
CAN LAWYERS TRUST AI-GENERATED LEGAL RESEARCH WITHOUT VERIFYING IT THEMSELVES? A STUDY ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND LEGAL ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

The practice of law has evolved Artificial Intelligence (AI) that has created new options to conduct legal research and prepare documents more quickly. But the tendency of generative artificial intelligence systems to produce misleading or fake material creates severe professional and ethical problems. One example of this happening in the real world in 2023 occurred in the United States, when lawyers used the chat-based AI system to perform legal research on a court document. The lawyers' submission featured fake statements, false citations and fake court opinions generated up by the AI. The court was unable to authenticate some of the authorities cited and later found that the authorities were fabricated by ChatGPT. The lawyers were fined and required to pay financial penalty. This instance demonstrates generative AI is no replacement for a lawyer's professional discretion. Artificial intelligence systems generate replies based on patterns in data and answers might be persuasive yet factually incorrect often called "hallucinations." Such errors can damage the lawyer's credibility, waste judicial resources and sometimes harm clients in the practice of law. The issue also brings up critical questions about professional responsibility, accuracy, human accountability and ethical use of AI. Lawyers have a duty to check facts, quotations and authority before submitting them to a court. In 2024, the American Bar Association's Formal Opinion 512 underlined the significance of lawyers' existing ethical duties such as competence, confidentiality, contact with clients and transparency toward tribunals when using generative AI. In legal research, artificial intelligence can be useful but the results it gives should not be taken as fact without being checked. Case citations, laws, quotes and legal proposals made by AI should be checked by hand with primary sources or relevant legal databases. Legal work can be written with the help of AI, but the work is still done by a lawyer.

Keywords: Generative artificial intelligence, AI hallucinations, professional responsibility, legal ethics, lawyer competence, citation verification.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS:

Abbreviation	Full form
ABA	American Bar Association
AI	Artificial Intelligence
D C	District of Columbia
GAI	Generative Artificial Intelligence
LLM	Large Language Model
S.D.N.Y.	United States District Court for the Southern District of New York
U.S.	United States

INTRODUCTION:

Lawyers have always done a lot of research, interpretation of legislation, analysis of judicial precedents and meticulous preparation of legal documents. Technological developments have gradually changed this process. Online legal databases, electronic filing systems and digital research platforms have already reduced the time required to locate legal materials. The emergence of generative Artificial Intelligence has introduced another significant change. Generative AI systems can produce human-like responses to questions and assist lawyers in legal research, drafting, summarising documents and identifying potential legal arguments. These capabilities can make legal work faster and more efficient. However, speed and convenience cannot be allowed to compromise legal accuracy. One of the principal problems associated with generative AI is its ability to produce information that appears authoritative but is actually false. These errors are commonly described as AI “hallucinations.” Generative artificial intelligence (generative AI) is a significant technology whose workings remain somewhat unclear to a variety of lawyers.¹ In a legal context, hallucinations may include invented case names, incorrect citations, non-existent judgments, inaccurate quotations or misstatements of statutory provisions. Generative AI encompasses a kind of artificial intelligence engineered to summarise, comprehend, forecast and produce novel content.

¹ Carol A. Needham, Regulation of the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence Tools in the Delivery of Legal Services: Verification and Accountability, 77 Wash. U. J.L. & Pol’y 185 (2025).

Information is inputted into a large language model and the resultant output, when presented as text, reflects the algorithm's prediction for the subsequent word or phrase.²³ The seriousness of this problem was shown in *Mata v. Avianca, Inc.*³ in 2023. Lawyers used ChatGPT to help prepare legal submissions and some of the authorities cited to the court were subsequently found to be invented. The incident resulted in sanctions against the lawyers. The case demonstrates an important principle: AI may assist a lawyer, but it cannot assume the lawyer's professional responsibility. A lawyer remains responsible for the accuracy of materials submitted to a court, regardless of whether the information was obtained from a human researcher, legal database or AI system. Therefore, the central question of this research is whether lawyers can trust AI-generated legal research without verifying it themselves.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEMS:

The increasing use of generative AI in legal practice has made the balance between efficiency and accuracy a subject of debate. AI processes huge amounts of information within seconds but does not necessarily make the distinction between real and fake legal authorities. The main problem is that AI-generated answers are confident and sound like a professional wrote them. So, a lawyer may take an answer as correct, just because it is written in convincing legal language. This is a huge risk when AI generated material is incorporated into pleadings, written submissions, legal opinions or court documents without verification. This is compounded by the fact that lawyers have professional duties of competence, confidentiality, honesty and transparency to the courts. If an AI tool provides wrong information, the lawyer cannot just say the mistake was made by the AI. The question then is not whether AI should be used in legal practice but how it should be used responsibly and human accountability maintained.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

This research examines the following questions:

1. Are lawyers allowed to rely on AI-generated legal research without personally verifying it?
2. What are the risks of AI hallucinations in legal research?

