finally, it begins to **define best practices**, setting out benchmarks by which to judge online legal help. As we understand users' mental models and workflows, we can define usability metrics based on them. These findings can underpin

later designs of better online legal services. They are material for future designers and developers to structure quality interactions and innovate in how to use the Internet to provide legal assistance.

C. Structure of this Study

To understand how online legal services can better be provided, this study takes a design research approach. It investigates who the target users are, what their needs, preferences, workflows, and mental models are, and then proposes what kind of new product or service would fit these user requirements. To define user requirements for online legal help, the study draws from three sources:

1. Literature that documents user behavior and requirements
2. Consumer complaints about their experiences using online legal services
3. Questionnaires with laypeople about how they use legal services online, as well as how they would use the Internet to resolve a fictional legal problem

First, it surveys the current literature that has been written on how legal services can be provided and what the user and legal system requirements are for these kinds of tools. Second, it examines consumer complaints lodged by people who have tried to use an online legal site, encountered problems, and shared their complaints in an online consumer reporting forum. Third, it uses a task-based survey to examine how fifty laypeople currently deal with legal problems and how they would use the Internet to find help for a fictional legal issue. The survey documents how these laypeople would respond to a real-life problem that has a legal dimension—in this case, an eviction notice—and what kind of searches they perform, what kind of sites they enter, and how they respond to different models of legal assistance sites. It gathers these users' feedback on which legal resource websites they consider of highest value, interrogating their notions of what makes a resource usable,

trustworthy, and of high quality. This study looks to what laypeople report these metrics to mean including how they define usability, trustworthiness, and quality legal services, in order to draft user experience standards for online legal standards.

What are the key findings of the study? Most people would like to be able to use a standard Internet search to diagnose and then proceed through resolving a legal problem. Common failpoints or frustrations are unclear search results, sites that have overly general or overly jargon-filled information, the presentation of information without action points or next steps, the placement of information behind paywalls or alongside advertisements, and the inability to know with assurance that the information is reliable. Laypeople want legal help sites that appear at the top of a search, that are affiliated with a government or other public institution that they can trust, and that have information that is at once direct, reliable, and systematic. They want official sites that present information and services with: (1) **clarity** (with easy navigation and search to quickly find the right information); (2) **open access** (so they do not have to pay or see advertisements in order to use the service); (3) **authority** (giving them confidence that they know the information is reliable and expert); (4) **comprehensiveness** (so that they can find all relevant information in one place and go from understanding to action); (5) **modern design** (visual layouts and interactive features that demonstrate the site is up-to-date and trustworthy and that give rich tools for customization and filtering of information); and (6) **conversation** (question-and-answer format with personal narratives and anecdotes to illustrate scenarios).

Laypeople express an interest in hiring lawyers for help, but they also want to use Internet-based legal services to help them understand their legal situation, learn the terminology and process, do some parts of the process themselves, and be a smarter “shopper” when deciding what legal service provider to engage. The Internet is a key form of legal service for this demographic. It is their first stop in figuring out what type of problem they are dealing with, if they have any legal options, and what type of legal procedure or service to pursue.

This Article's findings of how laypeople frame and respond to legal problems using the Internet and how they respond to current models of sites provides many of the key design insights that will feed into future design research and development of new legal help resources. The study uses this research to develop hypotheses about targets for current online legal service providers to redesign, about what types of online legal services hold the most promise for user engagement, and what types of initiatives with courts, technology companies, and legal service providers need to occur in order to make the Internet a better place for legal help. These hypotheses, as summed up in the Articles's final sections, can be tested in future studies with wider demographics and with more empirical research.

II. THE DESIGN RESEARCH APPROACH

This Article takes a design research approach to begin scoping what kinds of online legal services and products should be developed. A design research approach uses the methods that designers employ to craft solutions to problems and adapts them to create research findings as well as concepts to be designed. Design methods are useful to define: (1) who the target users are for a potential solution to problem; (2) what these users' requirements are for an optimal product, service, or system; and (3) what actual product, service, or system will best resolve the problem for these users.

A central stage of the design process is building a deep, detailed understanding of the project's target users.²³ The goal is to define who these users are in rich terms, to understand their motivations, behaviors, and preferences in detail, and to move the discussion away from assumptions about what the audience wants and toward concrete knowledge of their requirements.²⁴

²³ See LUMA INSTITUTE, *INNOVATING FOR PEOPLE: HANDBOOK OF HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN METHODS* (2012) (providing a rich, practical exploration of why user research is necessary when designing services, as well as an inventory of methodology to carry out this research).

²⁴ *Id.* at 2–27.

To do this stage, design researchers use qualitative methods to understand target users' experiential and functional needs. Functional needs encompass the users' goals and what kind of tasks and states they want to achieve. Experiential needs focus more on how the user feels during the process, whether it provides them meaning, and whether it fits with their values and aspirations.²⁵

To define users' needs and make them useful to designers and developers of new interventions, the design researcher uses the tools of workflow maps, mental models, personas, and user requirement lists. These are synthesis tools that convert observations about users into guides that set standards and targets for future development. **Workflow mapping** has a researcher document the steps that a user takes when approaching and trying to resolve a problem. Often it is oriented around analysis of a certain task.²⁶ **Mental modeling** uses qualitative interviews, observations, and task analysis to define different user groups' mental models towards a subject matter. Mental models encompass the person's functional and experiential goals, as well as their attitude to the subject matter and task at hand.²⁷ **Personas** are user archetypes that encapsulate a "distinct set of behavior patterns regarding the use of a particular product (or analogous activities if a product does not yet exist)."²⁸ They are fictionalized versions of real test users' behaviors, expressions, preferences, and ways of working. They can also be considered composite user archetypes. **User Requirements** are a shortlist of the essential features and frames that a new design must have, to satisfy the target user. They give necessary direction and constraints to any possible solution. It can help developers make good decisions, both for engaging users and ensuring viability in the long-term for an initiative. They are necessary to "give you a deep understanding of

²⁵ See ALAN COOPER ET AL., ABOUT FACE: THE ESSENTIALS OF INTERACTION DESIGN 75–77 (4th ed. 2014).

²⁶ LUMA INSTITUTE, *supra* note 23, at 36–37.

²⁷ INDI YOUNG, MENTAL MODELS: ALIGNING DESIGN STRATEGY WITH HUMAN BEHAVIOR 5 (2008).

²⁸ COOPER, *supra* note 25, at 67.

people's motivations and thought-processes, along with the emotional and philosophical landscape in which they are operating."²⁹

Design research methods are useful to create standards for innovation of new services. They define what kind of design will be usable, accessible, user-friendly, and engaging for the target audience. They also scope out targets where interventions can be successful, what current workflows can be tapped into and improved, and what mental models and framings will engage the target users. The design research approach's main point of value is that it will guide development to be oriented around the users' needs and not the system's constraints or the developers' preferences. Ideally, by having strong understandings of people's needs and preferences, legal help resources will better serve laypeople.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW: WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT HOW PEOPLE USE ONLINE LEGAL SERVICES

In defining user-centered standards for online legal help services, there is a limited body of research from lawyers, sociologists, and human-computer interaction scholars that set out initial understandings of how laypeople use the Internet to access legal help and what key fail points and opportunities exist.

A. A New Era of Online Legal Services

There are increasing numbers of legal information sources and services available to the general public online. Whereas information about the law and tools to complete legal tasks were historically reserved for legal professionals, there has been a shift to making these services available online, either for free or for a small cost. The types of sites and their sponsors include the following categories.

²⁹ YOUNG, *supra* note 27, at 2–3.

- **Government/Court-Sponsored Information sites** that say what the law is, what legal procedures are, and what eligibility for receiving services are. For example, the websites of the California Self-Help Center³⁰ and US Citizenship and Immigration Services.³¹
- **Non-profit Legal Services Referrals/Information sites** that help a user figure out what their legal issue is and what local services are available. For example, the LawHelp portals in many states³² or sites like Illinois Legal Aid Online.³³
- **Private Legal Information sites** that help users understand what the law says about certain topics. These include sites that present articles and answers on legal issues, like Nolo,³⁴ Immihelp,³⁵ JustAnswer,³⁶ and FindLaw,³⁷ as well as more lawyer-focused tools that provide in-depth research tools and summaries, like Ravel,³⁸ Judicata,³⁹ PlainSite,⁴⁰ CaseText,⁴¹ and Co-Counsel.⁴²
- **Legal Services/Eligibility sites** that present screeners to determine what legal services or paths users might be eligible to pursue. Often these are run by nonprofits or

³⁰ Judicial Council of California, THE CALIFORNIA COURTS SELF-HELP CENTER, <http://www.courts.ca.gov/selfhelp.htm> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

³¹ UNITED STATES CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES, <http://www.uscis.gov/> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

³² *E.g.*, LAW HELP NEW YORK, <http://www.lawhelpny.org/> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

³³ ILLINOIS LEGAL AID ONLINE, <http://www.illinoislegalaidonline.org/> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

³⁴ NOLO, <http://nolo.com> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

³⁵ IMMIHELP, <http://www.immihelp.com> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

³⁶ JUSTANSWER, <http://justanswer.com> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

³⁷ FINDLAW, <http://findlaw.com> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

³⁸ RAVEL, <http://ravellaw.com> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

³⁹ JUDICATA, <http://www.judicata.com> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

⁴⁰ PLAINSITE, <http://plainsite.org> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

⁴¹ CASETEXT, <http://casetext.com> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

⁴² CO-COUNSEL, <http://cocounsel.co/maps> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

startups. Examples of these sites include Expunge.io⁴³ and CitizenshipWorks.⁴⁴

- **Private Legal Self-Help tools** that not only provide the user with information but that also assist them in getting forms completed or even to settle their dispute without going through the courts at all. In this area, there are mostly for-profit startups like LegalZoom,⁴⁵ Rocket Lawyer,⁴⁶ Bridge US,⁴⁷ and Modria.⁴⁸

This landscape of online legal services is only growing. The National Center for State Courts published a paper outlining the need for state-by-state legal help portals that would not only provide information about legal issues but also guide a user through the entire process of determining their issue, choosing a path to take, and navigating this path to resolution.⁴⁹

B. People Are Using the Internet to Find Legal Services

More laypeople are turning to the Internet to find help to resolve problems with legal dimensions. The Internet is increasingly a first port of call for a person when seeking out information about whether their problem is a legal one, and how to possibly address it.⁵⁰

⁴³ EXPUNGE.IO, <http://www.expunge.io> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

⁴⁴ CITIZENSHIPWORKS, <http://citizenshipworks.org> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

⁴⁵ LEGALZOOM, <http://legalzoom.com> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

⁴⁶ RocketLawyer, <http://rocketlawyer.com> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

⁴⁷ BRIDGEUS, <http://bridge.us> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

⁴⁸ MODRIA, <http://modria.com> (last visited Dec. 10, 2015).

⁴⁹ THOMAS M. CLARKE, BUILDING A LITIGANT PORTAL: BUSINESS AND TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS, NATIONAL CENTER FOR STATE COURTS AND STATE JUSTICE INSTITUTE (2015).

⁵⁰ QUEENSLAND ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT LEGAL SERVICES INC., QUEENSLAND COMMUNITY LEGAL CENTRES' USE OF TECHNOLOGY LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION PAPER 18 (2014).

