

# *Some Editing Required: Producing Canada's Hansards*

As producers of the official transcripts of parliamentary debates, Canada's Hansards are responsible for ensuring parliamentarians and Canadians have a fair and accurate report of what happened on any given day on the floor of a legislature. In this roundtable, four directors/editors of Canadian Hansards discuss how their teams work to make the transition from "the colourful theatre of debate to the black and white specifics of text."

**Deborah Caruso, Lenni Frohman, Robert Kinsman and Robert Sutherland**

**CPR:** I'm sure some outsiders think of Hansard as a verbatim record of parliamentary debates, but there's a lot more to it than that. What are some of the biggest misconceptions of your work that you've encountered from parliamentarians or other parliamentary observers?

**LF:** I think the biggest misconception is that there's no editing required in making the transition from the colourful theatre of debate to the black and white specifics of text.

**RK:** People think it just magically appears at the end of the day. That it's just there. I have people who call me five minutes after a one-hour speech and they ask, "Can I have a copy of that, please?" (*Laughter*). They don't realize that we have to research all the names of the constituents and companies they mention as well trying to figure out what they were saying in their different languages... which are all English!

**RS:** I think most people are surprised by the amount of labour that's involved in actually turning out a

product at the end of the day. We have a staff of about 30 people. When Members come to our office and see the number of people typing away, they're just blown away that there are so many people. I think they only see the tip of the iceberg with a few people in the chamber or around the building. There is a large, and in our case, part-time staff which is required to turn that transcript out by the end of the day, as Bob said, or in our case to get a draft up within about an hour.

**DC:** We have a Hansard reporter at every session, whether it's the legislature or committee, and they're just at a laptop taking very brief notes to help with the transcript. I think most of the MPPs in the room are under the impression that the Hansard reporter is simply there typing live and that's what will become the transcript. I know a few committee chairs have turned to the reporter and asked, "Can you read that back to us, please?" (*Laughter*). I think they've seen too many courtroom movies. It takes a huge team effort. Most days our legislature starts at 9 a.m. and ends at 6 p.m. All those hours of debates are posted to the website the same night. There are committees meeting at the same time, so it's a huge team effort.

**CPR:** Are there many differences among the Hansards in jurisdictions across Canada?

**DC:** The short answer is yes. There are 10 provincial Hansards, three territorial Hansards and then the House of Commons and the Senate in Ottawa. Depending on how many annual sitting days there are, and if Hansards of committees are produced as well as

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**Deborah Caruso**

debates in the legislature, you'll have either a full-time staff, or a hybrid with full-time staff supplemented with a lot of sessional staff. The territorial Hansards are all contracted out. They're all private sector. Some legislatures have more than one language that can be spoken. As far as I know, New Brunswick and the House of Commons and Senate are the only ones that do translations into the other language spoken. Others might report in whichever language was spoken.

**RK:** I think the main difference is numbers. When Robert was mentioning up to 30 members of staff during the sessions, that just makes me cry – with envy. *(Laughter)*. We have seven full-time staff and lately we've been moving from building to building because our former office building was condemned. As a result of space constraints in our temporary location we're down to about 14 for the session and have to complete the transcript that day. We also have committees, but those transcripts aren't completed on the same day. It takes maybe two to three days. I think we pretty much do the same things in terms of production, it's just the numbers and the hours that are different.

**RS:** I agree. There are a lot of common issues in the nuts and bolts of how we assemble the document. At a certain level, we all have people transcribing, people editing and we're all dealing with language problems and problems understanding what a Member said or what they're trying to say. But the workload does vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. For over two-thirds of our year we have two houses that we're reporting at the same time, so that's why we need 30 people.

**LF:** In Saskatchewan we have about 36 part-time editors at Hansard and three full-time people – the managing editor, the production manager and the indexer. That is a large staff to manage concurrently sitting committees. I think that local labour market conditions can also really affect how Hansards are staffed. If you're working, let's say in Yellowknife, and you have to produce in French, how you're going to staff that position really does depend on the availability of people.

**RK:** Another issue when staffing is when you mention the hours when you're interviewing. You have people leave that room so fast! *(Laughter)* Today we might sit from 2 p.m. to 10 p.m. and then from 12:01 a.m. to 11:59 p.m., but we won't know until 10 p.m. People aren't prepared to give up their lives for that like the rest of us old fogies.

