Lawyers invented Google. This is patently untrue. Still, most lawyers do not appreciate the affinities between their own methods and the underpinnings of the world’s favorite search engine. Indeed, much of today’s and tomorrow’s technology is built on concepts familiar to lawyers. Understanding these parallels should make us more apt to welcome IBM’s Watson to law.

First, Google “discovered” case citations. Google’s seminal innovation was introducing hierarchy of authority to web search. Moving beyond text indexing, PageRank counted and weighted hypertext (the sometimes blue and/or underlined clickable links). By cataloguing who linked to whom and how frequently, Google could direct users to websites with the highest level of perceived authority.

Next, Google happened upon stare decisis. Users add their judgment by selecting links that best match the intent manifest in their search terms. Google tracks user selections and updates accordingly. The more users who select a link when using certain search terms, the more preeminent weight Google accords.

Google has come around to ever more lawyerly thinking. Google’s algorithms now look at freshness of content (most recent authority) and the region from which a search originates (jurisdiction). Google also provides users with features for autocomplete (implied terms), SafeSearch (Sheperdizing) and snippets of content on the results page (Headnotes). Thus, Google’s algorithms produce educated guesses based on similar, recent, citable precedents from the highest authority in your jurisdiction. Google just happens to do this instantly and at an incomprehensible scale (45 billion pages and counting).

Now, imagine if Google was able to take in more complex queries and select among potential conclusions by creating and testing hypotheses. This, too, should sound familiar. It encompasses many aspects of legal judgment. And it describes the advances in cognitive computing represented by IBM’s Watson, which in January 2011, laid waste to “Jeopardy!”’s two greatest champions.

Watson excels at natural language processing (i.e., machines understanding how humans actually talk). The nuances of idiomatic human speech are well represented in “Jeopardy!” with categories like “Before and After,” where the correct response is a portmanteau. Watson rarely gets lost in these linguistic twists and culturally-specific turns. Watson could not only process the hackneyed play on words in this article’s title, but also recognize that Sherlock Holmes never utters his signature phrase in any story credited to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. This acumen for natural language processing enables Watson to handle extremely complex queries (i.e., fact patterns).

One goal of natural language processing is more frequent interactions between humans and machines. Increased frequency enables the machine to get smarter faster. Like Google’s use of precedent, Watson learns through feedback and makes probabilistic guesses based on the immense quantity of information available to it. Dr. Watson is already operating in medicine as an expert diagnostician. And Watson, Esq. is now on its way to law. Paul Lippe and his team from Legal OnRamp are already using Watson to help some of the world’s largest legal departments tackle some of their most recent, complex problems, such as resolution and recovery planning under Dodd-Frank.

If you harbor any doubts that silicon can surpass carbon in certain aspects of legal work, I urge you to Google the algorithm created by Professor Daniel Martin Katz that substantially outperforms experts in predicting outcomes of Supreme Court cases. Professor Katz founded the ReInvent Law Laboratory at Michigan State, and he bears a comforting message that humans plus machines outperform humans or machines alone. Machines do not replace human expertise; they augment it. Thus, one of those “Jeopardy!” champions armed with Watson would have bested Watson alone, as well as any other former champion. This hybrid approach is already in evidence in chess where man-machine teams significantly outplay any computer or grand master working alone. It is how Watson works in medicine. And it is how Watson will be introduced to law. Though it might touch more aspects of your practice, expect your relationship to Watson to be much like your relationship to Google: a tool of immense power that moves from novel to essential seemingly overnight. I, for one, welcome our new computer colleague.