

Researching the First Amendment

Free speech, freedom of press, freedom of religion, the right to peaceably assemble, and the right to petition government for a redress of grievances are all at the very core of American law, culture, and life. These freedoms and rights have been sacred to Americans since the birth of this country, and all have been granted by the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States. The First Amendment has been at the heart of numerous legal battles and cultural issues.

Attorneys, academics, and members of the public who are interested in conducting research on the First Amendment will find many comprehensive and freely available resources online. All you need to do to access this information is find a computer with Internet access and jump in. If you don't have a computer immediately available, visit your local public library.

This article highlights electronic resources for federal and state First Amendment information. These resources are free and may prove useful when conducting research on the First Amendment.

The Black Letter

It is extremely easy to find the text of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution free of charge online. The federal government's Government Printing Office website at <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/constitution/index.html> lets you access the text of the First Amendment and the *Constitution, Analysis and Interpretation (1992)* database. This database offers annotations to cases decided by the United States Supreme Court.

Another useful resource is available through Findlaw. The Findlaw website has links to various Articles and Amendments of the U.S. Constitution. Findlaw's site at <http://www.findlaw.com/cascode/constitution/> contains First Amendment text with links to relevant annotations. The Library of Congress's American Memory Project at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/help/constRedir.html> offers re-

searchers an interesting option for accessing the First Amendment, and includes digital images of the Bill of Rights as originally drafted.

Finding the text of Michigan's Constitution online is also relatively easy. The Michigan Legislature's website is a comprehensive electronic resource for anyone conducting research on Michigan law. It includes Michigan Compiled Laws, pending legislation, and constitutional law. The Michigan Legislature's website is at <http://www.legislature.mi.gov/>.

The Michigan Constitution includes provisions similar to the federal First Amendment. You can access the 1963 State Constitution at <http://www.legislature.mi.gov/documents/mcl/pdf/mcl-constitution.pdf>.

The resources listed above represent a small sample of the electronic resources you can use to research the letter of the law. As with any legal research, a good strategy is to begin searching broadly and then refine and narrow the scope of your research as the process evolves.

Fortunately, you can find many great online resources for First Amendment case law. The FedWorld.gov website, offered by the United States Department of Commerce at <http://www.fedworld.gov/supcourt/index.htm>, has the full text of 7,407 decisions from volumes 300 through 422 of U.S. Reports, from 1937 to 1975. Naturally, Supreme Court decisions are available through the U.S. Supreme Court website at <http://www.supremecourtus.gov/>.

Findlaw also has extensive coverage of the U.S. Reports. Findlaw offers Supreme Court decisions at <http://www.findlaw.com/casecode/supreme.html>, as well as briefs at http://supreme.lp.findlaw.com/supreme_court/briefs/index.html. Other noteworthy electronic sites for researching First Amendment case law are offered by Cornell School of Law's Legal Information Institute at <http://supct.law.cornell.edu/supct/>, and OYEZ at <http://www.oyez.org/oyez/frontpage>.

Michigan Supreme Court decisions can also be accessed electronically. Published and unpublished Michigan Supreme Court and

Court of Appeals decisions can be accessed at <http://courtofappeals.mijud.net/resources/opinions.htm>, through Findlaw at <http://www.findlaw.com/11stategov/mi/mica.html>, and through LexisNexis at <http://www.lexisone.com/>.

Again, the resources mentioned above are only a fraction of what is available online for legal research dealing with constitutional case law. They were selected based on the scope of their coverage and ease of use.

Electronic Informational Resources of Interest

A variety of other websites may be helpful when researching the First Amendment. Some of the resources contain analysis, while others let you access the latest cases. It might be worthwhile to browse the First Amendment Center website at <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/>. This site contains an analysis and news about the First Amendment. Another helpful source, The Virtual Chase, is offered by the law firm of Ballard, Spahr, Andrews, and Ingersoll. The website, at http://www.virtualchase.com/resources/first_amendment.html, includes links to other related websites. Finally, you can conduct searches on Google or other search engines; Google is at <http://www.google.com>.

Conclusion

Conducting online research of the First Amendment at both the federal and state levels is relatively easy. To access this free information, find a computer with Internet access and start searching. ♦

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