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EISIL: A Gateway To International Environmental Law On The Web

JILL WATSON*

Let me start with a very Brief History of Electronic Information System for International Law (EISIL). More than five years ago, the American Society of International Law (ASIL) began exploring how to bring its expertise and resources to bear on efforts to sort out and improve access to international law information on the World Wide Web. ASIL received funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in 2000 to build an international law information gateway and began the process of assessing how this might be accomplished.

ASIL convened a large planning workshop consisting of ASIL members, editors of the American Journal of International Law (AJIL) and International Legal Materials (ILM), people from international organizations, institutes, librarians, and others. This planning workshop was followed by another workshop that brought together other scholarly gateway builders who addressed technical issues.

The consensus was that people wanted was a “one-stop shopping” site that would guide researchers to high-quality international law information on the web. A database covering the full spectrum of international law subjects would accomplish this. The types of resources targeted as being most useful were: primary documents, high quality Web sites, and research guides.

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After performing the necessary preparatory work of defining database structures, selection guidelines, scope, standards and so on, the project managers went looking for –and found – a database designer: Northern Lights Internet Solutions, a Canadian firm. Northern Lights helped us survey our target audiences -- generally professional level people, from students to international law experts – and to conduct usability tests and peer site assessments. And since EISIL content is created and maintained by many hands, a sophisticated but easy-to-use editorial Web interface had to be designed for authors to do their work.

In 2002, the database was ready to receive data and Marci Hoffman began entering records into a large Prototype section covering human rights.¹ This period provided opportunities for fine-tuning EISIL's functionalities, as well as for the creation of such necessities as author guidelines and instructions.

The editorial web interface for EISIL's builders was put to the test when three new "charter" authors were recruited and trained in 2002 to populate the economic, environmental and criminal law sections. These sections were launched in an "EISIL Preview" in June 2003. In 2004, the pace sped up to complete the remaining subject areas in EISIL, and the full database was officially launched in September 2004.

EISIL will never be "finished" since more and more resources will be added. New primary documents appear frequently, and coverage on EISIL broadens and deepens accordingly. New database functionalities, tools and content are continuously being explored. Perhaps one day it will contain an archive of full-text secondary materials such as articles on international law, or possibly documents from International Legal Materials

How EISIL works: Browsing

The information in EISIL can be approached in a variety of ways. We felt it was important that EISIL start with a view of the full spectrum of subject matter, since many users may not be fully aware of what international law covers. So we have all 13 top categories on the first screen. They include such areas as Private International Law, International Environmental Law, and a general category. A sample of subcategories appears on the home page. The last sections to be completed are still greyed out.

¹ Marci Hoffman is Lecturer in Residence and Foreign and International Law Librarian at the University of California, Berkeley, Boalt Hall. Hoffman has worked extensively with ASIL and is an expert on international and foreign law on the Internet.

One can browse through the EISIL framework getting to more detailed subcategories. Almost all of the main sections start off with a Basic Sources subcategory. Category descriptions reveal what is covered in each section, and contain live cross references to other relevant topic areas in EISIL.

You retain your sense of where you are in the context of the whole topic through the *breadcrumb* feature that is also useful for navigating through the category. The EISIL records you see are automatically arranged by type of resource, leading off with Primary Documents, then Web Sites and Research Guides. Lists of resources can be viewed by title only, or accompanied by brief descriptions.

How EISIL works: Searching

If you prefer to word search, both a basic “Find” box, and a more sophisticated “Advanced Search” are available. Searches can cover the whole database or be limited to a certain section, or, on the Advanced Search page, to a certain type of resource, such as Primary Documents. Full Boolean searching is presented as simply as possible, as well as options for using date searching and other focusing tools.

Even the basic EISIL search engine searches not only the title, but also alternative titles and descriptive text. But you can fine-tune your search to titles only, or another field in EISIL. Your search results will list EISIL records and just like browsing, you can opt for a streamlined list of titles, or click the “show description” box. You can determine how many items to display per page (10 is the default), and you will notice that multiple pages of results are indicated on the screen.

The official title of the resource that appears here is a link to the document or web site itself. The “More Information” button on each EISIL record leads you to an important part of the database’s value-added content. EISIL authors have not only searched the web for the most relevant, stable and authoritative documents and sites in their subject areas, but also added useful data.

Detailed Records

Simply click on “more information” under any linked resource and you will have access to information such as:

- The title fields which include the proper title of the document or resource as well as any popular names or acronyms.
- Dates (such as conclusion or entry into force)

- Short descriptions of the function and purpose of the document or the web resource. There are also helpful tips about using the resource, for example mentioning that the site requires registration or the documents are only available in a particular format. Any information that might aid the user in using the site is included.
- Citations. We all know how difficult but crucial this information is for the researcher. Our EISIL authors do their best to locate authoritative citations from reliable print sources, such as UNTS, ETS, and ILM. Sometimes, however, a citation is just not available. Note that citations are not in American Bluebook format, since not all EISIL users rely on the Bluebook.
- Keywords. Keywords are added as another access point to the data for the researcher.
- Site administrator information. This information may help if the site you are trying to access is down or you need other information from the site's administrator.

Looking, for example, at the EISIL record for the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, one sees all of the fields just mentioned. You could:

- search for this record by any of the titles;
- learn the entry into force and conclusion dates;
- find information about the document and the site hosting the document;
- get a citation to the UN document and UNTS;
- find information on the instruments which amend the treaty and links to these EISIL records, the keywords;
- see the languages in which the document is available; and
- obtain information and contact information for the document creator and administrator.

EISIL brings all of this information together in one place for the researcher.

