

Making the most of the internet as a tool for public legal education

How many times have you looked up the internet recently because you needed to find something out? Can you remember the days when everything was not at the touch of a button and you could go for weeks, or even years, not knowing something only to suddenly find the answer? Maybe you've consulted the internet today because you have a problem or you've wanted to learn more about something so you can help others?

In recent times the internet has played an increasing role in the dissemination of information and education relating to the law. Many who face civil justice issues, for example, consult the internet for resolution strategies.¹ Individuals may consult a range of sources, including advice websites, books, blogs or educational material written by legal practitioners, often found on their company websites. These types of materials are useful, not only to empower individuals with knowledge about their legal rights or entitlements, but they can help individuals obtain access to justice.

Anyone, with a bit of know-how, can publish on the internet, whether it is on a website, through blog-writing software, on social media, or whatever format they choose. They can do this in a variety of ways – for example, as written text, a podcast, or through videos. The internet offers great potential as a public legal educational resource. You can reach wide audiences of people from all over the world. Nevertheless, because anyone can publish over the internet, you cannot always be sure that the information you are obtaining is correct. You may find that you have to cast a more critical eye over certain sources – testing their validity with your own powers of evaluation.

While it is easy to reach vast audiences using the internet, how we engage individuals when they access your post, your blog, or your video, is a different story. I personally feel that I have access to so much information, in the words of American novelist and poet, Gertrude Stein, I might lose my common sense! I can access thousands, even millions of sources. I am bombarded by vastly much more information than I have ever been. Given the vast array of sources out there - why would someone choose to watch your video, or read your disposition? How do you ensure that it is not just a few select individuals who can understand what you're saying? These are challenges for pro bono public legal educationists.

What we suggest in the Open Justice Centre is to make things simple. We are trying to educate many, not demonstrate to a few how academically accomplished we might be. We want pictures, easy to read text, and short and snappy points. We want the public to feel engaged - to watch all of your videos, or read all of your blogs. We want the public to feel that your materials are easy to get through, and we want them to watch all of them. At the same time, we want your materials to be informative and

¹ C. Denvir 'Online and in the know? Public legal education, young people and the internet' *Computers and Education*, 2016, 204-220.

accurate. The internet is a very useful tool for public legal educationalists, but we must properly harness its potential, to ensure we can get the most out of it.

Dr Neil Graffin
The Open Justice Team