

The Information Explosion and the Senate

Richard Greene

When preparing this paper, I asked Senate Information Services for statistics on the volume of material distributed by the branch in 1985. "Do you want that in tons, cubic yards or by the truckload? . . ." the co-ordinator asked in his return memo. The figures for 1985, when I did receive them, were indeed impressive: 800,000 brochures distributed; two mil-

and became a full branch in 1983. There is no indicator that the public thirst for data about the Senate has come close to peaking.

In the first quarter of 1986, Information Services ordered another one million brochures, wrote eight news releases and organized four press conferences – three of them in one week. In addition, some 6,000 students are expected to participate this



Information Services Co-ordinator Gord Lovelace and production assistant Paulette LeBlanc check material for new edition of Senate brochure.
(Senate Info. Services)

lion pages of information material printed internally; 10,000 telephone and written requests answered; and 1,000 press articles about the Senate distributed in a bi-weekly clipping service.

All of these statistics represent dramatic leaps annually since Information Services began as a part-time operation in 1981

year in the branch's various student education activities, up from 5,000 in 1985.

Interestingly enough, this information explosion has occurred without a parallel increase in staff (two employees in 1986) and, indeed, has actually permitted some important efficiencies in time and money due to the economy of scale.

There have always been people, media and public alike, who have been interested enough in the Senate to call or write in for information, just as there always have been staff willing to reply to these requests. Most requests, prior to 1981, were addressed to the Speaker, the Clerk or, simply, the Senate. The bulk

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Senator Renaude Lapointe addressing students who participated in the Senate's education program. (Senate Info. Services)

of these ended up with someone in the Clerk's office for distribution to the appropriate Senate branch. Unfortunately, even a simple letter could end up on quite a merry-go-round, for there was no central repository for information.

For instance, the documentation contained in today's standard information kit – which is on its way back to a correspondent within minutes of receipt of a request – could have involved five or six branches even a half-dozen years ago and taken days or weeks to compile.

A telephone request was in trouble right from the start – the information number listed in phone books got callers through to a security desk! How far they got from there depended on the experience of whoever picked up the phone. Although there was a wealth of information available to staff to answer such requests, it was not centrally compiled, filed, updated or distributed. That situation has changed, dramatically, so that we now have an extremely sophisticated system of gathering and disseminating information.

The old telephone number has been replaced by one that connects with a proper referral operator and most of those referrals end up at Information Services. The branch has handled up to 110 calls in one hectic day, and the weekly average is a still-substantial 200. More than 95 per cent of these requests are answered immediately, that is to say, within seconds or minutes. If the request involves mailing of documents, the material is sent out the same day. The five per cent of queries which cannot be answered with information immediately at hand are referred the same day to the appropriate agency within or outside the Senate. Information Services has never received a complaint from correspondents regarding delays in receiving information requested.

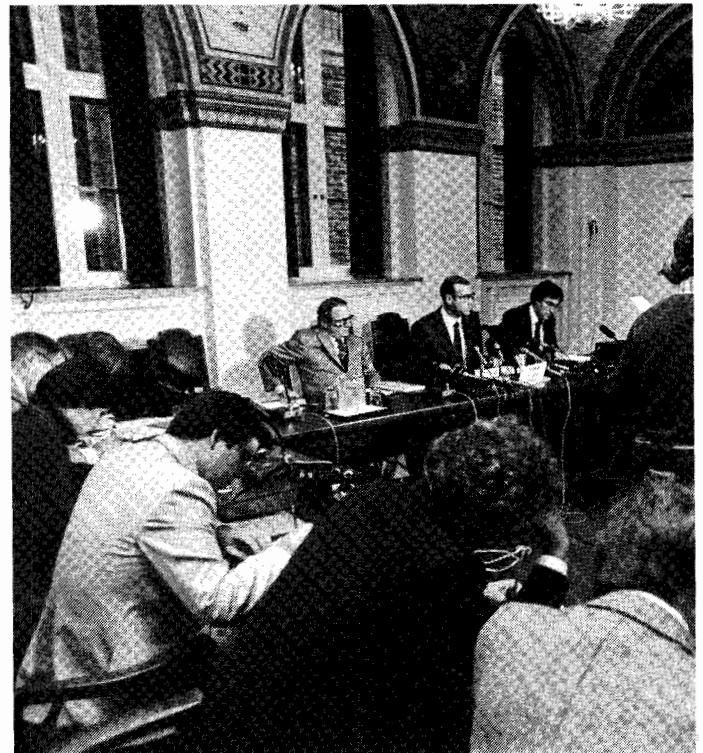
The Information Services branch makes heavy use of computers to keep all material current. The appointment of a new Senator alone involves changing dozens of lists, a process that

takes only about two hours. That updated material is distributed overnight to Senate staff and Senators' offices, both to keep them informed and to permit them to reply to queries they receive directly. Further distribution involves media, other government departments and various public and private concerns on our mailing list.

