

CLIRS CORNER

A REGULAR COLUMN OF OPINION ON THE CLIRS SYSTEM

Readers are invited to forward their opinions to the Editor.

A RESPONSE TO OUR CRITICS

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(This article was written in mid-1984, before the launch of the CLIRS pilot scheme; details of proposed CLIRS databases are contained in the insert to this issue - Ed.)

When CLIRS is publicly launched in the first quarter of 1985 Australian lawyers will at last have access to an Australian Legal Information Retrieval System. Not only will the Australian CLIRS be able to cope with the information demands of those Australians requiring legal information, it will also ultimately provide a host of ancillary information relevant to the Australian business community.

There has been recent speculation that CLIRS will provide a sub-standard service (*Justinian* No 30, April 1984) and that Government decisions regarding the chosen software will result in the legal profession being the loser due to "bureaucratic high-handedness". Much criticism has been levelled at STATUS. Such speculation and comment is indicative of the misconceptions that surround the STATUS product.

STATUS is a Dynamic Product

Perhaps the principal misconception about STATUS can be corrected by stating that it is not a static product. A team of software scientists at U.K. Atomic Energy Research Establishment (Harwell) took well over ten person years to develop the first commercial version of STATUS. Amongst the greatest assets of STATUS are:

(a) its concept permits constant revision and enhancement of its structure and code - therefore it is a dynamic product capable of remaining at the leading edge of technology;

(b) its flexibility allows considerable tuning to particular applications and user requirements - of the 200 or so major STATUS users worldwide, few of them have not 'customised' STATUS to their specific demands;

(c) its portability permits it to run on a wide range of hardware and it can be moved intact from one hardware environment to another. Also it has a most desirable ability to interface with other software products;

Over the years the several new versions of STATUS have so far improved its performance and facilities that it now bears virtually no resemblance to the product that it was at the time of its first release, unquestionably the 'state of the art' full text management software.

In recent years comparative studies of all available full text retrieval software have been conducted by a number of overseas and Australian authorities.

Overseas: The European Commission of the E.E.C.; The National Law Library (U.K.); The Society of Computers and Law (U.K.); The Kluwer Legal Publishing Group (The Netherlands); The International Thomson Organisation; The British Oxygen Company.

In Australia: Thorn/EMI Group (World Reporter); The Attorney General's Department Canberra; NSW Government (for all Departments); SA Government (for all Departments); CSIRO; Woolworths; The WA Museum; Esso; Shell; Monash University; Ministry of Housing, Victoria; Justice Information Support Centre, Perth.

These and many others came to the independent conclusion that STATUS is the leading product worldwide. The largest STATUS research and development and support team outside Harwell itself is located here in Australia.

STATUS was also recently chosen by the Department of Social Security in the largest and most competitive tender in Australia's history. They looked at all products available both in Australia and the rest of the world. Further, last month WANG Laboratories USA, the world leaders in text systems, has chosen STATUS as their free text retrieval product for incorporation in their product range for worldwide distribution.

The latest version of STATUS is called STATUS 85 and this is to be released early next year. It effects a major improvement in performance with very large databases and it is this new version which CLIRS Australia will be using.

Evidence of this continual development is further emphasised when one notes that micro STATUS will also be released shortly. Consequently, any argument that "the NSW and Victorian Governments have locked the profession into STATUS for years to come" and that the "software program that will be the basis of CLIRS is destined to be obsolete by the time the system is on stream in 1985" clearly avoids the basic fact that STATUS is currently the most dynamic and professional information retrieval package available.

It is important to note that CLIRS is making use of a range of software products. For instance, data more suitable for referencing by key field will be stored and accessed by MODEL 204, a comprehensive general purpose database management system. Engineered for high performance, MODEL 204 has gained a reputation as the outstanding product in its class. The system handles larger databases and more simultaneous users than any other commercial DBMS. MODEL 204 was recently selected by the Australian Department of Social Security following a benchmark in which a 15.3 gigabyte database was loaded onto the system and accessed by a network of 870 terminals. MODEL 204 won the benchmark competition by processing 1000 transactions per minute with a response time of two seconds.

