
Do You SSRN?

by Norman Otto Stockmeyer*

After the drudgery of research, the tedium of writing and rewriting, and the agony of awaiting an editor's decision comes—we authors hope—the joy of seeing our manuscript published. But how soon the thrill is gone. Before long, readers have tossed the periodical, and our article is history.

If the article is published in a law review or journal, it remains retrievable online through searchable subscription databases such as Westlaw, Lexis, and Hein. But those databases are not accessible to non-subscribers. And many authors write articles for a host of “second-tier” legal magazines and newsletters that are not available through the online services. Those articles are gone for good, except perhaps in the musty stacks of the relatively few law libraries that archive such ephemera.

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What is SSRN?

SSRN is a website that maintains an “eLibrary” of research in 18 social-science disciplines (“networks”), including law. Its Legal Scholarship Network is the largest and most popular open-access repository of legal scholarship, and it constitutes about 25 percent of all SSRN content. If you are a law professor, you probably already know about SSRN. The purpose of this article is to introduce SSRN's archival function to other legal writers.

SSRN's stated mission is to provide rapid worldwide distribution of research to authors and their readers. To this end, it allows authors to upload abstracts and the full text of unpublished “working papers” (draft manuscripts) and “accepted papers” (articles published or accepted for publication). This is done through the SSRN User Headquarters, accessible at <http://hq.ssrn.com> (free registration required). And every uploaded document (“eprint”) is downloadable for free by anyone with an Internet connection and PDF reader.

As of the close of 2010, SSRN's eLibrary contained the full text of more than 314,000 documents from 149,000 authors. Downloads are running at a rate of more than 10 million a year. The SSRN eLibrary can be accessed at <http://ssrn.com/search> (no registration required). In addition to traditional articles, it contains everything from op-ed columns and written testimony at a hearing to amicus briefs and entire books.

SSRN keeps a running count of the number of times each document is downloaded. SSRN uses these counts to generate lists of the most-downloaded documents, authors, and institutions. As you might expect of our rankings-obsessed profession, SSRN counts are increasingly being used as a measure of scholarly productivity and influence.

In 2009, SSRN itself was ranked sixth on the top-ten list of “The Most Important Developments in the Legal Academy Since 2000” by the readers of Brian Leiter's popular Law School Reports blog.

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Once a document is uploaded and reviewed, it can be cited and retrieved by its abstract number. For example, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1569003> will take you to my article on Laurance M. Hyde from the Winter 2010 issue of *The Scrivener*. (Searchers can download an article only after viewing its abstract. About one in five SSRN abstract views results in a download.)

SSRN's other uses

This article is about archiving published articles. But you can also post drafts of articles ("working papers") on SSRN. Views differ on the wisdom of this practice if your ultimate goal is publication in a traditional ink-on-paper periodical. Some scholars post such "preprints" to preempt a hot topic, and sometimes the postings will result in an offer of publication. But other times, editors may reject a submission that has been previously posted on SSRN. If a posted draft is published, etiquette requires you to replace it with a "postprint" of the published version.

For one reason or another, your goal may be merely to self-publish an article on the Internet. SSRN facilitates that, too. Produce your article in Word—editing, spell-checking, and grammar-checking carefully, because no copyeditor will be flyspecking your work—then convert the Word document to PDF and submit it to SSRN as described above, picking the most appropriate eJournal(s) to have it abstracted in.

While this form of "green" publishing probably will not count for law-school promotion and tenure purposes, it gets your scholarship "out there" through SSRN's eJournals, while saving the time and expense of editors, printers, postal workers, and recyclers.

Finally, SSRN can be useful for research. Indeed, anyone seriously considering writing a scholarly article for publication would be neglectful not to research the topic in SSRN's eLibrary. SSRN permits searching by title, abstract, or author's name. Clicking on an article's title brings up the abstract, as well as the option to download the article. Clicking on the author's name reveals all other articles that the author has posted, as well as the author's affiliation and contact information, including e-mail address.

Here are some helpful sources I found on SSRN in the process of writing this article:

- Susan Duncan, "Demystifying the SSRN Process: How to Make It Work for You," <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1166022>
- Carol Parker, "Institutional Repositories and the Principle of Open Access: Changing the Way We Think About Legal Scholarship," <http://ssrn.com/abstract=928489>
- Stephanie L. Plotin, "Legal Scholarship, Electronic Publishing, and Open Access: Transformation or Steadfast Stagnation?" <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1350138>
- Victor Ricciardi, "A Workshop on the Social Science Research Network," <http://ssrn.com/abstract=879685>

As *Google* did, *SSRN* has become so commonplace in academic circles that it is being used as a verb. With that thought in mind—and this guide in hand—you can now begin to SSRN your articles.

* Norman Otto Stockmeyer has gone emeritus after more than three decades of teaching at Thomas M. Cooley Law School, with visiting stints at Mercer University and California Western. His SSRN author page is at <http://ssrn.com/author=80303>.