Documentation published by Information Services ranges from telephone lists through research papers on the Senate to four-colour brochures. The branch is one of the heaviest users of internal printing. The bi-weekly clipping service alone involves about 750,000 pages annually. The creation of new documents is based on demand. For instance, a recent magazine article on women in politics resulted in a great demand for a list of all women Senators since Confederation. Such a list was created and is maintained.

In addition to internal distribution and answers to requests, the branch has a substantial list of subscribers who have asked to be kept abreast of events in the Senate. The most important are those who circulate the information provided to an even broader audience. Such agencies include the Canadian Press wire service, the *Canadian Directory*, the *Canadian Parliamentary Handbook*, the *Corpus Administrative Index*, the *Press Review Sources Directory* and Canada Service Bureaus right across the country. The distribution of such basic information, by creating so many outside sources of information, eliminates thousands of calls and letters each year to the branch and the Senate as a whole. The branch also distributes directly thousands of Senate Committee Reports every year, on request. This eliminates forwarding memos to other distribution centres or individual Senate committees.

About 6,000 students will participate this year in the



Senators Fernand Leblanc and Douglas Everett field questions during a Senate news conference. (Senate Info. Services)

branch's education program in association with such groups as the Terry Fox Youth Resources Centre, the Forum for Young Canadians and the Youth Parliament of Canada. These students, in groups ranging from 100 to 250, are addressed by a Senator and each is provided with an information kit on the Senate.

Information Services wrote communiqués and organized media campaigns for about a dozen Senate committee reports in 1986. The branch also provides advice for media and Senators in arranging interviews.

The branch organizes dozens of photographic sessions every year and distributes photos of the Senate and Senators through the Canadian Press Photo Service. It does graphic design and paste-up for various internal printing projects. It compiles, prints and distributes the Senate Bulletin clipping service to 1,000 internal and outside subscribers. It co-ordinates the two new Senate channels on the OASIS parliamentary information system. It serves as liaison between the Senate and other government information departments and, of course, the Parliamentary Press Gallery.

In any legislative institution, one can generally count on the media, politicians and political staff to disseminate news and

The use of computers, word-processors and high-quality printers, as well as standardization and a "generic" approach to distribution has resulted in cost savings that more than cover increased volume. Thousands of dollars alone were saved when the publication of *The Rules of the Senate* was converted from a bound edition to three-ring-binder format. Now, we keep the Rules up-to-date by simply sending out revisions to addresses on a central subscriber's list, rather than reprinting the entire book for just a few changes.

Indeed, improved technology has revolutionized every branch, particularly those involved in the publishing of the inevitable agendas, proceedings, debates and reports necessary for the smooth running of any legislature. Millions of pages of printing once done outside are now "typeset", edited and produced internally, with attendant improvements in speed, quality control and, again, costs.

Our experience suggests that dissemination of information involves a not-so-vicious circle. A tourist may give his brochure to a student who writes in for an information kit for an essay which prompts his teacher to do a class project which brings a busload of students to the Senate which may prompt a story in the lo-



The author in one of the Senate's high-tech "hot rooms". (Senate Info. Services)

information about immediate political happenings. It is left to the institution, however, to meet the demand for information regarding such things as rules, proceedings, procedure, status of legislation, schedules and agendas of meetings, history, biographies and any number of other items of interest.

While centralizing information material ensures it is kept current, wide distribution of this same documentation gives every Senate employee the resources to serve as an information officer. Co-operation between Information Services and other branches within and outside the Senate is critical to the success and efficiency of the system. For instance, a single one-hour student education session involves security, printing, messengers, interpretation, electronics, cleaning, public works, guides and accommodation services, all operating from a standard plan.

cal newspaper which may prompt a reader to write in for a brochure . . .

There are few limits on our ability to meet this increasing demand. There have been occasional "crunch" periods where the various services offered by the Information branch compete with themselves or demands of other departments to put a strain on printing, accommodation or distribution facilities. These cases are rare, however, and the backlog can quickly be cleared up with temporary assistance from other branches.

The Senate is already involved in the electronic transmission of information and will be ready when technology and economics dictate a wholesale move to electronic dissemination. Everything from educational videos to radio communiqués is under active study by Information Services. ■