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↩ *Clirs Corner (cont. from page 11)*

Poaching of Data

Reference has been made to the fact that "there appears to be nothing to stop a subscriber to CLIRS storing the results of a search on a private in-house computer". Users will be able, in-house facilities permitting, to download data. However, the following points must be made with respect to such action:

(a) Standard user contracts for computerised information services do not permit users to copy or convert data into any magnetic medium without the written agreement of the information provider.

(b) Users will be permitted to download only a certain quantity of data before a triggering mechanism alerts CLIRS computer support staff that an unacceptable amount of data is being transferred. At this point CLIRS will have the option to either terminate the transaction or enquire from the user as to the nature of their actions. CLIRS is aware of the undesirable consequences for all parties should downloading methods exceed normal day to day requirements and has taken positive steps to strictly control such activity.

(c) Should a user be able to gain access to a large quantity of data in-house, sophisticated manipulation of that data would be necessary to permit on-line searching by that user, irrespective of whether STAU is loaded on their machine. Quite clearly, the expenditure both in time and money required to maintain such a procedure exceeds the access charges to CLIRS.

(d) Access to CLIRS generates cost to the user. Coupled with the fact that the data could only be updated by a continual process of downloading, reformatting, database construction and reconcording on a regular basis, clearly the economic viability would once again be highly questionable.

(e) Material carried on CLIRS is in the public domain and freely available in printed form.

Cost

The ability of any information retrieval system to justify the cost to the users of the system may be measured by reference to two critical factors: (a) its practical value to the user; and (b) its ease-of-use.

With respect to (a) : CLIRS has had the benefit of observing the experiences of the Americans and the British and it will be able to provide many of the services previously neglected by these systems. A significant part of the initial database will comprise legislation and case law from New South Wales and Victoria. Access will be provided to a wide range of Commonwealth materials and coverage will be expanded quickly to include similar material from the other States, providing a truly national system.

It has been stated that the overseas databases did not fare as well with the legal profession as expected. This was due to the fact that these systems concentrated on providing primary legal material which did not reflect the diverse needs of the average lawyer.

CLIRS therefore is committed to the early inclusion of a number of secondary databases. Studies have clearly indicated that lawyers refer far more frequently to secondary matter than the primary sources. CLIRS will be guided by the users who will be encouraged to indicate their needs and preferences, either personally or through the mechanism of the State Advisory Committees, which have been appointed to provide guidance with respect to the range and extent of database content.

Given the wide spectrum of data which will be available to the user on CLIRS and given that it will be the most comprehensive and up-to-date method of researching the law, any employed solicitor or law student charged with the task of completing a complex and lengthy research job would be well advised to consult CLIRS.

With respect to (b) : CLIRS Australia is now developing a comprehensive training program with centres being initially established in Melbourne and Sydney. CLIRS has also been actively encouraging and assisting law schools to develop facilities to ensure that students are provided with in-house training. Increased computer literacy in the community will lead to a greater awareness of the utility of information retrieval systems. CLIRS will also develop simple mechanisms to make access to CLIRS no more difficult than turning on a television.

A system which provides a comprehensive service to a user, irrespective of his/her location justifies its cost of \$100 per hour, on the assumption that the system is used efficiently. An average terminal session of 10 minutes provides the user with high quality information at a manageable price. Time is money and CLIRS, used efficiently, will certainly produce substantial reduction in time spent on research activities.

Alternate Systems

The DATAFUSION or Associated File Processor (AFP) method of retrieving information is accomplished by reading an entire database. This technique might be suitable for a small database where computing expertise to maintain a full database management system is not available, or the user needs to undertake a search on a common phrase across the entire database. This approach does not meet the requirements of a comprehensive legal information retrieval system such as CLIRS will provide. The Atomic Energy Research establishment, Harwell, has carried out a comprehensive comparison of STATUS and AFP for Computer Power which details the problems associated with AFP. The report clearly indicated AFP's poor response times (4 to 5 minutes to scan an entire 300 megabyte disk). Our agreement calls for guaranteed response times in the order of 2 to 5 seconds, which we are confident can be achieved.

Search Strategy

It must be stressed that CLIRS will be far from identical with EUROLEX and many of the problems encountered by this and other information retrieval systems will not be evident on CLIRS. As previously noted, EUROLEX runs on STATUS 80.4 whereas CLIRS will operate on STATUS 85 which considerably upgrades the question solving procedure as well as providing the user with a host of other enhancements.

