

Developing a Consolidated Virginia Court Case Database
(Technical Paper)

The Importance of Remote Access to Court Cases
(STS Paper)

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received
unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines

Introduction

The VA Court Data Project aims to facilitate the remote access of publicly available court records in Virginia. Less than a year ago, Virginia rolled out the Online Case Information System (OCIS) in order to combat the issue of accessing court records online. Unfortunately, this implementation comes with certain constraints. One such constraint involves prohibiting individuals from mining their data. An implication of this is that researchers can't grab the data from the website for research purposes (*Virginia Judiciary Online Case Information System*). Furthermore, any form of automated scripting against the database is also strictly prohibited, meaning that the state makes it very difficult to utilize the data they've allocated pertaining to court cases. No doubt, the development of the OCIS is a massive step in the right direction, but it is by no means ideal for ensuring easy access to publicly available data.

Under the guidance of UVA Law's Legal Data Lab, progress is being made in a variety of areas to implement this system. Much of the work that remains to be done involves designing the user interface, creating tools to ensure quality data and coding programs to search websites for public information, also known as scraping. Although this specific project will pertain to court documents specifically, the principle of the database could potentially be expanded to any document protected by the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

Technical Topic

As mentioned previously, the largest portions of this project can be divided into two distinct sub-tasks: designing the interface, and aggregating the data. For designing the interface, the popular Python framework Django will be leveraged to implement a web platform. Django will take care of the functionality of the website as well as the aesthetics, which will be specified in HTML. For the backend, Amazon AWS will provide a variety of services to facilitate the storage and querying of data. An example of a service that may be leveraged is Amazon's Simple Storage System (S3), which provides a method for long term storage of data. Another service we may use is DynamoDB, a cloud-based database system by Amazon that streamlines key-value querying.

Naturally, both the frontend as well as the backend are relatively unfunctional without any aggregation of data. To accomplish this, the VA Court Data Project will leverage Python to scrape websites for pertinent legal documentation. In simple terms, scraping involves running a script to search through websites for some data and gathering it for further use. In our case, this data will be publicly available court records, and the information collected will be used to populate the backend databases.

The project will be organized into small groups that will focus on implementing one specific functionality. As is common with this style of organization, the Agile Development method (scrum) will be leveraged to ease the development process. In short, Agile Development refers to a methodology of team organization revolving around iteratively improving functionality in time-sensitive chunks known as sprints. As is the nature of scrum, constant input will be provided by the project's main customers – Michele Claibourn, Director of Research Data Services and Jon Ashley, head of the Legal Data Lab.

STS Topic

The benefits of having an easily queryable database for court records cannot be overstated. Such a system is necessary to sustain a free and fair democracy. The Virginia Freedom of Information Act, a state implementation of its federal counterpart, provides a series of legislative protections for citizens to access open records. In fact, all fifty states currently implement some variation of the Freedom of Information Act, and a variety of governmental watchdogs have surveyed each state for compliance (*Diana, 2019*). Sunshine laws, as they've come to be called, pertain to any legislation requiring government agencies to be more transparent. These types of laws are constantly in the limelight as government agencies push to reduce transparency in the name of privacy and national security (*McElhatton, 2017*). As the age of information ensues, it is of the utmost importance that open records remain easily accessible to the general public.

The term "open records" refers to publicly available documents that may be requested and accessed by members of the public. Access to these documents are protected at both the state and federal level as a method to ensure transparency among the government and its constituents. As stated, the VA Court Data Project will concern itself with court documents specifically; these documents contain vital information – everything from the prosecutor and defendant names, to the offense committed and the date of the trial. Such records are critical for citizens who don't have the means to hire legal help, and must do research on their own.

Traditionally, the process for requesting and obtaining public records involves visiting one's local courthouse, passing through security, and locating a registrar that would be able to assist you. Clearly, this system is outdated and leaves citizens, many of whom are strict on time, without access to public information. Moreover, current implementations of an online system are inadequate and often times expensive for the average user. For example, Fairfax County currently implements their own database for querying official circuit court records at a high cost – namely, \$50.00 per month per subscriber, on top of an initial \$150 fee (*Court Public Access Records*). Alternatively, court documents can be requested in person at a fee of \$2.00 per document, and \$0.50 per page.

[More examples of FOIA complaints]

Overall Conclusion

In an age of uncertainty, transparency is essential for maintaining public trust. Part of ensuring government accountability revolves around knowing what goes on behind closed doors. Time and time again the government has been found guilty of restricting the public's ability to query open records as a way to conceal unfavorable information. Perhaps the most popular example of upholding access to court records comes from *United States v. Criden*, where the court upheld the general right to request and copy judicial records. Both federally and locally, sunshine laws remain at the forefront of the fight for government transparency.

The VA Court Data Project hopes to alleviate this point of stress for Virginians statewide. Rather than sifting through half a dozen local websites, many of which require some sort of payment, or requesting court records in person, Virginians will be able to query a free and

privately run database of public records. In short, this project aims to strengthen one of the pillars of a contemporary democracy: the judicial system, and aid Virginians in accessing information that they are entitled to.

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