² Ibid.,

³ F. Supp. 3d 443 (S.D.N.Y. 2023)

3. How does *Mata v. Avianca, Inc.* show the dangers of relying on AI-generated legal authorities?
4. Should verification of AI-generated legal research be considered an essential professional obligation?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The objectives of this research are:

- To discuss the use of AI in legal research and legal practice, which is rising.
- To identify risks associated with AI-generated legal information.
- To explore the phenomenon of AI hallucination in the legal context.
- As an example of improper use of AI-generated legal research to discuss *Mata v. Avianca Inc.*

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The methodology used in this study is doctrinal and qualitative research. The study is based mainly on secondary and primary legal sources relating to the use of AI in legal practice. The principal sources are judicial decisions, professional ethical opinions and applicable legal principles. Specifically, the research examines *Mata v. Avianca, Inc.*, 2023 WL 4114965 (S.D.N.Y. June 22, 2023). The secondary sources may also include legal articles, academic discussions and professional commentary on AI and legal ethics. The correlation between the technological efficiency and the traditional professional responsibilities of lawyers is analysed.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

1. Carol A. Needham, *Regulation of the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence Tools in the Delivery of Legal Services: Verification and Accountability*, 77 Wash. U. J.L. & Pol'y 185 (2025).

Carol A. Needham discusses the professional and regulatory issues presented by lawyers' use of generative artificial intelligence to provide legal services. The article emphasises the

value of confidentiality, verification and accountability. Lawyers might be expected to look into how AI providers handle client data, but “often you can’t get access to the proprietary technical details that would let you make an assessment about data security, privacy or compliance with promises made in a contract,” said Needham. The article suggests that regulators are better positioned than individual lawyers to evaluate AI providers. Regulators could work with technical experts to set minimum safeguards, examine how providers deal with lawyers’ inputs and clarify what checks lawyers need to make reasonably. Needham’s analysis points to the continuing responsibility of lawyers for their work, but also implies that effective oversight of standard artificial intelligence systems might require steps outside the capacity and access of individual lawyers. This article offers a regulatory and professional responsibility perspective on a paper on AI-assisted legal research and document preparation. It adds to concerns about flawed or fabricated AI-generated legal content by showing that responsible use also requires protecting client information and creating accountability for the technology providers lawyers depend on.

2. James H. Curlin IV, *ChatGPT Didn’t Write This . . . or Did It? The Emergence of Generative AI in the Legal Field and Lessons from Mata v. Avianca*, 78 Ark. L. Rev. 123 (2025).

James H. Curlin IV discusses the increasing use of generative artificial intelligence in legal practice and education, with *Mata v. Avianca* as an example of caution. The article shows the dangers of lawyers’ blind faith in AI-generated information, as it led to the invention of cases and references by ChatGPT, and no expert verification. It highlights that efficiencies do not displace lawyers’ duties of competence, diligence, honesty and integrity. Curlin also believes that AI is likely to become a routine part of legal work, including research, document review and drafting. He promotes responsible adoption with clear ethical guidelines and practical training. In particular, law schools should teach students how to critically evaluate the outputs of AI, evaluate the authorities cited and understand the limitations of the technology. This literature suggests that standard artificial intelligence may be useful for legal professionals, but human judgement and accountability is still required.

3. Cynthia A. Norton & Nancy B. Rapoport, *Doubling Down on Dumb: Lessons from Mata v. Avianca Inc.*, 42 ABI J., no. 8, Aug. 2023, at 66.

Nancy B. Rapoport and Cynthia A. Norton analyse the ethical issues in *Mata v. Avianca*,

where attorneys filed false cases created by ChatGPT with inadequate due diligence. A judge and a legal scholar consider the possible effect on lawyers' duties of competence, diligence, supervision and candor to the tribunal if lawyers rely on unverified AI results. They argue that the use of technology to prepare filings does not change a lawyer's duty to make reasonable legal and factual inquiries. According to the authors, a qualified person should review the work before submission and lawyers should possess sufficient legal expertise to identify when AI-generated results raise concerns. They note that if an AI system goes wrong, we must be accountable and honest about it. According to the article, AI might help in legal work, but lawyers who sign off on court documents are still responsible for the accuracy and legality of the documents.