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➡ **CLIRS Corner (cont. from page 12)**

It should be added that with any full text system available in the world today it is possible to ask question that will give less than satisfactory answers.

Conclusion

CLIRS' approach and system design has ensured that the final product will be at the leading edge of information retrieval technology. A team of experienced information retrieval technicians have been assembled, together with an efficient and highly sophisticated computer installation. All raw data capture procedures have been undertaken to ensure portability which will permit, should the desire ever be manifest, the transference to any future superior technology.

The technical resources of Computer Power will be used to constantly evaluate software products and other information retrieval technology. Should the Computer Power Group identify any product that would produce a better performance and service to the user, CLIRS Australia will be in the forefront of a move to upgrade accordingly. Of note, is that all of the leading systems in the world, LEXIS, WESTLAW, EUROLEX, QUICKLAW use the same technology as STATUS.

CLIRS' stated policy is to develop a comprehensive and efficient legal information retrieval system, designed specifically to meet the needs of the Australian profession.

We are confident that the system we provide will be acknowledged as the most practical system in the world.



➡ **CCH Launch (cont. from page 4)**

We have also listed all the Acts on which we have reasonably significant commentary. The criterion we used was that if you searched for the location of commentary on, say, sex discrimination and the database told you to look in CCH's Personnel Reporter, you would not feel, after you had gone to the trouble of consulting that Reporter, that the reference was so inconsequential that you had been led on a wild goose chase.

The principal topics dealt with by each loose-leaf publication are listed so that you can look up subjects by topic words.

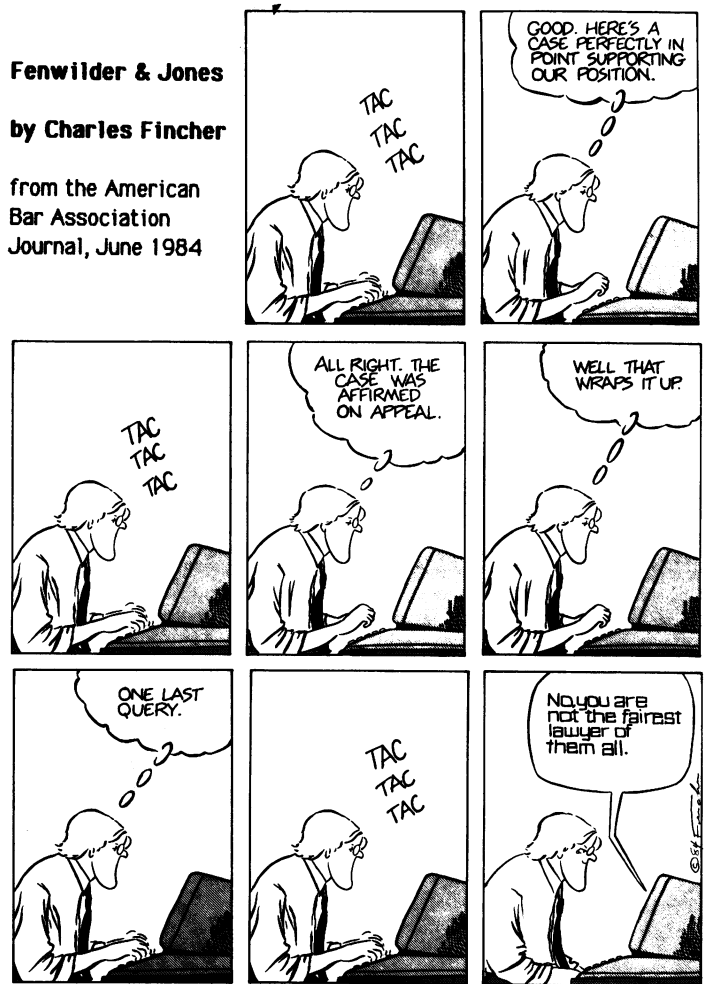
The database will give you lots of other information - the publication's name, authors, commencement date, price and what is included with the publication, for example case books and what the case citations for that series are.

(The database demonstration followed: Ed.)

Fenwilder & Jones

by Charles Fincher

from the American Bar Association Journal, June 1984



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