**LF:** That's very true Bob. I'm finding there are many intelligent young people who refuse to have their lives totally hijacked by their work schedule. I definitely see a change in mindset with our people.

**RS:** One thing I'll add is that as you go from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, some legislatures have longer calendars with sessions in the Spring and in the Fall while others are really compressed into a single period of time in a year. Here we have a Spring session and sometimes a Fall session, though we never really know. So when it comes to staffing, it's difficult to know whether to get a full-time person or part-time staff. I think it would be difficult trying to manage a situation where your House sat for 12 weeks in the Spring and then didn't sit again for another year.

**DC:** I think that's why they can have private contractors take over in the North – they have very abbreviated sessions. They have language professionals doing other things for the rest of the year who can be applied to Hansard when it needs to be produced.

**CPR:** What are some of the ways Hansard (in your jurisdiction and in general) has changed over the years?



Has technology, such as speech recognition software, made your work easier and more efficient?

**DC:** A lot of people ask that question. We investigate that carefully every couple of years. The only way we've been able to use speech recognition software was when one of our staff developed a repetitive stress injury. They used speech recognition software to get them through the period where their wrist was healing. It gets more accurate all the time under very controlled conditions. It performs with a really high rate of accuracy when someone is sitting in front of a microphone dictating at a fairly even pace, tone and volume and they've spent some time interacting with the software and training it...

**LF:** Not everyone interrupting and heckling you, Deborah?

**RK:** That's what I was going to say! (*Laughter*).

**DC:** Yes, but in a chamber like Ontario we have 107 different MPPs with different accents and voices. They turn away from the microphone. Sometimes there are 107 people speaking at the same time. The accuracy rate plunges so dramatically under those circumstances that it's more productive just to begin from scratch. Or, in Ontario and in a few other jurisdictions, we capture the closed captioning to use as our initial text input and then edit the closed-captioning because there can be some issues with accuracy. That is the classic courtroom transcriber scenario where the MPPs have seen the movies and think that's how Hansard is produced. With Hansard it's important that people's verbatim speech get tidied up. And this discussion is a perfect example. If you were to print my contribution verbatim I would be mortified! (*Laughter*) We insert ourselves into the copy just as much as we need to translate speech to text and to help make it make sense in black and white on the page. And it's very minimal intervention; just enough for it to make sense. Sorry, that was a bit of a sidebar. What a mess I'm making talking off the top of my head! (*Laughter*)

**RK:** To get back to speech recognition, we could never use it in Nova Scotia. I sit in the chamber most of the day and I don't think I've ever been there when there's just one person speaking. Seriously! The two people beside him are helping him out, and someone across the way is ranting and people are pounding their desks. We've never tried it for budget reasons, but it would just never work. We were excited when technology changed from five-minute audiocassette tapes that were run across the street by legislative

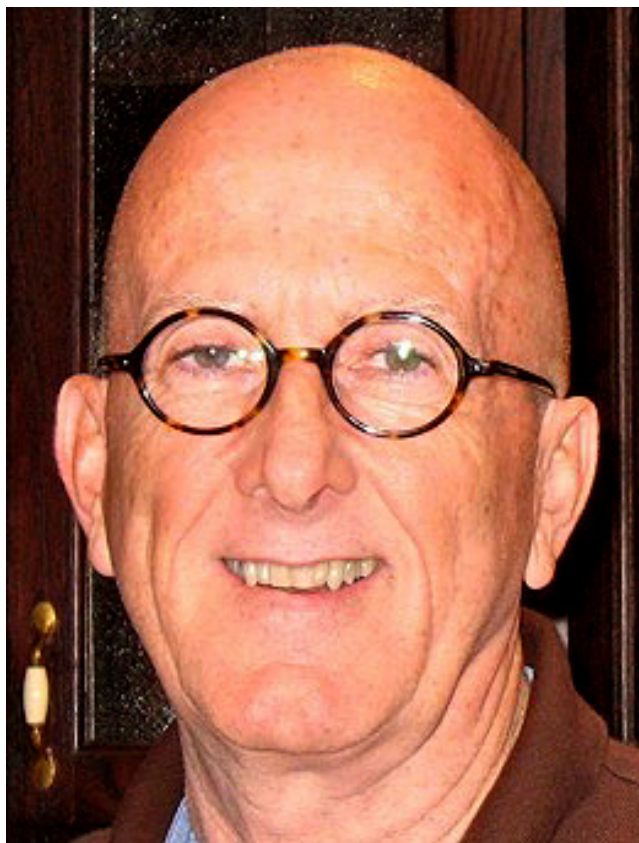


**Lenni Frohman**

pages to second-generation digital audio equipment! That's in the last six or eight years.