4. Christopher F. Lyon, *Fake Cases, Real Consequences: Misuse of ChatGPT Leads to Sanctions*, 28 N.Y. Litigator 8 (2023)

In *Mata v. Avianca*, Christopher F. Lyon discusses the sanctions, distinguishing AI use from a lawyer's failure to supervise and verify the AI's output. ChatGPT produced fictitious legal authorities that were plausible, he says, and the lawyers made the situation worse by not verifying the citations, not being candid with the court about its concerns, and not amending their filings. The article describes the resulting \$5,000 sanction and stresses that lawyers remain responsible for the accuracy of filings made on their behalf. Lyon argues that lawyers need to know the tools they are using and that generative AI should be approached with caution. He notes that a chatbot such as ChatGPT is not in and of itself a legal research database, although AI tools linked to legal databases may help with research. The main argument of the article is that artificial intelligence can help legal work, but lawyers have to act as gatekeepers by checking authorities and backing their representations to the court.

THE LAWYER'S ROLE IN VERIFYING AI-GENERATED AUTHORITIES:

Technology and the practice of law are nothing new as partners. More legal professionals are using technology for document drafting and research. Traditionally legal research was done with the help of physical law reports, textbooks and legal libraries. The development of electronic legal databases has substantially improved access to statutes and court decisions. Then there was the internet, which again revolutionized legal research. Case law, legislation and legal commentary could be electronically searched as opposed to being restricted to physical resources. The next phase is the development of AI; Generative artificial

intelligence Traditional databases can do much more than just retrieve data. Legal ethics counsel, working groups, and bar association committees have produced papers and guidelines addressing issues pertaining to the application of generative AI in the provision of legal services in several US jurisdictions. It is acceptable to say that lawyers need to be aware of generative AI's limitations as a matter of competence.⁴ It can learn from a large amount of data and it can generate new text based on patterns it finds. It is capable of composing documents, presenting arguments, and summarizing intricate legal material. Still, generative AI is not the same as a traditional legal database.

The database usually supplies a document that already exists. Despite the fact that a generative AI system can generate a response that appears to be linguistically plausible, it is unable to guaranty the accuracy of every detail. District of Columbia Ethics Viewpoint When 388 states: "[L]awyers who rely on [a particular] technology should have a reasonable and current understanding of how to use the technology with due regard for its potential dangers and limitations," it expresses a point that is made by almost all ethics opinions on the subject.⁵ This is especially true in the legal field where arguments are based on reputable sources. A fictitious judgment is not an actual legal judgment, but it may seem to be. A joint declaration from the Pennsylvania Bar Association and the Philadelphia Bar Association indicates that, "Legal practitioners must secure information related to client representation and ensure that AI systems processing confidential data (1) follow strict confidentiality standards, and (2) that confidential information is not disclosed to other clients or parties not safeguarded by attorney client privilege."⁶ Can Lawyers Trust AI-Generated Legal Research Without Verifying It Themselves? The answer is no. Lawyers can't just trust AI-generated legal research without verifying it themselves. Artificial intelligence may serve as a useful research aid, but it should not be treated as an authoritative legal source. The biggest concern is AI hallucination. If asked to provide case law, an AI system may sometimes provide a case that does not exist, or provide an incorrect citation for an existing case. It may also attribute a statement to a judgment when that judgment contains no such statement. *Mata v. Avianca, Inc.* might be one of the best examples of what happens when legal research is not validated by AI. In that case lawyers used

⁴ Carol A. Needham, Regulation of the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence Tools in the Delivery of Legal Services: Verification and Accountability, 77 Wash. U. J.L. & Pol'y 185 (2025).

⁵ D.C. Bar Legal Ethics Comm., Op. 388 (2024) (the requirement is anchored in District of Columbia's rule articulating the duty of competence).

