Robot justice: China's use of Internet courts

By Tara Vasdani

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Would it scare you if I said that China has been doing this since 2017?

In December 2019, China has announced that millions of legal cases are now being decided by "Internet courts" that do not require citizens to appear in court. The "smart court" includes non-human judges, powered by artificial intelligence (AI) and allows participants to register their cases online and resolve their matters via a digital court hearing.

The Chinese Internet courts handle a variety of disputes, which include intellectual property, e-commerce, financial disputes related to online conduct, loans acquired or performed online, domain name issues, property and civil rights cases involving the Internet, product liability arising from online purchases and certain administrative disputes. In Beijing, the average duration of a case is 40 days; the average dispositive hearing lasts 37 minutes; almost 80 per cent of the litigants before the Chinese Internet courts are individuals, and 20 per cent corporate entities; and 98 per cent of the rulings have been accepted without appeal.

It is 2020. Your Canadian commercial dispute is paperless. A document management platform sifts through all parties' documents to flag relevant vs. non-relevant documents. A subsequent platform reviews the relevant documents, and tells you that your case has the stronger evidentiary background.

A legal research tool in the meantime is determining whether a shareholder may attract wages for services performed, or simply be paid dividends. It's time to move to summary judgment. An Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) tool reviews your motion materials, your Affidavit (e-signed) and the Responding Record. An AI judge flags a case from 1970 that still applies today and — you win your dispute. The decision can be appealed to a human judge.

Cost savings? Astronomical. A preliminary decision? Within one month. The AI judge's eye for 1970 case law? Well, he's not hungry or tired like your articling student.

China's first Internet court was established in the eastern city of Hangzhou in 2017 and in 2019, it was reported that users completed more than 3.1 million legal activities using the court system from March

through to October. More than one million citizens were registered with the system, along with approximately 73,000 lawyers.

Judicial officials recently invited reporters to the Hangzhou Internet court to see how it operates. In a demonstration, citizens were seen using video messaging to communicate with the AI judges, and the following was observed:

"Does the defendant have any objection to the nature of the judicial blockchain evidence submitted by the plaintiff?" a virtual judge asked during a pretrial meeting. The non-human judge was represented in the system by an image of a man wearing a black robe.

"No objection," the human plaintiff answered.

The judges "appeared" by hologram and are artificial creations — there is no real judge present. The holographic judge looks like a real person but is a synthesized, 3D image of different judges, and sets schedules, asks litigants questions, takes evidence and issues dispositive rulings.

A Hangzhou court official told China's state-run CGTN television network that the Internet court system operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

In today's marketplace where almost everything is purchased or transacted online, the potential for this type of court system is significant.

In a previous article (https://www.thelawyersdaily.ca/articles/11582/estonia-set-to-introduce-ai-judge-in-small-claims-court-to-clear-court-backlog-), I commented on Estonia's adoption of an AI judge to settle small claims disputes. Prior to that, I commented on the Ontario Superior Court of Justice's pilot project launched on Feb. 11, 2019, the Digital Hearing Workspace (https://www.thelawyersdaily.ca/articles/10192/digital-hearing-workspace-pilot-project-one-step-closer-to-court-modernization-) (DHW). The program is currently used to deliver, store, organize and retrieve all documents relevant to a file, electronically. It applies to all Commercial List proceedings, and failure to upload documents to the platform is addressed by a presiding court official.

Combined with an ODR system or AI-powered judges, and considering the backlog of civil and commercial disputes experienced by litigants in Canada, the idea of an AI judge seems to resolve many current issues. And it is not too far from our midst.

The U.S. recently forecasted a time when AI-driven legal assistants might be presenting judges with case law, precedents and the background needed to make a decision. Hear that? Legal assistants.

In 2019, I reviewed a very helpful, and very vanguard legal research AI tool championed by the Toronto-based company, Alexsei.

Tools such as Alexsei use machine learning to identify relevant and up-to-date case law across the web and

scan the Internet to discern lawyers' opinions on cases as identified in their legal blogs. The software then generates a legal memorandum within 24 hours of being asked a legal research question.

China, or Estonia as I reported in 2019, are not the first to mix AI and the law. In the United States, algorithms assist in recommending criminal sentences. The widely popular U.K.-based app DoNotPay, an AI-driven chatbot, overturned 160,000 parking tickets in London and New York a few years ago.

The international deployment of Internet courts is just another step in the saga of the eventual automation of certain legal tasks and processes.

Taken in harmony, the last year in Canada alone saw the adoption of directives within the federal government regarding AI's replacement of mundane administrative tasks; judges' reprisal for the failure to use legal research AI tools to assist in conducting research and saving client legal fees; the DHW, requiring counsel and parties to upload their documents to an electronic filing system; and my personal favourite, Google's Duplex which I hope will arrive into our industry soon.

All in all, I repeat, adopt and reiterate that the legal industry's resistance to the above changes will create great hurdles to lawyers and their staff alike. Modern judiciaries have already begun to expect the employ of legal tech tools by counsel, students and the courts. Should lawyers choose not to live up to the challenge, they could end up with a very disappointed client, potentially large and assessment-worthy client cost consequences and since 2017, an algorithm's reprisal.

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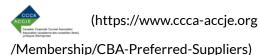
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