**LF:** That has been the big change: technology. Although speech recognition software's contributions aren't significant yet, other types of technology have helped. Computers, for example; back when I started we had a Wang! We had word processors! Now, we have 24 networked editors who can live-time share annotated research. Now dual monitors can create a large virtual workspace where research can be accessed so much more quickly and consistently. Now the whole Hansard is transcribed, edited, and posted to the Internet about two to three hours after the House rises.

**RK:** I have to ask if anyone knows what a Mag Card machines is? That's what they used when I first started. We aren't using years here, just technology. (*Laughter*) But we still did it by the end of the day before we left the office, even if it was three or four o'clock in the morning. There were these massive machines with cards with little holes punched through them.



**Robert Kinsman**

**DC:** I've seen those in the movies, Bob! (*Laughter*).

**RK:** I know! So, technology has made our lives easier, but we're still only ahead of our deadline by a few hours. Within an hour we give excerpts to Members if they request it, but we don't put any of the rough draft on the Internet.

**CPR:** While we're on the subject of speeches, many Members seem to read from prepared remarks. Do they often provide you with copies in advance or afterwards?

**RK:** Many of our Members deny they're using a speech, even if they're standing with a page in front of them. (*Laughter*). But, actually, there was a new government in 2013, and about 30 new Members came to an orientation we call Members' University where each division describes what they need to make their lives and the Members' lives easier. Some of these people were obviously listening because we do have Members that send over remarks in advance or when they're finished, and most will send them if you request it. Our big new problem has been people reading from iPads. They either can't print

it, or don't. That's a new wrinkle this past sitting. But most people will send their speeches. There is a telephone near the chamber where our staff can call to request it. A number of years ago, Ruth, a woman working in our office, called to ask for a note to be sent to a Member giving a Speech, requesting a copy. The Member received the note, turned to the camera mid-speech and said "No Ruth, I won't send it!" (*Laughter*). You have to be a little discreet.

**DC:** We do receive copies of virtually everything that's prepared, but only after it's delivered in the House or committee, never before. Our staff have a table in the Chamber, but they are what's known as "strangers in the chamber." They aren't allowed to walk around, so they have to use the legislative pages as their couriers. We get a steady stream of the printed remarks all day, every day. I would love to get them in advance, because that would be so helpful for our interpreters. I think the Ontario Hansard is the only one where the interpretation is part of the service. Our interpreters have learned over the years to wing it. We'll get them in advance when we can, but we don't hold our breath.

**RS:** In BC we have a couple of procedures. One is known as two-minute statements. They're before Question Period every day. Six Members are allowed to stand up and they each have two minutes to make a statement about something going on in their constituency. Those are always prepared remarks and the Members are almost always reading from a prepared text. We have a pretty good success rate in having those sent to us either in advance or after. And for the Budget Speech or the Throne Speech, Members will often have prepared remarks. They are less likely to send those to us unless we request them because they're half hour speeches. But it's a bit of a double-edged sword. They can depart from their text, so you could never just take the text and assume that's what the Member will say. You would have to do a line by line comparison between the prepared speech and the transcript. And if you have to do that, you might as well just do the transcript. We're not going to make the record conform to what they want it to say. The record has to report what they actually said. You can use the text to see where they might have run off the rails a bit, or for names or titles that are printed within it that will help from a research perspective, but the job of reporting what they said is ultimately the job of the person listening the first time they transcribed it. We have a number of Members whose first language is not English and they will very often send us their remarks in



advance and that's very helpful because in those cases you actually do a line-by-line comparison just to make sure if there are problems with diction or noun-verb agreement.