A 2010 study from the ABA finds that an increasing number of people are using online searches to find a lawyer for a personal legal matter.⁵¹ The poll found that most people, if they needed a lawyer for a personal legal matter, would first turn to family, friends, and colleagues to find a lawyer and then contact a known lawyer, look in a directory, or search online.⁵² Younger adults are especially likely to rely on online searches for finding a lawyer, while very few of those over 65 would use the Internet to find a lawyer.⁵³

The poll inquired into what online services a person would be most likely to use if searching for a lawyer to help them. The person was offered the options of lawyers' websites, an online directory, a Q&A website, a lawyer rating site, blogs, social network sites, Twitter, or email list hosts. The highest number of respondents said they would very likely use Q&A websites, lawyer rating websites, and lawyers' own websites. Online directories and matching websites ranked somewhat lower. Ranked quite low were blogs, social media, Twitter, and list hosts.⁵⁴ When people decided to proceed on a legal matter without a lawyer, the ABA poll found that they were likely to turn to free online services. Free online services ranked almost as highly as the use of court self-help centers or judges. Free online services ranked higher than books, court clerks, software, or librarians. Fee-based online legal services were ranked the lowest, as the least likely to be used.⁵⁵ Free online legal resources were particularly popular among younger and lower income respondents.⁵⁶

⁵¹ AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE DELIVERY OF LEGAL SERVICES, PERSPECTIVES ON FINDING PERSONAL LEGAL SERVICES: THE RESULTS OF A PUBLIC OPINION POLL (2011), http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/delivery_legal_services/20110228_aba_harris_survey_report.authcheckdam.pdf.

⁵² *Id.* at 8.

⁵³ *Id.* at 10–11.

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 14.

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 22–23.

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 28.

The ABA survey shows that people do have a large interest in free online legal resources and unbundled legal services that they could purchase from lawyers. It also indicates that for the task of searching for a lawyer, the Internet may not be their first resource, but it is more popular among young people and is about as popular as searching through an offline directory. These trends all indicate that the Internet as a source of legal help—whether it is being used for finding a lawyer or navigating a legal procedure without one—is an important target for work on improving access to justice, especially among younger people and those in lower income levels.

C. The Poor State of Current Online Services

Despite the growing number of people using the Internet to seek out legal help, many studies point to the lack of usable, user-friendly legal help services online. Many studies point to the inadequacy of current online legal services and also indicate some of the users' behaviors and expectations that lead to low usability. Research into whether laypeople can currently use the Internet effectively to find legal help shows that there are major issues with Internet-based services. The Self-Represented Litigant Network has surveyed what the online experience is for laypeople trying to find legal help online. In their inventory of court- and government-sponsored websites, they identified many problems with the presentation of the services: the pages were overloaded with information, did not provide a clear path to follow, and did not use responsive design to be easily accessed on mobile phones.⁵⁷ The study also faulted the court websites for not showing common searches that could help users know what issues and paths they may want to follow.⁵⁸

The Canadian group Community Legal Education Ontario (CLEO) surveyed legal service providers in Ontario to

⁵⁷ Katherine Alteneider, Presentation at the Equal Justice Conference: Introduction of SRLN National Self-Help Services Inventory, ATJ Tiers & Discussion, slide 9 (May 6–8, 2015).

⁵⁸ *Id.*

assess how they provide services to laypeople and what new initiatives have promise. The Ontario legal services providers reported problems with online legal help. The providers reported that “their clients are not able to easily find and make use of online information.”⁵⁹ In Australia, researchers in Queensland studied how technology is being used to deliver legal services in community legal centers.⁶⁰ The assessment found great potential in Internet-based services but that the current models are not sufficiently user-friendly or effective, in part because they are structured around lawyers’ ways of addressing legal issues rather than the mental models of laypeople going through a problem.⁶¹

Researchers at University College London (UCL) have conducted several studies of how technology-based legal help tools are used by laypeople in Great Britain. A study of over 10,500 adults in England and Wales found significant growth in adults’ use of the Internet to obtain information about problems with a legal dimension.⁶² However, the study also revealed that non-lawyers’ “success” rates in using the Internet to address their problems were low, and young people had the most difficulty in finding useful and correct legal information.⁶³

The UCL research team followed up with a study focused particularly on young adults’ use of the Internet to find legal help. They found that young people have difficulty finding relevant information when searching the Internet regarding a legal problem.⁶⁴ Search engines were a critical part of the

⁵⁹ CLEO CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND INNOVATION, PUBLIC LEGAL EDUCATION AND INFORMATION IN ONTARIO COMMUNITIES; FORMATS AND DELIVERY CHANNELS 22 (2013).

⁶⁰ QUEENSLAND ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT LEGAL SERVICES INC., *supra* note 50 at 31.

⁶¹ *Id.* at 19–21.

⁶² NIGEL J BALMER ET AL., PUBLIC LEGAL EDUCATION NETWORK LEGAL SERVICES RESEARCH CENTER, KNOWLEDGE, CAPABILITY AND THE EXPERIENCE OF RIGHTS PROBLEMS (2010).

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ Catrina Denvir et al., *Surfing the Web – Recreation or Resource? Exploring How Young People in the UK Use the Internet as an Advice*

workflow. If legal information that was high quality — meaning up-to-date, freely accessible, applicable to the user’s situation, and jurisdiction-correct—was not displayed prominently in reply to a user’s query, it was unlikely that a user would find it. Search engine results and rankings had a great effect on the ability of the user to find quality information. The UCL study also questions users’ ability to correctly parse information that they find online. Even if users did select a site with reliable legal help, they often did not take note of the jurisdiction to which the information applied.⁶⁵ Rather, they collected legal information and did not consider that it was jurisdiction-specific and potentially irrelevant or contrary to the law that applied to their situation.

These studies point to several key takeaways for designing better online help, particularly in regard to laypeople’s workflows when seeking out information on the Internet. Users use search engines as their main portal to try to find legal information. The prominence of a site on the search results depends on what appears first on the list. If a site appears lower than the first listings, it is less likely that a user will click through to its page. Many users cannot (or do not) easily parse through search results to find “quality” or “public service” sites of legal information. Many users are not aware of the importance of jurisdiction-specific legal information. If they find information that seems trustworthy, they take it as useful and often stop their search there.

D. How Laypeople Use Online Legal Services

Human-computer interaction researchers have studied how laypeople approach legal tasks and process legal information. Their studies provide key insights into how best to provide legal resources and processes to laypeople online. One key finding is that laypeople need significant time and direction

Portal for Problems with a Legal Dimension, 23 INTERACTING WITH COMPUTERS 96, 99–102 (2011).

⁶⁵ *Id.*

to find helpful legal information, especially when compared to legal experts like lawyers or librarians. In Newman and Doherty's study of lawyers versus non-lawyers' ability to retrieve legal information from online resources, they found that laypeople could not process legal information as quickly or as fully as lawyers.⁶⁶ They found that laypeople "had more than twice as many difficulties trying to carry out information retrieval tasks using online legal databases than lawyers."⁶⁷ They took longer and failed to complete as many tasks when asked to retrieve correct answers about what the law said using various online legal information sites.⁶⁸ Laypeople often did not understand the structure of sites, though these structures made sense to lawyers. When legal information was presented in the traditional ways that lawyers would access it, non-lawyers spent considerable time trying to navigate the website, looking for signposts or clues as to what was important and sifting through long collections of information to try to find what was relevant.⁶⁹ They were not able to efficiently navigate information structured for lawyers' mental models. The difficulty was reflected in their inability to use the site's navigation, which was structured around categories and terms that lawyers use to make sense of the information, but that did not resonate with the laypeople.

A study by Mastarone and Feinberg found that laypeople tend to browse randomly when confronted with a set of legal information that is unclear or confusing to them. In their study of laypeople's use of legal sites, they found that when people encountered an obstacle in their search for a relevant resource, then they would begin to browse and click around without direction. Sometimes browsing can eventually lead a person to the information that she desired, but when a legal issue or task is more complex, browsing will likely lead to failure. That is the reason the authors recommend designers to build strong

⁶⁶ Newman & Doherty, *supra* note 16, at 429.

⁶⁷ *Id.*

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ *Id.* at 434

guidance and clear information architecture into the system.⁷⁰ Newman and Doherty also found that users, when confused about the options presented to them, or unsure of what was relevant to them or not, would choose pathways at random.⁷¹ On average, non-lawyers encountered a difficulty every 4 minutes (lawyers every 9 minutes).⁷² Instead of moving systematically through information, they ended up taking random paths trying to find relevant information, spending excessive time and encountering frustration—often leading them to abandon a task.⁷³

These studies point to several guiding insights for more usable legal help online. First, a legal help tool should have a navigation system and information architecture that matches laypeople's mental models (and not necessarily those of lawyers). Second, laypeople need tools to help them parse large collections of information—whether in search results or on an individual page—to quickly understand what is relevant and what is not. Third, any design should have a browsing safety net that can catch a person who has started to browse randomly out of confusion, and redirect them efficiently to an appropriate section of information.

The ABA poll on how people use different channels to find lawyers also points to several requirements for how to engage users online. The poll highlights the importance of trust and value when people are seeking help for personal legal matters.⁷⁴ Users also respond with great interest to Q&A sites' worth in helping them to find a lawyer. The interest in Q&A sites could indicate that people want conversational resources, which allow them to ask questions, get answers, see others' questions

⁷⁰ Ginnifer L. Mastarone & Susan Feinberg, *Access to Legal Services: Organizing Better Self-Help Systems*, IEEE INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION CONFERENCE 5 (2007).

⁷¹ Newman et al., *supra* note 16, at 434.

⁷² *Id.* at 429.

⁷³ *Id.* at 434.

⁷⁴ ABA, *supra* note 32, at 28.

and answers, and use these conversations to find and assess lawyers they may want to hire.

The Queensland study of effective technology use for community legal centers proposed a shortlist of what makes for effective and beneficial Internet-based resources. First, Internet resources should be organized to reflect the perspective of the layperson rather than the logical analysis of the lawyer.⁷⁵ The information should be presented in creative and engaging ways, not just as text documents, so that a person can easily take it in.⁷⁶ Finally, the information and service offerings should be integrated with each other, so that a person can easily go from understanding their issue to acting on it, and hopefully finding a service-provider to assist them.⁷⁷

In his review of current legal help sites' usability, Abhijeet Chavan sets out many recommendations for what kind of legal aid sites will be most useful for users based on his experience in building websites for services. His requirements are that legal help sites be mobile-friendly, with responsive content, and with content that is broken up into staged and segmented text to make it easier to scan it.⁷⁸ Staging content means putting the text into distinct sections, and users only see the text if they click on buttons like "more information" or "read more" to see the entire description. Otherwise, they will be shown summarized, simplified versions of the text.

The CLEO study of legal information delivery channels similarly found that clients wanted their information staged.⁷⁹ When first encountering a legal resource, the users preferred a short presentation of information that was clear, concise, and simple.⁸⁰ The legal service providers concluded that this

⁷⁵ QUEENSLAND ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT LEGAL SERVICES INC., *supra* note 50, at 21.

⁷⁶ *Id.* at 20.

⁷⁷ *See id.* at 22–23.

⁷⁸ Chavan, *supra* note 14, at 275–276.

⁷⁹ CLEO CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND INNOVATION, *supra* note 59, at 13.

⁸⁰ *Id.*

preference exists because the users may be in crisis or have high levels of stress and cannot take in much information at the moment.⁸¹ Also, shorter texts seem to be more inviting because the amount of information is less likely to be overwhelming and difficult to follow. This format makes it easier for people of all kinds, including those with lower literacy or foreign backgrounds, to comprehend it.⁸² Later on, though, once stress has abated, the users like more lengthy texts that let them investigate legal issues more deeply and feel confident about their understanding of them.⁸³

To summarize, the limited literature on how laypeople seek and parse legal information points to several insights about what user-friendly online legal services should do and should not do.

