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The Lexis Two-Step

After two major updates in 2014, Lexis Advance empowers users with improved functionality

By Beau Steenken

The Texas Two-Step, a popular country-western dance, comes in many varieties with influences ranging from polka to swing. One aspect that all variations share, however, is the division of dance steps into sets of two with alternating timing: slow-step, slow-step, quick-step, quick-step. Thus, it struck me as fitting that Lexis showed off a preview of the latest version of Lexis Advance at AALL in Texas because the cadence of the two-step wonderfully illustrates the ongoing development of Lexis Advance as a research platform.

After operating Lexis.com for roughly a decade and a half, LexisNexis announced the development of Lexis Advance, an improved research platform. Not coincidentally, Thomson Reuters engaged in the same activity with WestlawNext. While to a certain extent Lexis and West were reacting to each other (as good competitors do), the real impetus for the change took form in a non-legal search platform. Google and its celebrated algorithm changed the way information retrieval on the Internet works, and the legal search providers wished to incorporate similar enhancements.

While West and Lexis trumpeted the improvement of their search algorithms and showed off streamlined unified search bars, law librarians reacted with skepticism. Why fix something that was not broken? Also, the tremendous emphasis on algorithms and ease of use caused fear that West and Lexis planned to take control away from researchers and give it to an inflexible mathematical equation, an approach many doubted would work with the highly nuanced research required by the practice of law.

Many of the concerns expressed by law librarians turned out to be valid, at least upon the first releases of the new platforms. Eventually, WestlawNext managed to win law librarians over, but Lexis Advance took a much longer path to respectability.

Slow-Step, Slow-Step

Lexis's first steps into the post-Google era came slowly, as Lexis Advance began an extended roll-out in December of 2011, nearly two years after the release of WestlawNext. Thus, Lexis entered the fray at a serious disadvantage. Predictably, many reviews of Lexis Advance on launch tended toward the negative, if not the outright alarmist.

Perhaps most troubling for Lexis, a number of librarians who had advocated for Lexis.com over Westlaw Classic came out panning Lexis Advance. For example, Dan Baker-Jones published a series of blog posts critiquing Lexis Advance over the course of 2011 and 2012 on *Nota Bene*, the blog of the O'Quinn Law Library at the University of Houston. As one can tell from the extended time period of Baker-Jones's posts, Lexis acted slowly not only in the initial roll-out but also in responding to criticism.

Indeed, most of the major complaints about Lexis Advance persisted into January 2014. In terms of execution, Lexis Advance operated at a snail's pace compared with its competitors. The speed problems actually derived from Lexis Advance's other problem of execution: a cluttered interface that bombarded researchers with extraneous information that increased the difficulty of identifying desired information. Ideologically, Lexis Advance took faith in the algorithm to the extreme. Lexis failed to include many of the finding aids from Lexis.com in Lexis Advance. Even more troubling, Lexis did not build a topical browse into Lexis Advance, including only a rudimentary browsing of sources arranged alphabetically. The ideology of Lexis Advance, inherent in the platform's architecture, suggested the triumph of the algorithm over the researcher. The problems in execution and flawed ideology left Lexis Advance as a clear second choice legal research platform.

Quick-Step, Quick-Step

Lexis, of course, was aware of the criticisms and did seek to fix the problems with Lexis Advance. Because of the ideological choices that led to many of the problems with the platform, most of Lexis's interim fixes amounted to mere Band-Aids. After all, huge information retrieval/database platforms, much like battleships, turn very slowly. Nonetheless, Lexis became convinced of the necessity of such a turn and chose 2014 to fix the systemic problems with Lexis Advance. Because of the scope of the changes, Lexis released them in two separate stages, one in February and one in September.

The February update, albeit the smaller of the two, did add functionality to Lexis Advance and represented a shift toward empowering researchers. First, Lexis introduced the
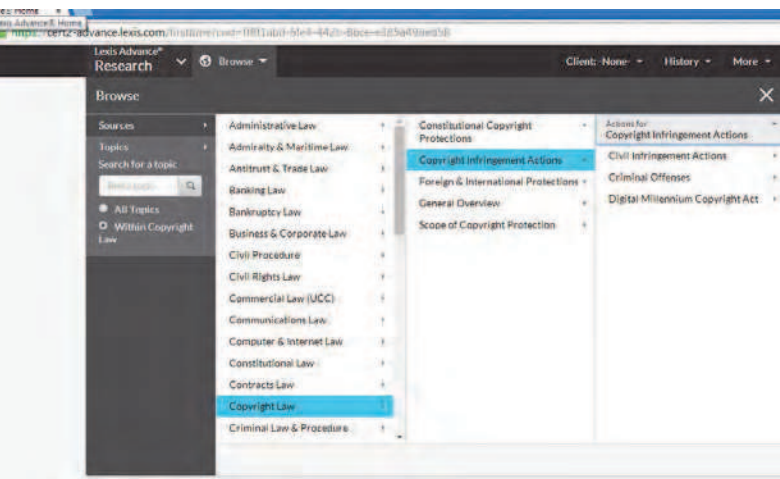
Browsing Lexis Advance