**RK:** I'd just like to add one thing about Member statements. We used to have something called Notices of Motion and it was the same thing. It was sent to us by the caucus office each day before the House sat. They tabled it with the Clerk and then we got a refined copy later. It was wonderful. But the new procedure allows each Member to read two one-minute statements about whatever they want for up to one hour. They don't have to table them so most don't. We've had quite the time with this! I'm meeting with the Clerk and Speaker before the next sitting and I'm hoping to have them tabled as they were before, even if they aren't registered by the Clerk. It's an hour of one-minute statements with constituents' names. It's murder! I'm not kidding. *(Laughter)*

**CPR:** Earlier in our discussion the common idea that Hansard is verbatim was brought up, but in many cases it's "essentially verbatim." A few years ago in Manitoba, Hansard became embroiled in a political news story where an editing decision was deemed to have cleaned up a minister's remarks in a way the opposition argued was unacceptable.. *[The minister referred to porcupines having 'pines' before correcting himself to say quills. Hansard removed the reference to 'pines' - the Speaker ordered the omission to be reinstated and for Hansard to report speech verbatim.]* What kind of editing procedures do you have? Do you have any notable stories about issues that have arisen when editorial decisions have been made?

**DC:** We do have policies and new staff are trained thoroughly. We are "substantially verbatim." Our policies allow us to make tweaks, but we never put words in anyone's mouth. While there are some variations, most of the Hansards adhere to the same policy which was drawn from the mother of all parliaments, Westminster. For example, if someone is saying "million, million, million" all the way through a speech then stumbles and says billion at some point, unless it's referred to and becomes a political thing we would probably just change it to conform. It was a verbal stumble that everyone listening understood as an error. We will also edit false starts. No one speaking off the cuff speaks very smoothly. If a person starts with a couple of words and then immediately restarts in a different direction we would drop those first few words to



**Robert Sutherland**

tidy it up a bit. We have a good training program and people ask when they're not sure. Where it's erupted into controversy, if I can use that word, would be when someone applies an editing decision that corrects an error in speech by a minister. It was never partisan, but if a minister of the Crown made a stumble and someone just corrected it according to the usual policy applied, an opposition member might stand up and allege that Hansard fixed it because the government asked us to do something. *(Laughing)* That happens all the time, I get a call from the minister saying "Oh, can you please fix that!" And that's another point, you can't read sarcasm into print. *(Laughter)*. I was being totally sarcastic just then. But it's so rare. I don't recall having to deal with a situation like that except for perhaps once during the last seven and half years. I think my predecessor had to deal with a couple of instances when someone was alleging that we were tweaking the copy in favour of a government minister or to make the government look better. Like I care whether the government looks good or not. By the way, I'm retiring shortly so I'm being more candid than I would have if we had this interview a year ago. *(Laughter)*

**RS:** I can't recall anything during my tenure as manager or director where there's been a controversy like that. Years ago, in the 1990s there was a case when an editorial change was made at a very basic level. In retrospect it wasn't a very good editorial decision and it just so happened it concerned the man who became the premier when he was answering a question from the Leader of the Opposition. It wasn't widely reported in public, but I know the organization was deeply embarrassed about it. That was a point where we changed from some fairly substantial editing to a much more verbatim style. We realized there was a pretty big risk if you started doing those things. The funny thing is, I don't ever feel like I'm pressured by the Government or the Opposition Members to correct an embarrassment. I'll get requests to tidy things up a bit, but I never get the sense that it's a case of them saying something they'd like to take back. I think that's because they actually respect the work that we do. They trust the quality of the work they're getting from us. We smooth things over, but we don't fix substantive mistakes that they've made. If they said something embarrassing, they're going to have to live with that. Once it's on the record and out there, we won't change it. If they really feel strongly about it they'll have to rise in the House and correct their remark. The issue you refer to in Manitoba – we make that kind of change in the transcript almost every day. We fix those minor errors or slips of the tongue as a part of the process and no one questions it. I have to say, it boggles my mind how that turned into an issue in Manitoba.

**DC:** I think it might have been a lack of understanding of the editing process by the Speaker. When the Speaker made the ruling stating Hansard must be 100 per cent verbatim he probably was thinking that it was already almost 100 per cent verbatim.

**RS:** I actually read a comment by Members saying they were surprised to learn that Hansard had done any editing. That's what blows my mind. I can't imagine anyone reading a Hansard transcript and thinking, "yes, that's exactly how I sound when I talk."