- The resource should segment and stage information with short versions put prominently up front and then followed by lengthier explanations.
- It should present clear markers of trustworthiness and value that engage a visitor to the site and convert them into a user.
- It should offer a user-friendly navigation system with categories and functions that meet the users' needs and match how users would frame the topics, queries, and actions (as opposed to the categories and actions that legal experts would prefer).
- It should support users to help them understand and navigate the resources it offers and give clear indications about what might be most appropriate for the user and why.

⁸¹ *Id.*

⁸² *Id.* at 13.

⁸³ *See id.*

- It should supply safety nets for people who have become overwhelmed and gotten off-track on the site.
- It should be designed to be mobile-responsive, so people using phones, tablets, and other smaller screen are able to easily read the text and take actions.
- Information and action should be integrated with each other, so that the user can make use of what they have learned in a direct manner.

The limited literature on what laypeople want when seeking legal help through technology channels provides us this shortlist of design principles and possible interfaces that should make for better online legal help. Each of these insights contributes to our user-centered standards to guide future development of legal help tools.

IV. FINDINGS FROM ONLINE CONSUMER COMPLAINTS ABOUT LEGAL WEBSITES

A second source of user requirements for online legal help comes from laypeople's self-reported complaints about legal websites they have tried to use. The site Consumer Affairs allows consumers to report complaints and reviews of various services, including online legal service providers.⁸⁴ The consumers' ratings and their complaints about legal providers are rich with insights about their own approaches to finding legal help online, what they look for when assessing and purchasing potential service-providers, and how they would prefer the experience to be. Within the reviews, they give accounts of their workflows, their mental models, their trust-markers, and their user preferences and requirements.

⁸⁴ CONSUMER AFFAIRS, <http://consumeraffairs.com> (last visited Dec. 9, 2015).

On the Consumer Affairs website's section on consumer reviews of legal service providers,⁸⁵ there is one legal help website that has a substantial amount of reviews: Immigration Direct.⁸⁶ It has 102 reviews, with a total average rating of just over 1 out of 5 stars.⁸⁷ The bulk of the negative reviews comes from people who have made payments on the website for the ability to access and submit immigration application forms then subsequently discovered that the same forms are available for free on the federal government's website. The people who write reviews explain how they came to use the Immigration Direct experience—why they were searching for help, how they sought legal help, why they chose to use Immigration Direct, and how the experience of the site was. These small narratives reveal many important insights into how laypeople currently try to use the Internet for legal help, what goes wrong, and what they wish could be better.

Many reviews point to a workflow finding that the literature had suggested: when laypeople turn to the Internet for legal help, they most often begin by searching terms in a search engine (Google, most likely) and will often only consider the first results before concluding their search. Many of the reviewers report that they were searching for official government websites to guide them through a visa or green card application, but they mistook the private company Immigration Direct for a government site. Their mistake is commonly attributed to two factors: (1) Immigration Direct appeared at the top of their Google search results and (2) the Immigration Direct site seemed to them to appear like an official site.

“I went on this website to renew my Green Card thinking this was the official site (they certainly make it look like an

⁸⁵ CONSUMER AFFAIRS LAWYERS AND LEGAL SERVICES, <http://www.consumeraffairs.com/legal/> (last visited Dec. 9, 2015).

⁸⁶ IMMIGRATION DIRECT, <http://immigrationdirect.com> (last visited Dec. 9, 2015).

⁸⁷ CONSUMER AFFAIRS REVIEW PAGE ON IMMIGRATIONDIRECT.COM, <http://www.consumeraffairs.com/legal/immigrationdirect.html> (last visited Dec. 9, 2015).

official government website), since it was the first thing that pops up when Googling ‘green card’.”⁸⁸

“I googled and they popped up. It was looking like a US government site so I started filling the application.”⁸⁹

“I thought I was on the legit site for the Immigration Dept. Their company is the first one that comes up when you search for Immigration. Their site looks exactly like the legit Immigration site.”⁹⁰

“Like everyone else who wrote a review I had googled ‘renew permanent resident’ and they were the first thing to pop up. It wasn't until the application was filed with USCIS that I realized they did nothing for me except take my money. I usually feel that I'm pretty scam savvy but I'm feeling pretty stupid now.”⁹¹

“I googled immigration and IMMIGRATION DIRECT came up looking like a US government site. You pay them for the same thing you can do FREE on the real government site. Why is it that sites like this can STEAL from the most vulnerable people in the US?”⁹²

⁸⁸ Elisabeth of Seattle, WA, Comment to *Immigration Direct*, CONSUMER AFFAIRS (May 6, 2014),

<http://www.consumeraffairs.com/legal/immigrationdirect.html>.

⁸⁹ Leyla of Clifton, VA, Comment to *Immigration Direct*, CONSUMER AFFAIRS (May 5, 2014),

<http://www.consumeraffairs.com/legal/immigrationdirect.html>.

⁹⁰ Martin of Morgan Hill, CA, Comment to *Immigration Direct*, CONSUMER AFFAIRS (May 7, 2014),

<http://www.consumeraffairs.com/legal/immigrationdirect.html>.

⁹¹ Lesley of Oakland, NJ, Comment to *Immigration Direct*, CONSUMER AFFAIRS (Jan. 17, 2014),

<http://www.consumeraffairs.com/legal/immigrationdirect.html>.

⁹² Dionisios of Littleton, CO, Comment to *Immigration Direct*, CONSUMER AFFAIRS (Dec. 6, 2013),

<http://www.consumeraffairs.com/legal/immigrationdirect.html>.

“I google ‘renew my green card’ and this website was the first suggestion. So I choose it thinking it is the official USCIS website.”⁹³

“Fell into the trap just like everyone else here through a Google search. They seem to pop out on top when searching for ‘green card renewal’ or similar searches of that nature. They make their site look just like a legit government site with a patriotic theme.”⁹⁴

There is great importance in being the first listing on a search results page. Many of the reviewers automatically assume that the first listing must be the most reliable simply because of its placement in the list. A common assumption is that the official government site will be the first listing. In practice, this translates into a workflow in which people click on the first link and take it to be an official site, even if there is no government logo, title, or other official marker on the site saying that it is official.

Since June 2013, the Immigration Direct site has featured a paragraph in large text on its main page that states that it is not affiliated with any government agency. The page also states that every one of the immigration forms is available for free from the government. Despite this disclaimer paragraph prominently displayed on their main page, the reviewers mistook it for an official government site and were angered to learn later that the forms they bought were available for free from other sources.

The reviews include some details about how the people assessed the site to determine its trustworthiness, how official it is, and whether to pay for its services. Their reports show how

⁹³ Dani of Providence, RI, Comment to *Immigration Direct*, CONSUMER AFFAIRS (Nov. 17, 2013), <http://www.consumeraffairs.com/legal/immigrationdirect.html>.

⁹⁴ Nemo of Madera, CA, Comment to *Immigration Direct*, CONSUMER AFFAIRS (Aug. 9, 2013), <http://www.consumeraffairs.com/legal/immigrationdirect.html>.

they ended up making mistakes and paying for services that they later regretted.

“After googling for ‘Renew Resident Card’, I entered the entry for ‘Renew Permanent Resident - ImmigrationDirect.com’. The site is titled, ‘Immigration*Direct - U.S. Immigration & Citizenship Form Services’ with a US Flag and prominently displayed buttons for ‘Green Card Renewal, Apply for Citizenship, etc.’. Unfortunately, I did not read further down the page the statement that ‘Immigration Direct is not affiliated with the United States government...’ Believing to be on an official US Immigration site, I pressed the button for ‘Green Card Renewal’ which leads to an even more official looking page to start the application process for form I-90 and started a questionnaire about the immigration status.”⁹⁵

“I thought this website was an online government service to apply for green card replacement. It appears to look like that down to the color scheme and the look alike government seal as part of a clever (scam), not knowing I registered and paid \$149 for an application that is free, free!!! Notice how they make you pay first and by the time you realize it's not US Gov, it's too late.”⁹⁶

“I wanted to file a green card replacement application. When I googled USCIS, Immigration Direct popped up first with the Statue of Liberty and Star Spangled Banner. I thought they were the official website of USCIS and started to file my application. After having answered a few questions, they

⁹⁵ Dieter of South Dartmouth, MA, Comment to *Immigration Direct*, CONSUMER AFFAIRS (Sept. 16, 2013), <http://www.consumeraffairs.com/legal/immigrationdirect.html>.

⁹⁶ Ernst of Miami, Comment to *Immigration Direct*, CONSUMER AFFAIRS (Nov. 25, 2014), <http://www.consumeraffairs.com/legal/immigrationdirect.html>.

charged me \$149 for Form I-90. Thinking it was part of the application fee, I went on finishing the filing.”⁹⁷

“This website came on the first thing when I Googled ‘immigration.’ I was trying to apply for citizenship and this was what I came into. I was going through the process and thought this was a gov’t website. It looked like one. And then it asked me to pay \$189... I thought this was a real gov’t website/agency.”⁹⁸

“A year ago I started a citizenship application on the website that popped up immediately when I used google search engine. I was then convinced it was an official website. When I resumed my immigration application about 3 weeks ago, I realized that Immigration direct is not an official us immigration website as their name and all photos on their website suggests.”⁹⁹

“I was renewing my green card and thought this was the official USCIS site. Too dumb, I did not pay attention and paid the \$149 online. After the form is filled and I found I need to pay the \$450 fee to government, then I realized this was a scam.”¹⁰⁰

“I thought I was on the legit site for the Immigration Dept. Their company is the first one that comes up when you search for Immigration. Their site looks exactly like the legit

⁹⁷ Cynthia of San Leandro, CA, Comment to *Immigration Direct*, CONSUMER AFFAIRS (June 7, 2013), <http://www.consumeraffairs.com/legal/immigrationdirect.html>.

⁹⁸ Annie of Athens, GA, Comment to *Immigration Direct*, CONSUMER AFFAIRS (March 16, 2013), <http://www.consumeraffairs.com/legal/immigrationdirect.html>.

⁹⁹ Christine of Durham, NH, Comment to *Immigration Direct*, CONSUMER AFFAIRS (June 14, 2014), <http://www.consumeraffairs.com/legal/immigrationdirect.html>.

¹⁰⁰ Sunny of Suffern, NY, Comment to *Immigration Direct*, CONSUMER AFFAIRS (Nov. 14, 2014), <http://www.consumeraffairs.com/legal/immigrationdirect.html>.

Immigration site. When I paid, I thought these were the fees for getting my citizenship.”¹⁰¹

These accounts provide a shortlist of the markers that people look for to assess the quality and trustworthiness of a legal help site. People look for official sources that are affiliated with the government. Visual and composition elements indicate that a site is official and trustworthy: the color scheme (in dark blues), patriotic images with national symbols (e.g., the flag and the Statue of Liberty), and a seal that appears to be from the government. These indicators convince people to rely on the site, assuring them that the services are official and worth paying for. The reviews also provide insight into laypeople’s ways of working. Many are moving quickly when searching and parsing results, without paying close attention to the details of what legal help service they’re using or whether it is the right match for their issue. They rely on superficial indicators about whether a site is official enough to trust and use.

The complaint narratives also provide important insight into laypeople’s workflows. When trying to find help on a legal process, the people who report their complaints have followed a similar pattern: (1) going to Google.com as their main portal; (2) entering a query for help with their specific immigration goal; (3) clicking on the first search results, expecting them to be quality, legitimate resources; (4) checking for trust-markers to confirm legitimacy; and (5) deciding to engage with the site, filling in forms, and entering their payment details.

