
Hansard Online in Manitoba

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Two of the most heavily-used documents in any legislative or parliamentary library are the printed record of debates and the statutes currently in effect. In Manitoba, automation has been used to enhance access to both types of publications. The legislative library has been an active user of the *Hansard online* database since it was launched and has participated in trials of other related databases put up by Manitoba Data Services.

Like many of the databases which libraries have used since the 1970s, *Hansard online* evolved from a need to produce a hard copy product in a more timely and efficient manner. The impetus to create a database came from the Office of the Speaker as a means to speed up the retrieval process for MLAs and others who want to find out exactly what was said in the Chamber.

The Manitoba legislature's *Hansard* database was initially created using data transcribed by word processing staff in the Hansard office from the Debates and Proceedings of the fourth session of the Thirty-second Legislature which opened on March 7, 1985. Hansard staff input data using WANG word processing equipment and transmit their work to the Manitoba Data Services computer. Retrospective files from 1981 on were later added, giving a potential of eight years' worth of the Debates. Because the files are large, only the current session and the two previous sessions are available at any time. Special arrangements must be made to load the backfiles, with a charge levied for this service.

This database, as well as other related files, are maintained by Manitoba Data Services who provide user training, technical support, and documentation. Manitoba Data Services chose the STAIRS system to create the Hansard database, and users access the system using AQUARIUS (A Query and Retrieval Interactive Utility System), a sub-system of STAIRS.

The *Hansard* database and other related files are used extensively by legislative library staff, staff in the Offices of the Speaker and the Clerk, caucus researchers and legislative interns as well as government departments, making a total of 126 registered users of *Hansard online*. Most searches are

completed in five minutes or less. The system is available from 7 a.m. to 1:45 a.m., seven days per week. Normally the full text of the previous day's debate is available by 10 a.m.

Legislative library staff perform an average of 25 to 30 searches per month on behalf of clients. Most of these are done onsite at the Legislative Reading Room using a dedicated line which gives fast logon and response time, as well as fixed cost charges. Alternatively, if a user wishes to search using a multipurpose computer, it is possible to access the file through the Datapac network.

In order to use the databases effectively, a searcher needs two types of information. Because of the volume of data associated with a full-text database, a knowledge of parliamentary procedure and terminology is essential. A searcher who knows how to track legislation, where to find information related to estimates, and what type of language is used in the House can produce good results quickly. It is equally important to know the names of members as well as their individual responsibilities as ministers or critics.

Secondly, the searcher needs to become familiar with basic information retrieval concepts (Boolean logic, ranking, limiting and truncation) and then to learn the specific commands used in interacting with the system. Users who expect to use the system frequently would be well advised to take advantage of a formal Manitoba Data Services training session in the use of STAIRS and to order the STAIRS manual for a more complete understanding of the system.

The basic retrieval commands in AQUARIUS are "Search" and "Select". using the "Search" command, it is possible to locate occurrences of single words, words in proximity to each other, or terms with some logical relationship to each other. For example, the names "Filmon" or "Carstairs" or "Doer" can be searched to find out what any of the party leaders have recently said in the House.

Use of the standard Boolean operators "and" "or" and "not" allows a user to construct a query describing a subject. Since the database is a record of what is actually said, the terms found in the file reflect all the diversity of language used in the House – at least as it is recorded for posterity.

The effectiveness of the Boolean operators is somewhat mitigated by the structure of the database. A "document" is one section of a sitting, such as Oral Questions. One document can be as long as 100 screens, and can contain the

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discussion of several unrelated topics by several Members. A search strategy intended to identify what a given individual has said on a specific topic could retrieve documents in which the personal name appeared on "page" one, while the subject itself is found on "page" ninety-nine in the speech of another Member. While browsing a document, the searcher can command the system to display the specific portions of the document containing the search terms and to highlight the word(s). There are techniques which can help the searcher improve results within a full text system. Using the STAIRS commands "with" and "same" to link terms or groups of terms gives more precise recall since they require the terms specified to occur in the same sentence or paragraph. Another of the most useful methods to zero in on a topic is the "select" command which limits the retrieval to a given date range or a specific set of documents such as "oral questions".

The *Hansard* databases are used to answer several different types of questions. They can be used to pinpoint an exact date or the number of times a phrase such as point of order is used in the House. A new speech writer can sample the verbal style of a Member in order to write an appropriate text. With a change in government, a newly appointed Minister may want to know what the previous Minister or critic said in the last session on a given topic. Following the most recent election in Manitoba which saw a large number of first-time MLAs elected, the *Hansard* database was useful in answering questions related to procedure in the Legislature. The most obvious benefit from the Library's perspective is the ability to offer a faster and more comprehensive service while saving staff time. This is particularly true for queries where the client is unable to narrow down a time frame or requires a comprehensive search such as: "Find all occurrences of the expression 'affirmative action' in this session to date".

Access to the database on demand makes this information available to offices or libraries who do not have sufficient space or need to collect the printed *Hansard*. However, the searcher should be familiar with the printed version in order to search effectively.

Because *Hansard online* is relatively inexpensive, it can be used to demonstrate capabilities and techniques of online retrieval for both clients and staff. Given its subject content, it is of special interest for Members and caucus researchers.

Desiderata

Based on the legislative library's experience with other online retrieval systems and in guiding end-users to conduct their own searches, there are some areas in which the library would like to see this useful service made even better:

- Occasionally retrieval is limited by the data input quality or practice. Although rare,

this can result in failure to identify a key reference. Consistency in input would remove this problem.

- There is at present no way to link a "page" (i.e. screen) of *Hansard online* with a page of the printed *Hansard*. This can be confusing for clients and limits the usefulness of the option of printing brief references instead of lengthy full-text extracts.
- Increasingly, information providers are becoming aware that their systems must consider user needs and preferences in designing access procedures. Since both content and retrieval are relatively complex, users should have the option of a user-friendly menu-driven system which would walk them through the typical steps and options of a *Hansard* search. Experienced searchers could bypass the menu and use the system commands directly.

The Law Library of the University of Manitoba and the Winnipeg Public Library have indicated interest in accessing some of the files maintained by Manitoba Data Services, such as *Hansard* and the *Continuing Consolidation of the Statutes of Manitoba*, in order to make this information readily available to the public. If the database is going to be used by a wider user-base, there will be a need for documentation which explains the contents of the file for a novice and offers a tutorial walk-through. It might also be helpful to incorporate that information into the online help function.

Another desirable feature would be greater flexibility in browsing the database on screen or by printing. This function is perceived as cumbersome, particularly for those accessing the system at 1200 baud, since all information is transmitted one screen at a time. Manitoba Data Services indicates that new communications software and 2400 baud access could improve this function.

These comments and a wish list for improvements do not in any way negate the success of this initiative which has benefitted the legislature, the legislative library and the many other users of the system. Indeed, Manitoba Data Services has extended its range of databases to include online versions of the *Minutes of Standing Committees* as well as the *Continuing Consolidation of the Statutes of Manitoba* in both official languages. The combined group of databases contributes to efficiency within the legislative assembly and government operations. Public access to this information supports the concept of openness in government and recognizes the need to make this information available as quickly as possible to the citizens of Manitoba. ■