

Online justice could put judges out of business... says top judge

The rise of an online justice system could put judges out of business in the wake of the march of the "robotic" court, a senior judge warned on Friday.

Lord Justice Fulford also said that the advent of computers might mean less transparency and open justice as more disputes are settled online.

However, he insisted that the judiciary would fight to keep courts open to public scrutiny as the digital revolution, which is fully backed by judges, takes effect. "The judiciary is fiercely committed to the principle of open justice," he told the annual Bond Solon expert witness conference in London. "Greater digitisation offers both challenges and opportunities in this field in that technology enables more data to be gathered that can be made accessible than historically has been the case," said the Court of Appeal judge, who is also the senior presiding judge for England and Wales.

"We will need to find ways in which the public can gain access to telephone, video and online hearings. I am determined that we will not throw a cloak of secrecy over our new digital, computer-aided processes, but this is going to need imagination and commitment."

Fulford, who is involved in implementing computerisation across the justice system, insisted that even with digitisation, "every decision about substantive rights will be made by a judge. The main elements of conciliation will be conducted by a human being." He added, however: "Perhaps all of us professionals who rather enjoy our jobs need to hope that the new digital systems – those clever algorithms – do not render us entirely redundant. We may ultimately be fighting the rise of the robotic court." The judge's comments came several days after the Bar leader sharply criticised the government for what she claimed were moves to compromise judicial independence by effectively forcing judges to back its court modernisation programme.