The people who have provided their accounts on Consumer Affairs may be a particular type of ‘layperson seeking legal help.’ They have all written reviews after having a negative experience trying to find legal help that fits their preferences, and most of them have also made a mistake when assessing sites’ quality and legitimacy. Compared to other users, they may be less discerning of search results and too trusting of sites with

¹⁰¹ Martin of Morgan Hill, CA, Comment to *Immigration Direct*, CONSUMER AFFAIRS (May 7, 2014), <http://www.consumeraffairs.com/legal/immigrationdirect.html>.

superficial markers of trustworthiness. These people may not represent all laypeople seeking legal help, but they offer a particular user persona archetype to guide future development that promotes better, more satisfying online services. This persona could be called “the quick-mover,” who wants to find legal help quickly, clicks on the first Google results, and tends to trust these first results. Even if these first results are marked as advertisements, their prime place is likely to earn clicks and possible money from a quick mover.

V. QUESTIONNAIRE & TASK STUDY OF HOW LAYPEOPLE TACKLE LEGAL CHALLENGES ON THE INTERNET

Academic literature and online consumer complaints offer some initial understandings of how laypeople currently use the Internet to find legal help and what their preferences, workflows, and requirements are. This Article fleshes out these understandings with a survey that explicitly inquires into laypeople’s approaches to using the Internet when they face a legal problem and what online resources they find most engaging, trustworthy, and valuable. The survey was an online questionnaire that asked laypeople to self-report about their relationship with law, how they use the Internet to solve problems, and how they would use it to address a fictional problem with legal dimensions. It offers a rich set of workflows, preferences, and mental models from laypeople that can further inform user-centered standards for legal help tools.

The survey has three main sections. First, participants were asked a series of questions to profile their relationship with the law and their past attempts to resolve legal problems. Second, they were given a fictional problem with legal implications and asked how they would respond to it and how they would use the Internet to respond to it. Finally, they were asked to visit a series of five different legal help websites, to try to use the sites to find legal help to resolve the fictional problem, and then to give feedback on their experience with the site. The

fictional problem was that they had returned home to find an eviction notice on the door of the home they rent.

The survey was distributed to potential respondents through the Amazon Mechanical Turk service in November 2014. Fifty-three respondents completed some part of the survey, and thirty-one completed the entire survey. The only constraint on who could respond to the survey was that they were over 18 years old and a verified worker on the Mechanical Turk service, meaning that they had previously completed tasks on the service and not been flagged for problems. The study aimed to remain open to any respondent to include a diversity of input and mainly to recruit those who had little to no experience working in the legal profession.

The choice was made to use Mechanical Turk as the platform to recruit participants because recent studies have shown that Mechanical Turk participants (MTurkers) produce reliable results in studies consistent with standard decision-making biases and traditional community and student samples used in behavioral research.¹⁰² MTurkers typically display similar traits: a tendency and ability to use the Internet to find answers, a propensity to value money more than time (like student populations who participate in behavioral research), and low attention spans and willingness to engage in cognitive tasks.¹⁰³ The study recognizes that this population does not represent all people who might be trying to solve legal problems using the Internet. Further study with a more diverse participant pool—drawn from sources other than online survey recruitment platforms—would give a wider perspective on what constitutes good user experience.

The survey was crafted in order to determine whether the respondents have previously used the Internet for legal help, how they used the Internet, how they assess the value of this

¹⁰² Joseph K. Goodman et al., *Data Collection in a Flat World: The Strengths and Weaknesses of Mechanical Turk Samples*, 26 J. BEHAV. DECISION MAKING 213, 216–17 (2013).

¹⁰³ *Id.* at 221–22.

help, how they would tackle future legal problems, and how they determine the value of leading online help sites. These findings should reveal key user workflows, preferences, and requirements when using online legal help resources.

The questionnaire was created to uncover answers to the following questions:

1. How would the lay respondents prefer to receive legal help when they encounter a problem?
2. How would they use the Internet to search for legal help? What phrases would they use, and what would they click on?
3. How do they assess possible resources online and decide what to use? What conveys quality, reliability, and value to them as they search for help online?
4. How do they evaluate existing legal resource sites?
5. What preferences do they have for how to receive legal services online?

A. Participants

The participants as a whole can be grouped into a similar category based on demographics: minimal legal background, between 26 and 54 years old, with college degrees, earning middle class salaries, and high confidence in using the Internet. The demographics of the respondents skewed to adults in their middle ages earning lower-middle class salaries. The respondents' age ranges, from most frequent to least frequent, are as follows: 35–54 (15 out of 31 responding); 26–34 (10 people); 18–25 (5 people); and one respondent between 55–64 years of age. No respondents were older than 65. Most respondents (21 out of 31) reported making a household income of less than \$60,000 a year. Three reported making more than \$100,000 a year, and the remainder made between \$60,000 and \$100,000. They had a variety of professions: journalist, x-ray technician, claims adjuster, accountant, commercial cleaner, student, receptionist, cook, economist, scopist, and bartender, to name a few. Most had either some college (11 people out of 31) or a 4-year college degree (11 people). One person had a doctorate, one had a professional degree, two had Master's

degrees, two had high school degrees or a GED, and three had a 2-year college degree. No one had less than a high school education.

The majority (44 out of 48) characterized themselves as having no legal studies or work experience, with a small minority (3) noting that they had taken classes at a law school or a criminal justice institute and one (1) respondent holds a J.D. and practices law. The participants were asked to choose a statement that best described their relationship with the law. The most popular response, rated 60% accurate, was "I want to be able to solve my own legal problems." The second most popular, with 58% agreement, was "If I ever have a legal problem, I will hire a lawyer immediately to take care of it." For the statement "I could probably resolve some legal issues successfully on my own, without hiring a lawyer," respondents on average ranked it 45% accurate. Most respondents reported learning about law primarily from the Internet (42 out of 48 respondents, or 88%), television shows (38 out of 48, or 79%), and friends (32 out of 48, or 67%).

The participants reported very high comfort with using the Internet, with people ranking their skill on average at 97 out of 100 (with a standard deviation of 7.84). They ranked their ability to use the Internet to answer problems at 85 out of 100 (standard deviation of 12.98). They also use the Internet with substantial frequency to get answers to problems, ranking the frequency of use at 81 out of 100 (standard deviation of 16.93).

VI. KEY FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The questionnaire and task study produced many insights into how people currently use the Internet to find legal help and what their preferences are for better online legal services. This shortlist of findings points to some metrics of what a "quality, trustworthy, and accessible" user experience would be for a new generation of Internet-based legal help.

The key findings are as follows, with additional sections explaining them in fuller detail:

1. The Internet and Google are very important legal service tools. These user groups use the Internet—in particular a Google Search—as the first tool in their “workflow” of determining how to respond to a new legal issue.

2. The Internet is used for legal orientation and strategy. They expect the Internet to give them an orientation to the legal terrain they are on and to help them form a strategy. They use the Internet to find basic legal information, model stories, advice, and perhaps even a definite answer about what they should do. Even if it does not give them a conclusive plan to resolve their issue, they want to be strategic in their subsequent actions.

3. Top hits on Internet Search have inordinate influence. The first hits on a Google Search Result are going to be the main, or only, sites that many people will visit to understand their legal issue and form their strategy.

4. The ideal legal help site is official, free, comprehensive, modern, and conversational. Users had very clear preferences and requirements for what a “quality” user experience on a legal help website would be. In an ideal world, they want a site that melds the authority and reliability of a government or court site with the modern design and interactive navigation of a for-profit company and the conversational, browse-able stories that are featured on forum and peer-to-peer sites. Their ideal is a hybrid model that is sponsored by the government.

5. Laypeople want official markers to know information is authoritative. The users want official information sources that are affiliated with the government or courts and therefore have reliable, legitimate information. They still want to explore sites from private attorneys, for-profit services, or peer-sourced forums, in order to gather a wider perspective and scout for useful information. Ideally, they want to have official markers on information to know they can rely on it.

6. Laypeople often don't consider jurisdiction. Many respondents are not knowledgeable about the importance of getting jurisdiction-specific information, and upon finding easy-to-use information from other jurisdictions, they rely on it as applicable to them. If the out-of-jurisdiction material appears at the top of Search Results, several users will rely on it and conclude their online search.

7. Paywalls, advertisements, and even the suspicion of hidden fees discourage use of a resource. Many respondents had strongly negative reactions to any site that requested money to access legal information or had advertisements for lawyers and legal materials. They consider these payment requests to be either annoying or delegitimizing and often leave the site for another.

8. Some love peer-to-peer stories, others hate them. Sites, like Yahoo! Answers, that provide open forums for people to share their stories and advice on legal issues produced a strong split in user preferences. Some respondents loved this way of learning about legal problems and strategies, others found them harmful because of the authors' lack of official status. A third camp used them to understand the legal terrain and possible outcomes but wanted to supplement them with official legal resources.

A. Workflows

What workflows did respondents use when conducting searches for legal help in the past or when presented with a fictional problem in the survey?

The Internet is a key, if not the main, tool that these respondents would use to assess and respond to their legal issue. The majority of respondents would use the Internet to educate themselves about the legal issue and possible solutions, often in combination with professional assistance from lawyers or help from family and friends. The value that the Internet offers to them is an ability to see "what is the legal rule that applies in my situation" and "what have other people in my situation done in

response to a similar issue.” The Internet becomes a self-diagnosis and a preparatory tool for these users, to help them craft a strategy and weigh how much more time, resources, or consultations they need to invest in the situation.

B. Past Use of the Internet for Legal Help

Most respondents (34 out of 48, or 71%) said that in the past they had searched the Internet to find help to address a legal issue. These legal issues included credit card debt and bankruptcy, divorce and custody, driving under the influence arrests, parking and traffic tickets, immigration, landlord/tenant rental agreements, employment problems, and marijuana-related drug crimes.

The survey asked respondents how they get guidance to resolve problems in their lives (not necessarily legal ones). The three most popular responses: the Internet, family, and friends. A small minority also refers to God or to a professional expert. Several respondents elaborated that they tend to search the Internet to be prepared on the topic then decide whether to talk to others for further advice.

“I always search online first and then decided what my next steps should be but I like to gather as many facts as I can independently before I seek help.” (P26)

“In general, I research things myself at first, and if that doesn’t work, then I ask family and friends. Usually, though, I can figure things out myself.” (P7)

The survey then turned this question to law by asking the respondents hypothetically, if they had a legal problem, how they would get guidance on how to resolve it. Again, the Internet was the most popular reported path for guidance (34 respondents). Unlike with general problems, respondents reported much greater interest in consulting an expert for help. Thirty of the respondents reported that they would seek out a lawyer’s help in response to a legal issue. Many of these had conditions attached: only a lawyer who was also a trusted family

member;¹⁰⁴ only a lawyer who was recommended by a trusted contact; or only a lawyer who was low-cost or offering free advice. On legal issues, the friends and family route was much less popular. Nine respondents would seek out their friends for help; twelve would seek out family members for help. There were some other courses of action: one person would look to books; one person would try to find free legal help at a library; and one would talk to colleagues at work for help.

Many respondents also reported on the sequence of help sources that they would seek out. A common theme was that the person would first consult the Internet with a search to appraise their issue and resources available for it and then seek out in-person help from lawyers, friends, or family after getting this preparatory information from the Internet.¹⁰⁵ Another variation of this workflow is that the person would research the issue on the Internet and then determine if it was a matter they could work on themselves or if they needed to seek out others' help for it.¹⁰⁶ They would use the Internet to determine if they actually had to hire a lawyer for help, and if not, they would try to do it themselves.

¹⁰⁴ "I would ask my dad because he used to be a lawyer," (P5). "I know a handful of attorneys and would call them. While most have specialties which might not match the situation, and although they may live far away, they would at least point me in the right direction," (P42). "My brother, the attorney, and I would work together on it. We always have and I am confident that if I had any legal issues he could take care of it promptly," (P53).