**DC:** The only time we've made an exception was when a Member was standing to pay tribute to a constituent who had passed away. The Member had either made a mistake with that person's name or that person's spouse's name and was mortified afterwards. They called us to ask us to correct it. That was completely non-political and I know that copies of the Hansard go to the family of the person who died, so we made an exception. But it's very rare.

**RK:** I think Nova Scotia is similar. Someone used the term "virtually verbatim," but our Clerk says we're an *in extenso* report which is a full report with repetitions and redundancies omitted. When I took over my position the former editor had been from the UK. Everyone sounded like Winston Churchill. *(Laughter)* We have members from all across Nova Scotia, but they just don't speak like that. One of my little maxims to the people here was: "You should be able to know who's speaking without seeing their name." We had one Member who said, "Thank God Hansard is here. You make me sound good by taking out the ums and the ehs." But we had one Member who was a former teacher, very well spoken, who decided one day to start mixing with the people by dropping his "I-N-G's" and "goin' fishin' with the boys." It appeared in Hansard as "going fishing." He complained the next day that we made him sound too good. *(Laughter)*.

**RS:** Deborah mentioned before that we have a huge style guide that our staff have to go through. It includes sections about when someone is being folksy or using common parlance. We have thought about all these things for decades, and, as a result, we now have this bible in front of us. When someone comes across speech like that they alert a managing editor to ask how they would deal with it in the copy. For those areas of the text that could be a problem, we put our collective minds to it and it will likely work its way up to my desk so that I know how an editorial decision was made. We really make an effort to show that we're faithful to our guidelines and established procedures to make sure we're treating all Members fairly. But we definitely have more latitude for tributes and non-political statements by Members. It's with Question Period and Debates that the Members are especially responsible for what they say and we take a very light hand there.

**LF:** Rob, you had said that members trust the quality of the work they're getting from us, within the nature of the Hansard office as non-partisan and apolitical. I very much agree with that. But the wild card is politics. For example, there was a time once where an Opposition Member had said something about a Minister. She was about to say, "That Minister ought to be taken out to the back shed and given a horrr...." The member started to stop herself just as the place erupted. We didn't put in the word because she clearly didn't get out a word. She got out a syllable before she was interrupted. But everybody in the room had psychologically finished that sentence for her. Of course, Hansard editors are trained not to finish thoughts, so that statement would have been published without the word, but with an

ellipsis, and then an indication of all hell breaking loose in the chamber and the Speaker shouting for order. But it just so happened that the government of the day was so desperate to shift the debate regarding some scandals that they chose to complain that Hansard had been sanitized. The issue did not get picked up by the media, but the complaint went from the government caucus to the Speaker saying “Can we not trust our Hansard anymore? Here was a verbal threat and Hansard has taken it out of the record.” I’d say the benefit we had compared to what happened in Manitoba was that the complainant was from the Speaker’s own party. It was easier for the Speaker to tell his caucus to let it go. I had the support of our Clerk, so the most I had to do was to meet with the Speaker and explain our procedures. The Speaker was supportive. In my opinion, our experience emphasized the need for good communication with Clerks about the kinds of editing we do because the Clerks are best placed to prevent problems from escalating.

**RK:** We’re very lucky. We work closely with both our Clerk and our Speaker, because we are very small. The Clerk once called me to ask, “Is that what you do? Should I have done this?” He’s very open and supportive, as is the Speaker.

**LF:** I agree, Bob. I think it helps to explain why our small situation really didn’t get any bigger. The Speaker asked to hear what our perspective was. When the situation in Manitoba happened I consciously made a point to meet with our Clerks to talk about our editorial policy and what was similar and different about what we were doing here. We don’t often get a chance to make that kind of intervention at the right time. It’s the Clerk that has the first ability to respond.

**RK:** And that was actually brought up at a subsequent Clerk’s conference. The Clerk explained the situation so there was some cross-pollination across Canada and that helped to ensure that the various Hansards and Clerks were briefed and better understood the issue.

**RS:** Members will say things using unparliamentary language. There are a number of celebrated clips of that. But you really have to be careful reporting it. If Members caught on to the fact that they could say whatever they wanted and we would report it, the debate could turn pretty ugly. If someone is heckling and accusing a Member of lying and there’s a way to argue that it’s not reportable, I’ll do that. You do want to be careful because you don’t want to open a back door for them to circumvent the Speaker.

