

CLIRS: Some first impressions

Visiting Australia in May 1985, I was given the opportunity to experiment with the Australian legal information retrieval service, CLIRS - and I have been asked to give some initial comments on this service.

An important point is the decision made to have national control of the service. There are a number of reasons which favour such a decision. Perhaps the most important single reason is the possibility of integration; the computerized service may be integrated with traditional services.

In Norway, the national control has made possibility of integrating the legal information service (LAWDATA) with the official legal gazette, the publication of the bi-annual statutes in force, regulations in force etc. A similar co-operation seems to be emerging in Australia - and may obviously be of profit to the legal community, not only those starting to use the computerized services, but also those who still rely on the conventional services.

Another important reason is the possibility of taking into consideration the policy objectives of creating a legal information service. A new information service should create a better information situation for the legal community as a whole. For instance, it would improve the information situation of small firms, which cannot afford comprehensive libraries of primary sources.

Related to this is the possibility of reducing the problems of lawyers in outlying areas where distance is a trivial, but important problem when accessing traditional services. And thirdly, the possibility of catering for the specialized needs of public authorities, which may have information needs different from that of a practising lawyer.

CLIRS relies on a modified version of the STATUS system. STATUS is one of the few major machine-independent retrieval packages offered today. It is a system which has proved itself reliable and tolerably efficient.

Experience has taught us, however, that users find the system less simple and robust than they desire. It is important to take note of such reactions. In my mind, there is no doubt text retrieval systems have to achieve a new level of avail-

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ability to gain acceptance.

But in emphasizing this, it should also be realised that, comparatively speaking, STATUS has a rather user-friendly interface. The amendments made to the system in Australia have contributed to this and I think it is a hopeful sign that strategies to supplement the conventional Boolean arguments are under development by Computer Power.

Therefore, though text retrieval in general still has to develop more flexible and simple user interfaces, the STATUS system is, relatively speaking, one of the more satisfactory examples offered today.

It has also been interesting to see that accessory services are being offered in the CLIRS environment. It is important to realise a computerized information service also is a computerized communication service, which may facilitate not only communication between the data base and users, but also between the

users themselves. Such a development should be encouraged - electronic bulletin boards (forum functions), electronic mail, etc. will hopefully be emerging.

This would also make it possible for users to annotate the primary sources, which might be an interesting development favouring the ideals of objectivity in a legal system.

Lastly, the aspect of training should be emphasized. User research clearly demonstrates that this prevails as one of the primary reasons for insufficient or inadequate use of the systems.

Obviously, law schools should play a major part in this training. Use of legal information retrieval services should be a compulsory part of any legal education - as it is today at a few universities throughout the world, though Sweden probably is the only country making it a compulsory part of the general legal education.

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News from Butterworths Telepublishing

LEXIS UPDATE

ALR (American Law Reports) Annotations added to LEXIS

The full text of all ALR Annotations from ALR Federal, ALR Fourth and ALR Third are now available on LEXIS.

ALR Annotations are the most widely cited source of American case law analysis. Their approach is not dissimilar to that of Halsbury's Laws. ALR Annotations are comprehensive articles which organise, evaluate, analyse and summarise all the case law relevant to a specific point of law or fact situation.

LEXIS users may search the ALR Annotations in conjunction with combined US Federal or State case law, providing the user with both cases and commentary on a particular subject.

EUROPEAN LIBRARY

Two new series of reports are soon to be added to the European cases file: the European Commercial Cases and European Human Rights Reports. Both series will be included from 1978 (date of

inception) and will be updated regularly. Their addition will increase the LEXIS coverage of European case law.

The European Human Rights Reports contain judgments from the European Court of Human Rights, selected reports from the European Commission of Human Rights and summaries of all other Commission decisions, settlements and resolutions of The Committee of Ministers relating to Human Rights.

The European Commercial Cases contain judgments from courts in Western Europe on such areas as international litigation procedure, information exchange, data privacy, copyright, agency and distributorship, products liability, cheques and bills of exchange, consumer credit, restrictive practices, etc.

SCOTTISH LAW

A range of Scottish legal materials is soon to be added to the database, including series like Session Cases and Scottish Criminal Case Reports.