¹⁰⁵ "I would check for information on the internet first. If it was very important or complex I would go straight to a lawyer" (P11). "I would start on the internet just to get a sense of the issue but then I would find a lawyer to actually deal with it" (P20).

¹⁰⁶ "First on the Internet, then if I'm unable to resolve it on my own I would consider contacting a lawyer" (P51). "I'd start with a simple google search and find the sites, info that is most relevant to me. If I realize that I'm over my head, I'd then look to an attorney" (P41). "I would search on the internet, and if it was too hard, get a lawyer" (P17).

C. Workflow in Response to Fictional Legal Issue

When the respondents were given a fictional legal problem (an eviction notice on their door), they were asked to use the Internet for a five-minute window to figure out how to deal with the note and then report back on what steps they took. This situation revealed their default workflow and what kind of sites, search terms, and tools they use to seek for legal help online. Most reported using a search engine, especially Google, as their starting point. On the search site, they searched some variations of phrases. Some searched for the laws or for rights,¹⁰⁷ others tried a variety of different phrases related to evictions, landlords, and renters that were not so much about the laws as the situation.¹⁰⁸

What sites did they visit during the five-minute period? The most popular types of sites visited were those from private attorneys or legal organizations, with 31 of 36 respondents reporting that they had gone to either an attorney, a law firm, or a legal organization (*i.e.*, Nolo and Avvo). The second most popular type of site, with 29 respondents visiting them, were California-specific government sites (including the California Department of Consumer Affairs, the California Court's Self-Help Center, and the federal government's HUD site's California section). By far, these two types of resources were the most visited. Other types of sites that the respondents visited were for-profit sites that are non-legal¹⁰⁹ (12 respondents), community groups in California (9 respondents), community groups outside California (4 respondents), non-California

¹⁰⁷ Some of the phrases: "renter rights San Francisco" (P44), "San Francisco tenant laws" (P27), "Tenant Rights, Laws and Protections: California" (P39), "California State eviction laws" (P5), "landlord laws in California" (P38).

¹⁰⁸ Some of the more scenario-based searches: "what does my landlord have to do to evict me" (P45), "can a landlord kick you out in order to charge someone higher rent california" (P47), "landlord give two weeks notice" (P1), "how long does my landlord have to make me move out in california" (P31).

¹⁰⁹ For-profit non-legal sites include city-data.com, Business Insider, Money Crashers, Zillow, and Money Under 30.

government sites (3 respondents), and private forum sites¹¹⁰ (2 respondents).

When asked to rate their experience in seeking help, the vast majority (30 out of 35 respondents) responded with positive comments, and the small minority (5 respondents) had negative comments. The positive comments centered on the ease of use in finding useful, basic information. For example, P7 reported, “I felt that 5 minutes was just enough time to become roughly familiar with the issue, and if I had more time I feel confident that I could find a solution the problem, and also be well on my way to hiring an attorney” (P7). The few negative comments came from respondents who did not trust the information they found online to be comprehensive enough¹¹¹ or were not confident in their ability to frame the issue for an effective search.¹¹² They were also asked what their feelings were when trying to figure out how to respond to the note. Many reported anxiety, urgency, and frustration as they began to seek out help online. These feelings were due to the difficulty in phrasing the search terms in ways that would get the best results and then finding information simply and directly.¹¹³ Respondents expressed frustrations with having to visit multiple sites to assemble an answer about how to respond to the eviction notice.¹¹⁴

After spending five minutes using the Internet to determine how to respond to the legal issue, the respondents were asked to rate their confidence on several different points: (1) what steps to take to resolve the situation; (2) what rights they have; (3) how to speak about the situation in legal terms;

¹¹⁰ This category of private forum sites only included Yahoo! Answers.

¹¹¹ “I feel like I’m grabbing a sequence here and a sentence there to eventually form the correct answer, rather than finding the answer complete in one spot” (P42).

¹¹² “it was actually hard trying to put into words that google can help me” (P37).

¹¹³ “Tough to figure out what keywords to type into Google” (P48), “I felt a little helpless since it was hard to search google for me” (P37).

¹¹⁴ “It was a little more frustrating than I thought it would be to find an answer. I had to go to multiple sites to search” (P47).

and (4) where to find professionals to help resolve the situation. On all these questions, respondents generally rated their confidence high. They were most confident about knowing their rights (79 out of 100, with 22.24 standard deviation); second-most confident about how to find professionals (71 out of 100, with 26.24 standard deviation); third-most confident about steps to take (70 out of 100, with 20.70 standard deviation); and fourth-most confident about how to speak in legal terms (63 out of 100, with 21.64 standard deviation).

When asked what next steps they might take if they had more than five minutes, the respondents varied between those who were confident that their five minute search was enough (a minority of 4 out of 36 respondents)¹¹⁵ and the majority that would seek out more help. Most of the respondents (26 out of 36) would continue searching for help on the Internet. A few (5 people) would seek out free legal services, either from community groups or free consultations with a lawyer. Only three said they would seek to hire an attorney. Two said they would seek out friends' help, and no one said they would reach out to family. The respondents who would seek out more information from the Internet mentioned a few goals: (1) to read through legal forums in which they could see more personal stories and how legal experts have responded to people's questions,¹¹⁶ (2) to find more official terms and key information that they could use to bolster their response to their landlord,¹¹⁷ and (3) to determine what possible outcomes of legal action would be.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ "Nothing, didn't need extra time" (P52). "There's nothing else I would need to do. I found what I needed" (P5).

¹¹⁶ "I would check out more personal stories from people that this has happened to" (P22). "I would ask on a forum for advice" (P11). "search around more, look into asking a question on a legal forum" (P48).

¹¹⁷ "I would find more reputable sites that further prove my point and use legal terms that would make the landlord obligated to see my side" (P31). "Probably compile a list of everything that was in my favor" (P4).

¹¹⁸ "I would look up cases in the past. I want to find out what size of payment I could receive from the landlord" (P30). "I would research similar

D. Key Takeaways of Workflows

1. The Internet Is the First Response, Specifically for a Handful of Functions

Respondents consistently reported that the Internet was a primary resource for them to seek legal help. When asked about their past experiences with finding help for legal problems, and also when tasked with responding to a fictional legal problem, the respondents rated the Internet as the core, if not the only, source for help. This respondent pool may not be representative of the entire population, in that they are younger than 65 and highly familiar with the Internet.

Their responses, with these limitations, indicate that the Internet will play a large role in laypeople's responses to legal issues. It will be a primary place, and often the first stop, after a person realizes they have a legal problem. Several of the respondents indicated that the Internet would be the resource they use to diagnose exactly what their problem is, what options are available to them, and what the best strategy in response to it would be. It might also be a place to find experts (*i.e.*, lawyers, legal professionals, or legal software) to help them resolve the issue but that was not reported with as much frequency. The role the Internet plays is that of orientation, diagnosis, and strategy-making for the respondents. They did not report a desire to use the Internet for finding a lawyer or other kind of legal service.

2. Google Search Is the Portal to Internet Legal Resources

When the respondents reported using the Internet, an overwhelming majority first visited the Google search engine, with a very small minority using other search engines. No one reported using another type of site first. They begin with a search engine site, in which they can type in a summary of their problem and see what sites the search engine identifies. The

cases and outcomes" (P19). "look for more examples of tenants who had been given 2 weeks notice and the outcomes" (P25).

respondents' workflow is as follows: (1) Google Search; (2) parse the results; (3) either use one result or review multiple results until satisfied that an answer has been reached.

The search listing that Google offers has enormous influence on what sites the user will visit in her attempt to find help. Respondents did not know what site they were looking for to find help. They do not turn to a library, a government site, or any other source that they could go directly to without using a search engine. Rather, they rely heavily on the search engine to direct them to the best sources of help. The results page that Google provides them will shape what they think the Internet has to offer and will direct their choice of what site to engage with.

3. The Jurisdictional Factor Is Not Always Considered

Many of the respondents were sure to search specifically for legal resources about their local jurisdiction. Some defined it by state (California) and some by city (San Francisco). The sites that they arrived at via this search were jurisdiction-specific, provided by the state government, local community groups and clinics, or private attorneys working in the area. Several people did not include jurisdiction in their search terms or in their assessment of the results. They then visited sites about generic housing law or sites meant for other jurisdictions, like Maine or Wisconsin rather than California.

This trend of jurisdiction-free searching must be of concern. The respondents were not aware that the sites they were visiting might not apply to them because they were looking at a site that was not jurisdiction-specific. If the person does not explicitly put the jurisdiction into their search terms, they are likely to get results that do not supply them with the correct law for their situation. This problem indicates a requirement for jurisdiction-proofing search results. Even if users don't know that location should be factored into their search for quality legal help, there should be 'bumpers' on the search that guide them to legal resources from their jurisdiction and away from other jurisdictions' sites.

4. Defining User Needs, From Users' Failpoints During Workflows

The respondents' reported workflows indicate key user needs that define what a good online legal resource must do in order to serve laypeople trying to find legal help. This study identifies user needs from the respondents' descriptions of problems they faced when using the Internet for legal help, either during their own past real-life experiences or during the fictional task.

The respondents' user needs cluster around five main themes. The first two derive from the respondents' stated problems when describing their past use of the Internet for legal help. The final three derive from the respondents' stated behaviors, and the failpoints that are apparent from how they use the Internet to search for legal resources. These five groups of users' needs are as follows:

- To easily find resources that are not “spammy,” irrelevant, or untrustworthy.
- To efficiently go from a search query on Google to correct, reliable, comprehensive resources.
- To get legally correct, jurisdiction-specific information even if they do not know the importance of jurisdiction and lack other knowledge to assess correctness.
- To deter overconfidence, which might lead users to assume that they have found the best resource and then give up their search, even if they have not found the best resource.
- To avoid exhausting or frustrating research efforts to find, compile, and make sense of the perfect information about their legal issue.

5. User Needs Emerging from Frustration

with Past Legal Searches Online

Several respondents, when asked whether and how they have tried to use the Internet for legal questions previously, mentioned the problems they have encountered in trying to get help online. There was substantial disappointment and frustration over the Internet's failure to serve their needs.¹¹⁹ Much of the frustration stemmed from lack of relevant information that they could use to address their issue and the difficulty in finding satisfactory resources efficiently. Particularly, this frustration manifested itself as complaints about the specificity of the information available, the usability of the resources, and the level of expertise needed to parse the information.

Respondents identified specific factors that made the Internet a poor resource for legal help. First, the information they could find online was too general,¹²⁰ too limited, and too generic¹²¹ to be valuable. Connected to this point, users felt that their own cases had too many variables to be able to find information that would apply specifically to them.¹²² They felt the Internet only provided general information that wasn't customizable enough for very complex human realities.

They also expressed a need for more straightforward, reliable information. Respondents wanted a resource that would supply conclusive information and would give them a sense that they had complete knowledge and a clear understanding of the

¹¹⁹ The negative emotions were often expressed as frustration and disappointment: "I wanted to find specific information on Ohio motor vehicle laws. I recall being very frustrated and not finding anything useful or trustworthy" (P42).

¹²⁰ "I was being sued for a debt. I looked up information on what kind of recourse I had to solve the problem. I found a bunch of general knowledge but nothing that pertained to my individual situation" (P11).

¹²¹ "I was trying to fight some parking tickets and similar things and was trying to find legal information. Most of the sites were run by lawyers who offered limited, generic advice for free, which was a little helpful" (P38).