Other Features

The value-added content just discussed is not the only useful feature of EISIL. For example, when EISIL outlines an international topic, it creates a framework for research by highlighting the most important primary documents and web sites for more information and further research.

The "Mark and Save" feature of EISIL allows you to mark records as you find them and create a tailored list during your research session. To save a record, simply click the box labeled "Save Record?" and when you have marked all you need, select "Saved Records" and you will have your own selected list, complete with content and live links. You can then print,

download or email the list. If you download or email it, the links will remain live. This is very handy when compiling a list for a professor, student, or other patron.

All of the content in EISIL, including links, is reviewed by the authors on a regular basis. This aids in the reliability of the content and the stability of the sites in EISIL. Your feedback also will help keep EISIL comprehensive, accurate and up-to-date. We encourage suggestions on sites and documents to add as well as notifications of broken links.

EISIL It

Google has become one of the most common tools for searching the web. And often using Google is the quickest way to find what you're looking for. So why use EISIL rather than Google? Well, here are some of the reasons:

- EISIL has Vetted resources. Information professionals and international law experts are evaluated the documents and sites before inclusion in the database.
- One is better than thousands. Doing a search for a document in EISIL (such as a search for the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties) will yield one hit on EISIL, but thousands of hits on Google. And EISIL links to the most authoritative version of the document.
- Using the right tool. As we all know, using the right tool at the right time is crucial in legal research. Whereas Google may be the right tool for locating tourist information for Helsinki, EISIL is the right tool for finding the Helsinki Rules.
- Deep web access. We have heard much about the "deep web." Some rich content on the Web is simply not available through search engines such as Google, Alta Vista and the like. Again, since our authors have a lot of experience with web resources, they find materials for inclusion in EISIL that automated search engines do not.
- As mentioned above, the value-added content in EISIL is unique and invaluable. No search engine provides this kind of information.
- And being able to customize your search results makes EISIL a multi-purpose research and educational tool

Researching International Environmental Law

As one can begin to see, EISIL can be tapped in many ways depending on the audiences and its needs. Let's look at the Environmental Law section. You may be searching for a particular international environmental law instrument, or looking for Web sites that will inform and assist your research. You might be helping a student to understand the scope of the subject area. As this student will see, the environmental section of

EISIL has been divided into a logical outline of subtopics including Basic Sources, Biodiversity, Pollution, and Protection of the Atmosphere. This allows the student to survey the full horizon of topics, and then focus on a particular subject. The student can quickly view and access the important primary documents, as well as the most useful Web sites and research guides on that subject.

For another example, let's say a researcher asks for guidance to Web resources that will bring him up-to-date on what is happening at important non-governmental organizations and intergovernmental organizations concerned with international environmental law. EISIL is intuitive and easy-to-use, so you can recommend that she search the EISIL database, confining the results to Web sites only. She will instantly have an alphabetical list of carefully selected environmental sites, accompanied by descriptions indicating the scope and content of those sites. Or she can do the search and email the results to herself or a colleague, complete with descriptions, live links, and other useful information.

Using EISIL at Work

You can use EISIL in your work as a

- library reference resource;
- classroom and instructional tool;
- professional and scholarly writing resource;
- instrument of outreach.

Using EISIL

Let's talk about EISIL as a library reference resource. EISIL is a good place to start when researching an international law topic. It outlines a topic. Because EISIL is easy to use, it is a great tool for the novice and the expert or what we sometimes call the "ignorant expert," such as a person who knows national law but perhaps not international law. EISIL is useful for judges, practitioners, government employees, non-lawyers, and students. It's a quick way to locate treaty texts and other related information, such as treaty status information. And librarians can use it to help supplement their print collections, especially if their international collections are not deep in all areas.

In academic settings, one can also use the database as a platform for classroom and instructional use. Use it for formal and informal lectures, classes, and seminars, such as Advanced Legal Research classes. And many law schools publish international law journals. The students who work on the journals almost always need research training. EISIL can be an excellent tool

for this. Finally, it can be used for International Moot Court team research training

In law firm settings, EISIL is useful for continuing legal education. Librarians could offer a one-hour session on international legal research and feature a selected EISIL category, such as International Environmental Law. And at Law firm lunch sessions, it's good for training new associates or those new to international law.

EISIL can be useful in a number of ways for Professional and scholarly writing. Cite checking international legal materials for briefs or journal articles is often a daunting task. EISIL can help curb the anxiety that often accompanies this work because it provides authoritative legal citations – often more than one. Since the record links to a reliable Web site for the full text, the cite checker can also check the language being cited in the document. For example, if you are looking for the Helsinki Water Convention, the EISIL record will provide you with multiple authoritative citations (the United Nations Treaty Series, a United Nations document, and International Legal Materials); a link to the treaty located on the UN Economic Commission for Europe site (the most respected and dependable version of this document); the entry into force and conclusion dates; and a solid summary to make sure that this is treaty you need.

EISIL is a wonderful tool for helping someone select a topic to research. They can browse around the database or search for specific keywords. They can quickly grasp the scope of the topic as well. On many levels and in many environments, EISIL should be useful for all kinds of writing projects: student seminar papers, law reviews and journals, faculty publications, court documents, and position papers.

And finally...

You can help us make EISIL known to a wider audience while you provide information and current awareness to your own patrons, clients and constituencies. Feature EISIL in your institution or library's newsletter, on your library's Web site, or on your firm's intranet. When preparing training materials, research guides, and bibliographies, include a link to EISIL. And, on the "About EISIL" portion of the site you will see instructions for linking to EISIL from your own site, which we encourage libraries, courts, and firms to do. The ASIL, and the many authors, advisors, and producers of EISIL would be delighted for you to show other interested people how EISIL works and can be used.