A.I.-assisted legal research is here (and it’s probably cheaper than what you’re paying now)

By Matthew Oas

Legal research can be a complex and expensive decision for solos and small firms, and also for larger firms that are looking to reduce overhead costs. Fortunately, the legal research industry has seen its share of disruption as new players and new technologies are making research cheaper and more efficient. By offering new services with monthly subscriptions as opposed to lengthy contracts, companies like Casetext and Ross Intelligence are worth considering.

Artificial Intelligence (or A.I.) is perhaps one of the most exciting changes to legal research over the past few years. Today’s A.I. is, in a very basic term, a computer program that can recognize patterns and find connections between similar ideas. The “intelligence” part of an artificial intelligence comes from the way that these programs can also learn to improve the quality of their pattern recognition over time. Often such programs rely on a curated database of examples and need to be taught to understand the jargon-heavy language of legalese and the legal concepts for each area of practice. Once an A.I. has sufficient experience it can find patterns and connections that go far beyond what a traditional keyword or subject matter search might return and in just a fraction of the time that would be spent on similarly in-depth research.

In 2016 Casetext introduced an A.I.-assisted search alongside its general legal research platform. Known as CARA, Casetext’s A.I. allows you to submit a legal document such as a complaint or brief and it will quickly find cases and other authorities that share similar facts, legal issues, and conclusions – no boolean logic required. CARA’s search goes beyond simply matching keywords and instead seeks out relevant caselaw on a much deeper and more accurate level. Ross Intelligence and Casemine both offer similar products, but both are newer and relatively untested. Helpfully, all three companies offer free demos or trials to make deciding between them a bit easier.

Several companies are also working on A.I.-assisted tools to help with the brief-writing process. Uploading your own brief to vLex’s Vincent A.I. or Judicata’s Clerk A.I. reveals caselaw that you may have missed, incorrect quotations or citations, and even arguments that may be more persuasive to your particular judge. Given an opposing party’s brief, the A.I. will quickly determine which cases may be most vulnerable to a challenge. Both programs are currently in their initial testing phases, but they may soon see wider availability as the technology improves.

The cost of legal research is another area that has seen a slow but steady shift over the past few years. Newer companies are offering services that compete with the traditional legal research providers but without the traditional, multi-year contracts and gatekeeping of materials with different plans. Casetext, Ross Intelligence, Casemine, and Fastcase all offer flexible, no-contract monthly subscriptions. Additionally, these subscriptions include complete access to each company’s archive of state and federal cases, as well as extensive lists of statutes, regulations, and other authorities. Gone are the days of out-of-plan pricing and surprise bills for searches in other jurisdictions.

While the goal of these companies and their new technologies isn’t to replace lawyers, they may provide a faster and cheaper way to level the playing field between larger firms and their smaller competitors. As A.I.’s improve and new companies enter the market, lawyers should be able to spend less time and money on research and more on building a solid case.

Matthew Oas is a public interest advocate and legal technology enthusiast living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He can be contacted at matt.oas@gmail.com.