¹²² For a divorce query: "there were too many variables and it was hard to get answers" (P50).

law.¹²³ Many expressed frustration that the Internet provided a cacophony of perspectives on a legal situation, but most of these perspectives were not from experts.¹²⁴ They complained of being barraged with an overload of competing information when they searched the Internet, much of which was contradictory.¹²⁵ In other scenarios, the respondents reported finding information that seemed relevant but that was presented in overly complicated ways, making it impossible to understand or use.¹²⁶ The respondents expressed a need for clear direction and tools to parse the information, to help them sort through the search results, and to uncover the right information for their situation.¹²⁷

Finally, dissatisfied respondents expressed a need for more trustworthy, reliable information from a Google search. They complained that the legal resources produced by their searches were “spammy” or untrustworthy.¹²⁸ They did not feel confident that a mere search, even with the best query that they could put together, would take them to a resource that was public, authoritative, and reliable.

At the other end of the spectrum, a handful of respondents reported that they have been able to use the Internet effectively to find legal help in the past. Their positive stories indicated the same user needs as the negative ones. A positive user experience online involves finding specific legal

¹²³ “Needed help with information about whether judgments against me were legal or not. I was not able to find anything conclusive” (P2).

¹²⁴ “Divorce/child custody laws. I found lots of legal forums with people complaining, telling their experience, etc. but not a lot of solid legal information that I could count on” (P27).

¹²⁵ “way too many result with conflicting information” (P10).

¹²⁶ “I looked for information about bankruptcy law and being sued for credit card debt. I found a bunch of complicated stuff that I didn’t understand and didn’t really answer my questions” (P45).

¹²⁷ “Inheritance and social security. I got mixed results wasn’t sure what results I should be going for” (P6).

¹²⁸ “Things having to do with a car accident. I found a bunch of spammy and fake looking results on the internet. (i ended up having to go through a friend’s friend for better information)” (P32).

information,¹²⁹ from an official government site,¹³⁰ and with supporting resources to help them not only understand their issue but take action to address it.¹³¹ In order to have a good online legal help experience, the users need easy ways to find reliable, conclusive, expert information, in an efficient way after doing a Google search for it. They need the ability to sift through a huge amount of information, to separate bad legal resources from good, and then understand complex terms and processes that they have no previous familiarity with.

6. User Needs from Failpoints that Arose During the Survey Searches

The final set of user needs derives from the search behavior reported by the respondents as they dealt with their fictional eviction notice. When doing their initial Google search, many exhibited behavior that showed concerning failpoints of the Internet as a legal help service. Many respondents were unaware of the importance of jurisdiction, as mentioned earlier in Section VI.D.3, and so they relied on legal information that did not necessarily apply to their problem. Related to this issue, many others were overconfident in their ability to find correct legal information and over-relied on the first Google Search results as being correct. These failpoints indicate a need to protect users from their own overconfidence in being able to effectively use the Internet to solve problems. How do we stop users from relying on faulty information or going with the first resources they encounter rather than the best resources?

A third failpoint online was the respondents' inefficiency in finding correct, clear information to help them understand

¹²⁹ "Found several links to code and legal advice relevant to my area specifically" (P52).

¹³⁰ "How to do a power-of-attorney for someone in a different country (Russia). I was able to find the necessary information on the Russian embassy website" (P51).

¹³¹ "My mom was going through a divorce a few years ago, and I spent a fair amount of time researching online to find help for her. I was able to find quite a bit, as it turned out, from downloadable legal forms to case law, which really helped" (P7).

their issue satisfactorily. Several reported creating their own comprehensive resource by going through multiple pages that appeared on their search results in order to piece together a custom resource for their own situation.¹³² Others reported trying out many different queries, pages, and posts trying to find the perfect resource to exactly match their situation.¹³³ This type of user has a great hunger and willingness to work to find effective legal help online. However, this type of effort can lead to an inefficient and unsatisfying user experience. As one respondent estimated, if they were faced with an eviction notice in real life, “I would probably spend a few hours looking things up, then get fed up and contact that eviction defense site” (P45). This type of user needs a way either to temper their expectations (so they better know that they will never be able to find the perfect resource or answer to fit their exact situation) or to customize the information they find in a very detailed, interactive way (so they can actually find information that fits their exact circumstances). Overall, this user type needs greater efficiency in the process, prompts to keep them from wasting time and effort, and stronger guidance about what to expect from searching legal resources.

This combination of user needs, apparent from the respondents’ reported workflows and failpoints, can be incorporated into user-centered standards for the ‘quality’ of

¹³² “I feel like I’m grabbing a sentence here and a sentence there to eventually form the correct answer, rather than finding the answer complete in one spot” (P42); “It was relatively difficult to find all the details that I require, but I did get a fair idea on how I should approach this situation” (P3); “I would take the time and read many articles and search more sites for some depth into the issue. I would go to sites where lawyers post and see if anyone has the same issues. I could even go to a forum too” (P6); “I’d simply search longer and read more in depth. I may very well create a word document to clip relevant info” (P42).

¹³³ “I did a few different searches to try and find out whether or not the landlord was within his rights and how much notice needed to be provided” (P47); “I searched google and read forums of people with similar issues” (P37); “Searched the California department of consumer affairs website, and looked on Yahoo answers for people who have faced the same situation” (P25); “I googled several phrases about illegal evictions” (P22).

online legal services. This study uncovered several needs that must be met for users to effectively engage with online legal services: (1) efficient presentation of correct, reliable, and comprehensible legal information; (2) means to get to information customized to the many variables of the user's specific situation; (3) preventing jurisdictional and other mistakes when deciding whether to trust legal information; (4) preventing the 'first Google search result' bias; and (5) stopping users from going on inefficient hunts for the perfect resource on many different sites with many different searches.

E. Preferences and Evaluation of Sites

In addition to user needs, the survey also aimed to uncover user preferences including what type of experience they would ideally like to have when getting legal help online and how the current legal help sites measure up to this ideal. To uncover information of user preferences, the survey asked the respondents to assess the search tools, results, and sites that they used while seeking legal help online. In the study's final section, the respondents were sent to a series of different online legal help sites. They were still tasked with trying to find guidance on how to respond to their eviction notice. They were asked to visit one site at a time from a randomized list of three sites: Nolo Press, the California State Courts' Self-Help Center, and Yahoo! Answers. Then, when they returned to the survey after visiting each site, they were given the chance to rank each site's usefulness, ease of use, and trustworthiness. They were also asked if they were ever confused while using the site, what they liked about the site, and what they disliked about the site.

These questions were meant to elicit their assessment mechanisms when deciding whether to use a legal help resource online, as well as their preferences regarding the usability and usefulness of a site. The three sites were chosen to represent different kinds of legal help sites, in order to get a rich comparison of how laypeople prefer to receive help online.

1. Comparison of Different Sites' Offerings

In the comparison of the three sites, the respondents preferred the California State Courts' Self-Help site over the other two. Their assessment was based on several factors: (1) trustworthiness; (2) legitimacy; (3) ease of use; (4) clear value and purpose; and (4) information that is direct and navigable. For each of these factors, the respondents described what markers they considered when deciding how each site rated.

The respondents had a strong preference for the courts' Self-Help site. On trustworthiness, 23 out of 31 ranked it as the most trustworthy of the 3 sites. On helpfulness, 24 of 31 ranked it as the most helpful of the sites. Nolo came in second, with 8 people choosing it as the most trustworthy, and 22 choosing it as second-most trustworthy. 7 respondents found it to be the most helpful site, and 22 respondents ranked it the second-most helpful. Yahoo! Answers was consistently ranked as the least trustworthy and the least helpful, though four people ranked it as the second-most helpful, and one person ranked it as the second-most trustworthy. The factors that most influenced the respondents' assessment of the three sites were how professional and reliable the site seemed, how easy and quick it was to find specific information, and how comprehensive the information was.

a. Responses about Nolo

Respondents rated Nolo with relatively high marks for usefulness (58 out of 100 points, standard deviation of 29.8), ease of use (57 points, standard deviation of 30.3), and trustworthiness (65 points, standard deviation of 26.5). They reported low levels of confusion, with only a few complaints about being confused. The confusion centered on, first, Nolo's sale of their own books in addition to providing free articles;¹³⁴ second, finding applicable information versus general

¹³⁴ "Once or twice, it was hard to tell if I was reading something relevant or a sales pitch" (P42).

information;¹³⁵ and third, difficulty navigating the site and searching for good information.¹³⁶ Most respondents had high remarks for Nolo because a large amount of information was contained on the single site;¹³⁷ much of the information was written and presented in straightforward, understandable ways;¹³⁸ Nolo had a clear way to search the site;¹³⁹ and the site seemed to be official, reliable, and accurate.¹⁴⁰ Respondents complained that the site was cluttered with too many links and sections;¹⁴¹ that the information seemed overly general; free information was not available for specific states or problems;¹⁴² and there were too many ads and attempts to sell things to the

¹³⁵ “I thought there was a section that would address the issue, but found nothing about two week notices, specifically” (P 1). “it’s got a plethora of legal information, much of which didn’t apply to me” (P45).

¹³⁶ “Searching for the correct specific state law regarding the problem took a while” (P25). “it was also hard to find each link” (P32).

¹³⁷ “[It is] easy to use and full of information” (P53). “has lots of options” (P22). “I love the level of detail, it seems to cover just about every situation” (P45).

¹³⁸ “The articles were clear and concise” (P37).

¹³⁹ “The drop down menu, listing everything by topic made navigation easy” (P25). “I liked that it had it’s own search engine to search on their site” (P41). “I loved that there was a simple search bar at the top of the page. Finding eviction information was as easy as using Google” (P30).

¹⁴⁰ “I like that the site has an air of officiality to it” (P5). “I like that it has legal advice that I can rely on” (P38) [Source says the exact opposite of this]. “it looks very comprehensive” (P27).

¹⁴¹ “category pages were not visually appealing, and looked cluttered” (P4). “The website is poorly organized and doesn’t seem to cover anything very specifically” (P36). “...it was a little cluttered, the information was buried deep, you had to click through too many things” (P32). “The drop down menu could do with more specific and well organised sub menus” (P25). “It was very overwhelming with so many links, so much information, and sections...” (P27).

¹⁴² “It’s got a vast amount of information, but it’s hard to figure out which of it is the stuff that is germane to me; my city, my state, etc.” (P45). “I didn’t see anything that may be state specific if there are differences between states which there are” (P41). “It didn’t entirely answer my question and could have used more details” (P47). “not easy to find pertinent info” (P44). “The free information wasn’t broken out by state” (P50).

user.¹⁴³ The issues relating to advertising and paywalls were the most salient negative points, going back to what one respondent called its “very spammy” (P43) experience.

b. Responses About Yahoo! Answers

The respondents were substantially more negative toward Yahoo! Answers. They gave the site poor ratings for usefulness (32 points out of 100, with standard deviation of 23.1), ease of use (44 points, with standard deviation of 29.7), and trustworthiness (24 points, with standard deviation of 22.7). The poor ratings derive primarily from the respondents’ suspicions about the quality of the content. Many said the site is a place for wrong answers, has content from unqualified authors, and should not be trusted for reliable advice.¹⁴⁴ Respondents also complained that it is hard to pinpoint correct and relevant information within the massive amount of content¹⁴⁵ and that some of the content seemed outdated.¹⁴⁶ Despite the lack of trustworthiness, respondents reported low levels of confusion. They found the site to be “streamlined and easy to use technically” (P32). The only reported point of confusion was how to navigate the many different answers available and how to choose which approach was correct.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ “I did not like that there seems to be large advertisements all over the place” (P30). “It tries too hard to sell you stuff” (P29). “They are just trying to sell you books and stuff” (P20). “I didn’t like how it also seems they are trying to constantly sell you stuff. It was annoying” (P5).