ability to search within a specific title directly from the word wheel, allowing researchers to replicate the end result of a browse. Prior to the February update, to find something specific on Lexis Advance, a researcher either had to wade through the alphabetical list of sources (and know the exact title of the source as cataloged by Lexis) or perform a general search and flail around with post-search filters in hopes of hitting upon the desired source. Because the title list in the word wheel operates on all words of prospective titles, after February, Lexis freed researchers from the limitations of alphabetical order. Similarly, Lexis added a pseudo-topical browsing tree in the February update. In reality, this feature consisted of nothing more than a list of topics available as pre-search filters, but even this increased the platform's functionality. Lexis also finally imported some of the finding aids from Lexis.com to Lexis Advance and made minor cosmetic upgrades, such as the ability to display "expanded" or "fewer" results to give users the option to reduce the information overload. Overall, the February update made Lexis Advance a much better product.

However, the February update pales in comparison with the September update. In the latter, Lexis completely redesigned the architecture of Lexis Advance, and the results leave Westlaw Next finally facing a worthy competitor. Interestingly, the new features that the Lexis representatives seem most excited about and the new features I view as the game-changing force differ somewhat. (This just goes to show how much there is to like about the new version of Lexis Advance.) Lexis representatives have been keenly pointing out the streamlined, simplified interface. The September update banished the exhaustive, horizontal list of source types researchers received with every search. Now, a limited (yet expandable) list of source types appears cleanly to the left of search results. Similarly, Lexis streamlined the list of available post-search filters, which now appear very neat. Furthermore, the design of the page draws the user's eye to the "Search Within Results" bar, perhaps the most useful of the post-search tools. Gone are the cartoonish introductory carousel and the annoying pre-search filters. (Lexis Advance now provides pre-search filters as options from a simple drop-down menu, and an unfiltered search acts as the default.) The interface redesign results in a cleaner, easier-to-use product. The increased operating speed that derives from the streamlined interface provides an additional bonus. However, these changes, while impressive, merely improve the execution of Lexis Advance.

The September update to Lexis Advance also addressed

the ideological shortcomings that plagued the platform in previous years. First, Lexis Advance finally features a true, highly detailed, topical browsing tree. While the February update indicated a shift in thought by providing ways to replicate a topical browse, the September update delivers upon that promise. As an example, I was able to browse from Admiralty as a topic all the way down to Defenses to Maritime Wrongful Death actions. At this level of specificity, I could either retrieve documents or add the topic tree to a general search. (For purposes of comparison, on WestlawNext the topical browse ends at the Admiralty level at which point the process switches to source-based browsing.) The new Lexis Advance also maintains the ability to browse sources but now presents the sources by useful classifications such as jurisdiction as opposed to something arbitrary like alphabetical order. The September update also made browsing within sources on Lexis Advance much easier. Each source now features a full, detailed table of contents, which can be opened on its own or via a section of the source itself. Taken as a whole, the September changes empower users of Lexis Advance and give back to researchers full control of the research process.
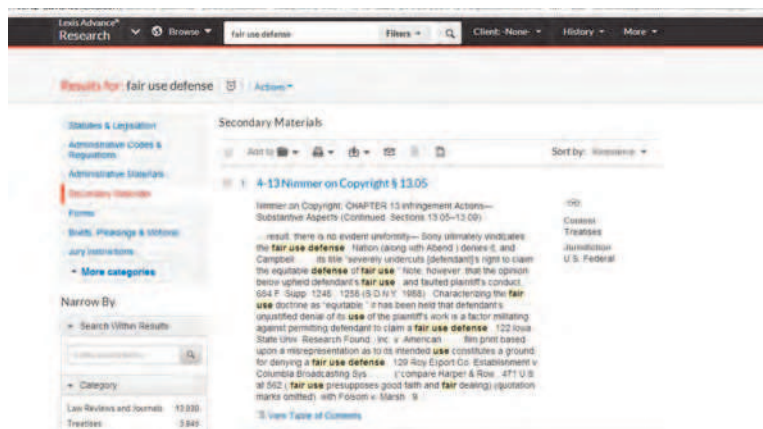
Lexis Advance search results

Next Steps

The Two-Step metaphor will likely still apply to Lexis Advance's further development. After the revolutionary changes of the 2014 updates, one would expect further refinement to be smaller in scale, so a couple of slow steps would be appropriate. While Lexis fixed the major, systemic problems with Lexis Advance, room for improvement still remains. For example, electronic indexes fail to accompany many of the sources on Lexis Advance. (It should be noted that neglect of a controlled index is a problem shared by other platforms as well.) Sadly, even many products Lexis publishes in print—*and so actively indexes*—do not feature electronic indexes. Still, importing indexes would be a relatively small step compared with the tectonic shift of 2014. The February and September changes of this year demonstrate Lexis's willingness to respond to user feedback, and I, for one, am greatly looking forward to using the much-improved Lexis Advance. ■

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