**RK:** We have a policy of not including heckling unless the Member who has the floor responds to it and identifies the heckler.

**LF:** Our rule is similar.

**RS:** Ours is similar as well.

**CPR:** I asked about what’s changed over the years. Now if I can ask you to speculate about the future, have you noticed any trends in recent years about Hansard reporting? For example, a number of legislatures are exploring the concept of open government. Would that affect Hansard’s operations?

*If they said something embarrassing, they’re going to have to live with that. Once it’s on the record and out there, we won’t change it. If they really feel strongly about it they’ll have to rise in the House and correct their remark.*

*~Robert Sutherland*

**RK:** As far as open government, we’ve had some discussions about that. The Speaker had a request for what they refer to as a “raw data dump” of our initial audio that would be transferred to a private company before it was posted anywhere. They would then begin harvesting the information. They’ve been doing it with screen scraping. That’s something that the control freak in me frets about. But the Speaker and the Clerk have been looking at those kinds of requests for some time.

**RS:** Are you referring to text or audio?

**RK:** Text. I think once we put it on the Internet people can do with it what they wish, but there should be some measure of control somewhere.

**RS:** We don’t have a policy on open data yet. We do release our data but it’s not in a format that these organizations would like in order to manipulate with



scripts. We've started publishing in XML as a part of our process. We haven't started releasing that yet. The other issue is that we only have that format for the past two or three years. It's not a large historical database that you could use to make long-term comparisons and analysis. It's also very expensive to set these types of systems up and I think that's something these jurisdictions are looking at. What would be the cost of trying to overlay that XML format over old files and would it be worth it?

**LF:** In Saskatchewan we do not have an open data policy yet. We do have a strategic communication plan that states we want to make the work of the Assembly visible and accessible, to make it more understandable, and to provide information which supports public engagement.

**RS:** I think the challenge for us is that we tend to be protective of these resources and we have to get out of that mindset and realize these are resources for the public to use. But the way some people use them leads to some strange comparisons. They say that the number of words a Member says is a measure of their efficacy. We know that's not the case, but it's really not our place to control that. I think we're still at a place where we think it's our responsibility to protect our Members; but at a certain point we'll have to take a deep breath, put it out there and let people make those kinds of comparisons.

**RK:** Another question would be, which copy of the data are they using? Our printed copy is now our official copy.

**LF:** I think, to reframe what Robert said, Hansard works so hard to establish itself as dependable and non-partisan – that you can depend on Hansard to be a fair representation of what actually happened. We're protective of that reputation, that the Assembly's publications are the gold standard record of what truly happened and was said in the Assembly. It remains to be seen how open data will aid or hinder the public's understanding and confidence.

**DC:** I'm not sure that open data and open government are the same thing. Open data might be a part of open government, but when I look at some

of the things they're doing at the House of Commons, it's the way that they're packaging the information on the website so that you can click on a place in the Hansard text and it will take you to the voting record, for example, or to information about the Member, or their constituency, or the index or information about that day's debate. We would love to do some of those things, but it's all dependent on the amount of resources you have available.

**RS:** The worry is that they're using the data to make some sort of editorial comment; but I think we need to get over that worry. Ultimately, we aren't making that editorial comment. The onus on us is to make sure that our products and websites – the authentic source – are accessible and not buried somewhere where no one will find it. It does put pressure on us.

**RK:** I think a lot of the people extracting data are doing it for general research purposes. As it gets more available there are going to be fewer people abusing it... once they pry it out of my cold, dead hands. *(Laughter)*.

**CPR:** Are there any other final remarks before we finish off?

**DC:** If I could just take the opportunity, since I'm retiring, to say how proud I am of having been a part of this institution, about our staff and about what we do and how well they do it. We recruit carefully and these people are dedicated. Contrary to this common misconception that it's one person sitting at a desk typing up a transcript, it takes a hard-working, smart team. And it's a miracle every day. It doesn't matter how many people called in sick, it doesn't matter if there are network issues, it doesn't matter what the issue is. Not a day goes by that the team doesn't put its shoulder to the wheel and gets it done so well and so accurately. It's a thing of beauty.

**LF:** Hear! Hear!

**CPR:** Thank you so much for taking part. Now, are there any offers to transcribe this?

**All:** Laughter.