¹⁴⁴ “There’s a lot of off-topic and random answers. I wouldn’t rely on it for serious matters” (P38). “A reservoir of nearly useless opinions” (P42). “It is not a professional site. Anyone can make up answers just to get picked for points” (P6). “people on there are idiots who just use the site to spout off nonsense” (P53).

¹⁴⁵ “would take awhile to find my specific answer” (P44). “Lack of organization” (P36). “Its more complicated to use and the answers may or may not be right” (P45). “I couldn’t really pinpoint exactly what I was looking for, although I could find semi-similar situations” (P15).

¹⁴⁶ “Seems outdated” (P24). “Sometimes the advice/question is old that it is outdated. The old ones should be deleted, depending on the topic” (P6).

¹⁴⁷ “I wasn’t sure, which approach is the correct one and what course of action, should I really take” (P3). “I couldn’t find an exact answer to my

Though Yahoo! Answers was not rated highly overall, a cluster of respondents did find it particularly useful. As a legal resource, it was quite divisive among the respondents. They seemed to either strongly dislike the experience as something that is unreliable and polluted with misinformation or love it as a simple and personal supply of diverse information. What did people like about Yahoo! Answers? A minority of respondents found Yahoo! Answers very valuable because of its stories from real people and conversational tone.¹⁴⁸ Some respondents like the question-and-answer format and the abundance of scenarios they can browse.¹⁴⁹ Specifically, they derive value from Yahoo! Answers by comparing their own scenario to that of many other people on the site. In this way, they refine their understanding and strategy for the situation. However, they would not use Yahoo! Answers as an exclusive source of information or for expert advice.¹⁵⁰

c. Responses About California Self-Help Site

The California State Court's Self-Help site was ranked the highest of the three sites for all factors. Respondents ranked it very highly for usefulness (77 out of 100 points, with a standard deviation of 20.8), ease of use (80 points, with a standard deviation of 23), and trustworthiness (86 points, with a standard deviation of 15.2). The high rankings come from

question, although I did find a number of partial answers" (P7). "I was confused as to how to find an actual answer to my situation instead of just making another question post" (P29).

¹⁴⁸ "I've been using Yahoo Answers for years and find it a valuable source of information" (P19). "I can get to know about how other people, in the same situation, responded to it" (P3). "Has other people's answers" (P24). "I do like that it's answered by real people who may have been in that situation before" (P41). "I like that it has questions from ordinary people from all over. We all can relate to problems posted" (P6). "Getting advice from others who may have already gone through the situation" (P11).

¹⁴⁹ "I like the question/answer format" (P5). "The availability of information and large userbase to draw from" (P37).

¹⁵⁰ "It is people asking questions and other people respond with answers. It should not be used as an end all answer. However, it does usually provide good advice" (P47).

respondents' sense that the site made it easy to find answers to their problems;¹⁵¹ that the site is official and has trustworthy information;¹⁵² and that the information is specific, digestible, and straightforward.¹⁵³ Most respondents found the site easy to use, though a few people reported being confused as they learned how to navigate the site.¹⁵⁴ When asked for negative criticism, the complaints were that the design was out of date,¹⁵⁵ searching the site was difficult,¹⁵⁶ the site did not have enough information,¹⁵⁷ and the site lacked a personable character.¹⁵⁸ Largely though, the responses were very positive. As one respondent wrote, "[i]f the time is taken to improve the site it could be a good resource" (P31).

d. Users' Preferences for a Quality

¹⁵¹ "The site allows you to quickly find answers to questions about legal processes you might have" (P5). "it was fairly well organized" (P53). "It's got pretty basic descriptions of the nuts and bolts of the situation that are easy to find right away, and lots of helpful links you can go to seek aid" (P45). "Simple to browse the topics and find the tenant section. Good layout of the topics" (P27).

¹⁵² "it was all CA law and I did not have to worry about it not being applicable" (P23). "it is clearly associated with the state" (P38). "it was very reliable and credible" (P7). "it had valid information" (P50).

¹⁵³ "Very easy and digestible facts pertaining to California law" (P19). "It's direct and has FAQs" (P1).

¹⁵⁴ "It took a few seconds to learn to navigate" (P7). "It is a bit hard to navigate" (P37). "I wasn't sure which topic some subjects would fall on" (P6).

¹⁵⁵ "The design of the site seems dated" (P15). "I didn't care for the look of the site" (P28). "The general design was a bit confusing at first. The look of the page is very basic and outdated, in my opinion" (P7).

¹⁵⁶ "It takes so long to find what I need and the search function is terrible" (P31). "I think the search function needs to be improved. That is how I try to find everything these days" (P31).

¹⁵⁷ "There was not as much information as other sites, but I feel like this site is only intended to be a started resource, instead of the only site one must use" (P38).

¹⁵⁸ "Not very personable. There's no 'about us' page, for example" (P42). "It was pretty bland" (P41). "Utilitarian" (P1). "It was a little plain" (P22).

User Experience

The respondents' reactions to the three different kinds of legal help sites indicate that they want a hybrid model with the best features of all three different sites brought together. The common features that they valued as making a "quality" user experience are as follows:

- **Clarity: with a clear value proposition, purpose, and navigation.** They prefer a site that clearly shows what value it has to offer then presents ways to take advantage of this value. They want a clear path to follow in terms of how to use the site. They want information that is easily digestible and readily apparent. The site should be extremely easy to use, with clear navigation and search tools helping them get straight to the legal information and jurisdiction-specific details that can help them resolve their problem.
- **Authority: providing official, reliable, jurisdiction-specific content.** The respondents prefer a site that comes directly from a government agency or a court. A site that is affiliated with these official bodies might also be acceptable. The authoritativeness of a site is a key criterion in how trustworthy the site is and how much credence and time the user will give to it.
- **Open Access: without any apparent marketing, paywalls or upselling.** The respondents do not want advertising, marketing, or pay-walls to come between them and the orientation and educational materials that they are searching for. At this point in their legal journey, they are at the beginning stages, trying to assess what the situation is and what paths are open to them. They do not expect to have to pay for this basic information.

They also do not want to find themselves in what seems to be an upselling situation, in which they get some initial information for free and are then under pressure to spend money. They don't want to be marketed to with

offers of lawyers, books, subscriptions, or other advertisements near the information they are seeking. It makes them distrust the site and move on to another search result. This finding may only apply during the diagnosis, orientation, and strategy-making stages. It may not hold true for subsequent stages of their legal journey, in which they are trying to create work product, interact with the legal system, and get to resolution. This finding may also be unique to the Mechanical Turk workers that the survey recruited, who in some cases tend to place high value on money.¹⁵⁹

- **Comprehensiveness: all the information in one flow.** The respondents prefer visiting a single site for coherent information, resources, and strategies, as opposed to a piecemeal approach. They prefer visiting one site for a complete view of what words to know, what situations might be like theirs, and what legal options are open to them. However, they are willing to do a piecemeal search, in which they browse through many sites that appear in their search results and then selectively save or make a separate list from the information they gather at the separate site. Ideally, the site will give them basic introductory info and then also the specific forms and steps to take.¹⁶⁰
- **Modern Design: following current web standards of visual presentation and types of interactions.** The respondents value the quality of the content, but they also want it be displayed well. This preference means the site should look like it follows recent design trends including responsiveness to mobile screens, intuitive presentation of information, and many interactive features for users (like contextual search, expanding menus, and the ability to filter and customize

¹⁵⁹ See Goodman et al., *supra* note 102, at 220–21. The MTurk users in Study 1 showed a stronger valuation of money than those in Study 2.

¹⁶⁰ “It would have any necessary paperwork that could be filled out and submitted to the court if needed” (P53).

information). Aside from expecting the site to use the latest web technologies to be more navigable and customizable, users also want the site to look as though it fits with recently designed sites and not those from a previous era. That image comes across in font choice and size, the width of the page, the color scheme, and other visual design components. If the visual look and interactive features seem outdated to the user, their experience is poorer and their willingness to engage with the site diminishes.

- **Conversation: presenting stories and scenarios that detail the law from a person's point of view.** Though respondents largely did not trust the stories that they read on Yahoo! Answers about others' legal experiences, many did have an appetite for reading through short narratives that describe how people in situations similar to their own crafted strategies and followed legal procedures. There is a distinct appetite for anecdotal information (though ideally that has been either created by a legal authority or verified as accurate by an authority). There is at least one type of user that would prefer legal services to be delivered in a peer-to-peer, conversational tone, with short sentences, a diversity of users telling their personal stories regarding similar situations, and some hyperlinks to more resources. The preference is for a portion (if not the entire site's information) to be presented in more informal narratives.

Similarly, several respondents wanted to be able to directly ask their question on the site, and have a person respond specifically to them (or have the feeling of a personal response).¹⁶¹ This preference is not asserting that the entire legal service should be presented through

¹⁶¹ "Users could both browse AND ask a question; legal professionals would answer" (P48); "it would allow me to tailor the question to my exact situation and then help me to formulate a response citing all relevant state laws" (P26).

stories and conversation, but rather this mode can supplement traditional articles and lists describing legal information in a straightforward way.

These findings from the users' comparisons of the three sites resonate with their responses to the survey's final question: what kind of site would the respondent create as an ideal legal help site? Several respondents advocated a hybrid of Nolo and the Self-Help site, with the Self-Help site's content presented in a more modern and navigable interface like Nolo's.¹⁶² Others advocated a mix of Yahoo!'s design composition and conversational tone with the official, legitimate information of the Self-Help site and the professional presentation of Nolo's site.¹⁶³

These responses affirm the importance of the factors mentioned in the comparison: strong information architecture, modern style and character, official and jurisdiction-specific credentials, comprehensive information and action steps, and free content without advertising. The ideal site would come from the government or court institution in their jurisdiction directly, but it would have a modern feel, with prominent navigation, search, and interactive features to help the user get to the right information for their situation as quickly as possible. It would have no advertisements or fees that distract the user or create distrust. It would be conversational and full of example

¹⁶² "It would have all the information of the self-help website but the layout and design of the Nolo website. It would also have a forum where questions could be asked, and hopefully answered by knowledgeable people" (P7); "the court site, except with a better layout" (P32); "It would be a site with the ease of use and official backing of the self-help site with the depth and detail of the NOLO site" (P38).

¹⁶³ "I would combine the contents from the Self-help site and Nolo and add an interactive feature, where users can share their experiences (just like in Yahoo answers), which would make it much easier for me to prepare a response to the notice" (P3); "It would be a combination of all 3 of the above sites. A site that has all the laws, a site that gives advice and information on how to do it yourself, and a site where others can share their experiences" (P11); "It would have the number of people willing to help of Yahoo, but with the professionalism of Nolo and the officialness of Self Help" (P37).

anecdotes and user stories that have been verified as legally accurate. The ideal site would be comprehensive, with information and materials that support a person from figuring out their legal problem, to making a strategy, to filling out forms and getting them filed.

VII. TAKEAWAYS FROM THE FINDINGS

Bringing together the findings from the survey responses, the online consumer complaints, and the literature review, this study presents several shortlists of insights into what a “quality” user experience of online legal help is, as defined by users themselves. The study has clear limits in terms of the user demographics profiled, with the survey focused only on tech-savvy, English-speaking, middle class people working on Mechanical Turk. Also, the survey is focused on one particular moment of a user’s legal journey—the initial scouting of legal help after discovering a legal issue—rather than later stages, which include trying to hire a lawyer, entering details of a case, assembling forms, or resolving a dispute. However, the findings defined here present an initial version of user requirements for online legal services. These findings can be tested, edited, and improved in future studies. Until then, this study’s insights can be used to guide the development of online legal services so that they will better engage, support, and inform laypeople.

