

Court Case Docket Research: Portal or Database?

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If you perform lots of electronic docket research in federal, state, and local jurisdictions, you know how time consuming it can be to access the many courts around the country. Unless you are already familiar with a particular court's online accessibility, finding quick, reliable, and inclusive fresh case data can be challenging.

While some researchers collect dozens of bookmarks or rely upon their Intranet for most courts that they access, a more efficient method is a portal - a single site that maintains links to all available courts. A docket portal functions as a pathway for researchers to access case dockets in all available jurisdictions very quickly. However, as an alternative to accessing cases through a portal, researchers can also use vendor databases to locate docket information. These sites collect data from many jurisdictions, provide a single user interface, uniform dockets, and advanced search functionality.

So which provides better results for locating and obtaining court case dockets, portals or databases? It often depends upon your exact goal, your deadline, your budget, and your skills as a researcher. As with most online research, accessing several sources is often required to obtain the best results.

Court Case Information Availability

Almost all federal district courts are now utilizing the federal judiciary's CM/ECF system, which can be easily accessed with a PACER account. This system provides public access to each court's docket database, and includes document images and electronic filing. Currently there are over 27 million civil, criminal, and bankruptcy cases on CM/ECF, with access to federal appellate courts coming soon. In addition, researchers can also access a nationwide case listing database through the PACER US Party/Case Index. While these databases are inexpensive, easy to use, and improve slightly with each new release, from an expert researcher's point of view their search capabilities are limited.

The availability and scope of state, county, and local court dockets, and case summary information online varies greatly. Each jurisdiction has its own rules and restrictions that determine what shall be deemed public or private and how their data may be used. For example, some courts allow the public to access their data, but do not allow commercial vendors to aggregate and resell it. Also, since so many different state courts use different docket formats and methods of producing case data, it can be difficult and time consuming for commercial docket data aggregators to add jurisdictions to their

collections. With this in mind, it is likely that a good docket portal may contain access to more courts than a commercial database provider. However, state courts may require the creation of individual accounts to access their dockets, which can initially slow down your research efforts.

Updated Case Data

Since a portal simply links directly to each court's public access web site, how often the case information is updated depends on each court's procedures. For example, federal district CM/ECF court data is live. After a docket entry is made by a court clerk or an attorney, it appears almost instantly online. But many state, county, and local courts warn that their web dockets should not be relied upon and are not updated daily. It is important to investigate how often a court's case data is updated if you are checking their site regularly with the purpose of monitoring a case's activity.

When searching for case dockets using a database, it's important to know the depth and breadth of the data collection for which you are searching. If a database is incomplete or has not been updated properly, you will not get accurate results. Sometimes locating a docket that has not been updated in many months may be useful, while other times it is not. Often these services allow you to search their internal database to locate a case, and then allow you to access an updated docket immediately from the court's database. However, if a court only updates its data weekly, and you are using a commercial database to check a docket daily, you are wasting your money.

Docket Formatting and Content

Federal district court dockets are generally straight forward, uniform, and relatively easy to interpret. These dockets continue to become more uniform every day thanks to CM/ECF's electronic case filing procedures. However, state court dockets can be difficult to read. Also, the information they contain, and how it is presented, varies significantly. Some contain only very basic case information, or a listing of filing fees paid. Some contain motion information, disposition, clerk's entries, and document images. Each court is different, and interpreting their version of a "docket" can be difficult depending on your experience with that jurisdiction and familiarity with court case dockets in general. While often the appearance, content, and formatting of state court dockets is different from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, there are exceptions. Some states utilize a uniform statewide case information database, and some court databases have identical user interfaces because their case management systems were built by the same software developers.

Commercial databases collect case information and present case dockets with a somewhat uniform format and add additional information and embedded links. For example they may add value to their dockets by consolidating information, adding useful narrative, links to law firm information, case cites, and researcher assisted document retrieval services.

Pricing

While there are only a few good case information portals on the web, you generally get what you pay (or do not pay) for. Free public record portals are generally updated less often than pay sites, contain broken or stale links, will not be comprehensive, and display distracting ads. Fee based portals generally offer more detailed information and a professional appearance, charge inexpensive monthly or annual subscription fees, and provide better results for serious researchers.

Commercial databases attempt to provide the best user interface and include useful services that public access court docket databases do not. The additional added value of these databases can be seen in features such as their ability to provide full text docket searching, automated case monitoring for existing and new cases, and customized case data reports.

What to look for in a good portal

-Highly Focused-

While the ability to look up your neighbor's dog tag license may be useful to some, you do not want to waste time searching through an over-inclusive list of public record database links. If you have to sort through too many unhelpful links, the value of the portal is significantly reduced.

-Good links-

If you find court links are often broken, misdirect you, or only direct you to court homepages, you are wasting valuable research time. New publicly available court case databases are constantly becoming available online. If a portal does not routinely add new links to their collection, it is not comprehensive.

-Cost-

A good portal will definitely save you time and money when searching for case information. Portals are utilized by small firms to inexpensively meet their research needs, without the pressure of negotiating large expensive contracts with mega legal service companies. Mid-sized and large firms use portals to obtain the fastest direct access to case dockets, enabling them to bill their time more efficiently to their clients.

What to look for in a good vendor database

-Fast Search Results and Current Dockets Which are Easily Updated-

Since you're paying a premium price, your search results should be provided quickly, and the case information should be useful. If the data you receive is too often outdated or cannot be updated easily, look for a better database.

-Excellent user Interface-

One of the primary reasons to use a vendor database is to save time and avoid the aggravation learning each court's access requirements and idiosyncrasies. A commercial database's user interface should be clean, intuitive, and should speed up your research, not slow it down.

-Advanced Search Capabilities, Case Monitoring, and Other Value-added Services-

A good database will allow you to search their dockets using full text, or by any combination of fields such as plaintiff, defendant, judge, date filed, law firm, etc. Case monitoring needs to be flexible, reliable and it should be clear as to what exactly has been updated on a docket, and when the update occurred. If a database is integrated with links to other related information, these links should be useful and functioning. If researcher assistance is offered for document retrieval, it's pricing and quality should meet or exceed your expectations. Also, the ability to search multiple court jurisdictions simultaneously can be helpful.

Conclusion

To locate comprehensive online dockets in all available jurisdictions, researchers should have convenient access to both quality portals *and* databases to obtain the best results. Often when used in conjunction, portals and databases compliment each other and together provide the most thorough research results. The service that produces the best results for you generally depends upon your specific needs, and the tasks you need to accomplish. For example, to quickly and inexpensively locate basic recent case information, a portal is probably a better choice than a database. But to conduct full text and other advanced metadata searching, using a more expensive commercial database is required. The key is to learn which docket portal and database vendors are the best for your specific purposes, how to properly maintain your accounts and relationships with their providers, and how to make full use of their strengths and abilities.

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