⁶ Pa. Bar Ass'n Comm. on Legal Ethics & Pro. Resp. & Phila. Bar Ass'n Pro. Guidance Comm., Formal Op.(2024)https://www.pabar.org/Members/catalogs/Ethics_Opinions/Formal/Joint_Formal_Opinion_2024200.pdf [<https://perma.cc/A3DU-73QF>]

ChatGPT to draft a legal submission. The proposal made references to a number of apparently valid court rulings. Some of the cited authorities, however, could not be found or verified by the court. Subsequent research showed that ChatGPT had created the authority. The lawyers were then subject to sanctions by the court. The case shows that lawyers are unable to delegate professional obligation to an AI system. Even if an AI tool produces a case citation, the lawyer remains responsible for confirming the existence of the case and verifying that it actually supports the claim for which it is cited.

This lesson is important, especially since counterfeit legal authorities can have dire consequences. They can lie to the judges, waste court time, hurt the attorney's reputation and hurt the client's case. The American Bar Association issued Formal Opinion 512 in 2024,⁷ offering important guidance for lawyers who use generative AI. The Opinion stresses that lawyers' existing professional responsibilities remain in effect when generative AI is used. Modern technology does not relieve solicitors of their normal responsibilities. These obligations include those relating to competence, confidentiality, communication with clients, supervision, appropriate fees, candor to the tribunal and security of client information. It means that lawyers should exercise proper supervision and be aware of the limitations of the AI tools they use. Say a lawyer wants an AI system to find examples that back a certain claim. The lawyer should then separately find the actual judgments and check the citations. The lawyer should look at the relevant judgment, not the AI-produced summary. Likewise, if an AI is asked to draft a legal document, the lawyer should review the final document before it is submitted to a client or court. Why Do We Need Verification? There are many uses of independent verification. Authoritative sources are essential to law. The existence of the case, statute or quotation and its support for the legal argument being made must be verified by a lawyer. Secondly, it safeguards clients. Poor legal advice, missing arguments, or lost litigation can all be caused by inaccurate legal research. In the end, the consequences of professional errors fall on the client. Third, it maintains the integrity of the court system. The courts rely on the lawyers to give them the correct authorities. False or misleading information wastes the courts' resources and undermines the public's confidence in the legal profession. It safeguards the attorney's reputation in the legal community. A lawyer who regularly relies on AI-generated lies may suffer professional consequences, including sanctions and damage to their reputation. Verification should thus be seen as a fundamental part of proper legal research, and not as an

⁷ American Bar Association, Formal Opinion 512, Generative Artificial Intelligence Tools (July 29, 2024).

extra step. The quick development of AI in the legal industry offers many potential as well as significant ethical pitfalls that could befall an inexperienced or ignorant lawyer. It is crucial to provide general rules to guarantee that AI is integrated and used properly and ethically as legal professionals try to traverse this novel and largely unknown field.⁸

CONCLUSION:

Artificial intelligence is transforming the practice of law by assisting lawyers in research, document review and draft preparation more efficiently. But speed and convenience are not always accurate. Generative artificial intelligence systems can fabricate legal authorities, quotes and explanations that seem plausible but are wrong or completely made up. The cases and literature examined in this paper, particularly *Mata v. Avianca*, demonstrate the professional and practical consequences of employing such materials without verifying them. False information generated by artificial intelligence may misguide courts, waste judicial resources, damage a lawyer's credibility, and harm clients. The conclusion is that lawyers can't rely on AI-generated legal research without verifying it themselves. AI-using lawyers are still responsible for work filed in their name. The duties of competence, diligence, candor, supervision and confidentiality remain applicable when technology is used to assist in the performance of legal work. Before quoting, lawyers should check quotations, legal rules, and factual assertions against primary sources or an authoritative legal research database.

They should also be aware of the limitations of the AI tools they use and take appropriate steps to protect confidential client information. That is not to say that there is no place for AI in the practice of law. Used judiciously it can help with the organization of information, initial drafts, summarizing material or proposing research questions. Its outputs should be treated as starting points that need to be vetted by legal professionals, not as legal advice. Law schools, law firms, the courts and professional regulators all have a role in encouraging responsible use, through practical training, clear guidance and appropriate safeguards. In the end, AI should enhance a lawyer's skills, not replace professional judgment. Technological progress can be a benefit to the legal profession and public confidence in the justice system, as long as lawyers check the work produced by AI and take responsibility for its accuracy and ethical use.

⁸ James H. Curlin IV, *ChatGPT Didn't Write This . . . or Did It? The Emergence of Generative AI in the Legal Field and Lessons from Mata v. Avianca*, 78 Ark. L. Rev. 123 (2025).

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