A. Summary of User Requirements for Online Legal Services

The initial set of user requirements from this study can be divided into a few categories: user needs (what is required to prevent the user from falling into failpoints), user preferences (what they would prefer to use in an ideal world), and insights into workflows and behaviors. The summary of the findings are as follows:

User needs. In order to guarantee an efficient, legally correct, and positive process in using the Internet for legal help, users need several things. They need efficient ways to get from a Google search to clear, customizable, expert-sourced

information about what to do. This content should be jurisdiction-specific, even if the user hasn't requested it be so. The user also needs to be protected from the 'first Google Search results are the only ones I need' phenomenon to make sure that they get the best resources even if they are tempted to go only for the first listed result. Users need ways to parse search results more effectively to avoid sites that appear to be government-related and trustworthy including sites of private for-profit enterprises selling free government forms for a fee. Finally, users need resources that are structured and presented in layperson-oriented models rather than lawyer-oriented ones, so that they can make sense of the material and have a sense of priority and direction.

User preferences. Beyond needs, user experience also depends on user preferences—how people want to consume the content, what would make for an engaging resource, and what would improve the usability and efficiency of the site. The survey confirms what the literature review hinted at and adds some initial preferences. An online legal resource should have strong and clear navigation. It should use up-to-date visual design and interactive design. Users want information with marks of authority, such as official seals, titles declaring that the content is sponsored by the government or courts, and visual cues like colors, icons, and font choices that demonstrate its legitimacy. The site should be as comprehensive as possible, meaning that information points are mixed with action points, and a person can visit one site to get from understanding their issue to taking action. Particularly in the early stages of a user's legal journey, sites should refrain from asking for money, putting prominent advertisements, or trying to sell products to the user because that will prompt disengagement. For at least some user types, a resource should also provide some of its information in personal narratives, small anecdotes, and conversational questions-and-answers, to help the user understand the complex legal information. A site can periodically adopt a conversational, peer-to-peer tone even if the content is authored and verified by experts.

Insights into users' workflows and behaviors. The survey respondents, who are tech-savvy and who take surveys

online for money, all reported that the Internet would play a prominent role in their response to a legal problem. The Internet would be used to get background information about the issue, to see what kinds of strategies and options are available, and to start weighing what the best course of action would be in this particular situation. The users may combine the Internet with other resources, such as conversations with friends and family, hiring an attorney, or visiting a library. However, the Internet will be one of their first destinations when making sense of what problem they have in legal terms and what this legal terrain looks like. Most users will start their attempts to use the Internet as a legal resource with a Google search. The responses that Google displays to them will have a strong, if not determinative, impact on what resources they use, with several users deciding that the top pick from Google was the only site that they needed to visit.

B. Key Takeaways

This study offers several general points, as well as specific takeaways for legal organizations. First, the study indicates that the Internet has great promise to be a vehicle for access to justice for middle class populations. People, particularly tech-savvy middle-class adults, want to use the Internet as the first stop on their legal journey. The Internet is a primary resource for these people to understand, strategize, and start to assemble their way of responding to a problem that has come up. It may not necessarily be the place they go to find lawyers, but the Internet—and especially the Google search engine—is the place they go to figure out if their problem really does have a legal recourse path, whether they need a lawyer to deal with it, and what they should be thinking about as they take their next steps.

However, this promise is not realized. The status quo of Internet legal help is not acceptable. The survey respondents, despite their tech-savviness and education, report frustration, inefficiency, and confusion when trying to use the Internet for legal help. The current search engine results and legal help pages do not sufficiently support users who try to find and make sense of legal information.

This study confirms the importance of user experience factors to how laypeople will use online legal services. The respondents were not only looking for positive outcomes (meaning correct information or a smart strategy) when using the Internet for legal help. They also put strong emphasis on experiential factors, such as the process and experience of seeking out this help. Getting to a smart, successful outcome is important, but users reported that it is difficult to use online legal resources to get to this outcome. The user experience of legal websites and tools must be improved in order to make them vehicles for effective access to justice.

1. Takeaways for Online Legal Service Providers

Organizations who develop and maintain online legal services must invest in user experience and interface design. The quality of the content or the service will not be appreciated if the service is not easy to navigate, with a modern and trustworthy appearance, and with interactive, intuitive features. Design factors play a large role in how a user judges the quality of a resource online. It is worthwhile for legal organizations to invest in better visual layouts, more coherent and coordinated user journeys, and modern web features that give a user both confidence in the site and improved efficiency and experience while using the site.

The user needs and preferences uncovered in the study also indicate some very practical design choices that legal resource-providers can make in order to improve their user experience. These design edits may not work for all user types, but they will improve the experience of the demographic studied here. The study's results point to several foci for redesign: (1) increasing ease of finding information through navigation and search; (2) structuring the information to laypeople's mental models using examples, narratives, and conversation; (3) making more interactive tools that let users find information specific to their case's variables; and (4) creating more

comprehensive, coordinated user journeys through the legal system.

One particular focus for design must be navigation and search tools that allow for easy access to relevant, correct information. Sites can invest in clearer menus, summaries of information, and prominent icons and headlines that make it very clear how a user can find the information relevant to them and skip past all other information. Related to this step, sites can make search very prominent and also more contextual, so that visitors can use the site's search, like they would Google, to surface the most relevant and important information with a simple query.

Second, legal organizations should invest in creating information architectures and styles that fit users' mental models. This step could entail framing the content around the life situations that laypeople are experiencing, rather than the legal categories that lawyers use to frame them. Sites can convert some of their information into a conversational tone and present illustrative stories explaining the legal information through anecdotes about seemingly real laypeople. They can also provide various presentations of the same, redundant information, with the expectation that there are different user types who prefer learning about legal information in distinct ways. This presentation can mean varying text with images and video or presenting some information in informal ways and others in formal ways. Resources should have multiple entryways, to engage the distinct types of users who are in bullet mode versus browse mode or those who enjoy browsing informal stories about legal problems versus those who want to read formal accounts of the law on an issue.

Thirdly, legal help sites should invest in tools that are interactive and customizable to allow users to find information on their particular situation. Users can derive value from a collection of static, general articles about a legal process, but they prefer tools that let them enter their situation's variables then delivers to them information that is specific to their case. Such tools could filter out much of the complexity that distracts and confuses users, helping the user to distinguish useful

information from noise. Users want quick, direct ways to find what legal paths are open to them given their particular circumstances. They need ways to know what parts of their circumstances are relevant and then how this affects their options.

Finally, legal organizations should invest in coordinating information and action options. The users want a way to get as much done as they can, from understanding their issue, to forming a strategy, to addressing the problem, on a single site. Legal help sites could build an entire flow of these functions on their own site. Alternatively, the various sites could link together to pass the user smoothly from one site to the next, so that the user can go from a site to read about their legal issue, then to a local service provider to get further guidance, and then to a court site to fill in official forms and e-file them. Ideally, the user will not have to scour the Internet for all of these different functions and repeatedly enter their case information. Rather, there should be an easy, intuitive flow of sites that, once the user enters, makes it is easy to get from start to resolution. This redesign requires the organization of many different legal help providers, vendors, courts, and government agencies, to coordinate their data standards and agree to operate with each other. It would benefit the users to have comprehensive, coordinated paths to legal help.

2. The Need for New Branding and Search Initiatives

The study points to the need for other initiatives, aside from legal help providers redesigning their sites. The research reveals that Google search has enormous influence that conditions the legal help that users will discover and use. This finding has two interesting implications. First, it means that there is not a strong enough legal brand that users visit when they have a potential legal problem, so they must rely on Google to be the intermediary that tells them where to go. Second, it means that Google could play a meaningful role in making the Internet a better place for legal help. How it presents results to search queries that relate to problems with legal dimensions can

have a strong effect on how laypeople find, parse, and use online legal resources.

On the point of branding, a takeaway that follows from the users' preferences is that governments and courts should invest more in their brand and the design of their resources. The survey respondents, as well as the people who lodged complaints on Consumer Affairs, wished to find an official, government site to provide them with the authoritative information and public, free resources. The users do not necessarily know how to find official, government sites. Government agencies and courts could invest in public awareness of the resources that they offer online. This investment could involve online, offline, and traditional media outreach campaigns. They may also invest in creating stronger brands to make it clearer to laypeople that they exist, that they offer free and authoritative legal help, and that they should be a first stop for a person with a potential legal problem.

Government agencies should invest in search engine optimization to ensure that their site is the first result in response to laypeople's common queries related to the services they provide. The agencies may also confer with search engine providers, like Google, Microsoft, Yahoo!, and Apple, to discuss the possibility of getting priority in search results over private actors or advertisements. Search engine placement should be a target for redesign, alongside the resources themselves.

Search engine providers may also consider revising how they present search results when users have searched for queries that contain possible legal problems. For example, if a user searches on Google "how to respond to an eviction notice," Google could flag this query as a legal query that deserves special treatment. This treatment might include presenting the search results with designs that would provide stronger guidance toward jurisdiction-correct, government or court-sponsored content, as well as providing some short orientation text about this query having potential legal remedies. Google might present the court or government site at the top of the page, in larger text, with a box or colored background, or with other visual cues that this site should be the user's first stop. If a user searches for a

topic that relates to a legal form, the search engine might provide a prominent link to that form on a free government site, to ensure that the user does not inadvertently pay for the form on a private site.

The search engine might also present a small description of the legal issue that the user's query related to, like a paragraph overview of what an eviction is, options for a divorce, or how to get a green card. Google already presents such summaries when users search for medical conditions, the weather, sports games, and some immigration processes. It could also provide contact information for local, free legal service providers who can help the user navigate the legal system.¹⁶⁴ The search result page could answer the user's question in a clear, commanding way and with information that is coming straight from a reliable source (the government or the courts) without a profit-based motive. If search engine providers could provide more directed results for legal queries, this change could have substantial impact on laypeople's ability to use the Internet well to access justice.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This empirical study of how laypeople use the Internet to respond to problems with legal issues affirms the importance of user experience design and defines an initial set of user requirements for better modes of online legal services.

Following this initial study of a limited demographic, and of a certain type of legal task, there is need for further study of laypeople's experiences with online legal help services. The

¹⁶⁴ A team of Google, Microsoft, Yahoo!, and Yandex engineers has begun exploring how to create an information schema for social services that would allow it to provide smarter search results when users ask about different government or social services. It would be able to refer users to local social service providers. This project is called Schema.org (<http://schema.org/>). It has not yet been revised to include information about legal services, but it could provide an initial structure for better search results for legal queries.

user needs, preferences, and workflows documented here can be verified in more extensive observational and ethnographic future studies. Future efforts can also test the insights by actually building technologies upon them, placing them in the hands of non-lawyers, and testing whether users' comprehension, engagement, and follow-through on legal tasks are improved by new, user-centered designs of legal help services. This study lays a foundation of insights and requirements which subsequent studies must test and expand.

This Article also can be used as the first step in a design process that results in the creation of new models of legal services. The user requirements and findings can serve as foundational insights for designers and developers, who are interested in creating higher quality online legal help. The design concepts discussed in the Takeaways session offer some promising directions for implementation-focused organizations to pursue. The user research and design concepts ideally will be used to prototype new types of legal information sites, document assembly tools, dispute resolution platforms, and other online legal services. Testing of these new models will also contribute to academic discussions of what types of presentations and tools are most effective in bridging the access to justice gap. To bring innovation to the access to justice movement, there needs to be more empirical study of what different groups of laypeople need and prefer when using technology-based resources, as well as development of these new tools. This two-track approach to innovation will deliver on the great promise that affordable technology, prolific data networks, and interactive design has for people's ability to navigate the legal system efficiently and effectively.