

A New Technology For Parliamentarians?

Gary Levy

The essence of desktop publishing is the merger of form and content -- giving the persons responsible for producing the material complete control over what is said, how it looks and when it will be produced. To some extent it would be much better if the term "desktop publishing" did not exist. People unfamiliar with technology assume it must cost a fortune or involve expensive operating costs. Others conclude it just means giving their material to a desktop publishing company instead of a traditional typesetter. A few simply buy a laser printer to go along with their word processor and proclaim themselves on the desktop publishing bandwagon. Newspapers, corporations and large magazines have used computers, laser printers and page-makeup software for years but until recently the price of such equipment was beyond the reach of little publications or small businesses.

Private Members of Parliament are sometimes compared to managers of small businesses. They have an office budget, three or more staff and produce a great deal of information including four householders every year. They require a maximum degree of freedom and flexibility to run their own parliamentary lives. For this reason the transformation of the *Review* into a desktop operation may be of interest to individual members of legislative assemblies in Canada.

Control, Quality, Cost

The major considerations for anyone thinking about desktop publishing are control, quality and cost. The relative importance given to each will determine the kind of desktop solution. For those already using typesetting, cost is the least important factor. Whatever desktop

approach is used the savings will be considerable. In most cases the cost of equipment will be fully paid for in approximately one year by savings from the typesetting budget. For persons moving up from a typewriter or word processor cost will be a more important factor.

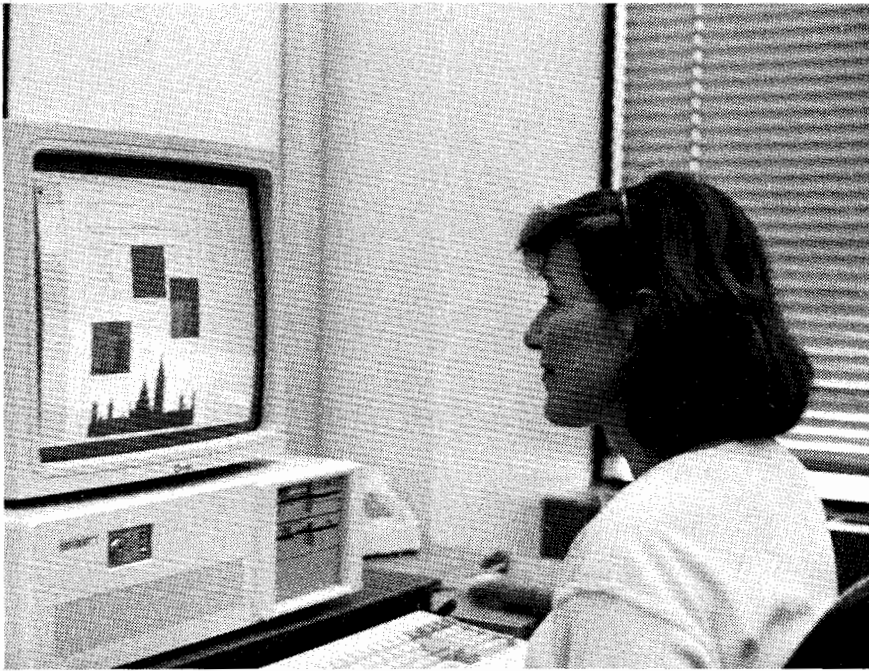
The question of quality is critical for persons already using typesetting. The same material published in a significantly less attractive format by desktop means is not likely to be of much interest no matter how great the savings. This is not a concern to individuals moving up since anything they produce is going to be significantly more attractive.

For those whose lives are built around deadlines, including parliamentarians, the real advantage of desktop publishing is neither quality nor cost but in the increased control it offers. No longer must text be sent to some remote location for typesetting. No more sitting around waiting for it to come back. No more frantic last minute phone calls caused by proofs delayed or lost somewhere.

A Few Technical Points

This article can hardly cover all the technical aspects of desktop publishing but a few general principles are important. First one has to decide to go with Mackintosh equipment by Apple or IBM-compatible hardware. Two or three years ago no page layout programs existed for the IBM-compatible world. A breakthrough occurred about a year ago and the market is now full of desktop packages for the IBM. This has spawned great debates between supporters of IBM and those who love their Macs. In the final analysis, however, this is a bit like a backyard argument between neighbours. One always buys General Motors and the other swears by Ford products. Nothing is likely to change the other person's mind. In any event the two systems are coming closer and closer together.

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This issue was produced using a Tandon computer, Moniterm Viking Full Page Display Monitor, Word Perfect software. Camera-ready copy was prepared on a QMS 800+ Laser Printer. Photographs, illustrations and the cover were produced by conventional methods and merged mechanically into the pages. The equipment was put together by Corel Systems of Ottawa.

The choice of laser printers is much more complicated but essentially it comes down to a choice between those which use postscript language (and are more expensive) and others. Postscript printers support more typesizes and produce better quality typefaces. The characters printed by both postscript and non postscript printers are only about 300 dots per inch compared to 1200 dots per inch for typesetting. The average reader cannot tell the difference, at least for ordinary text, but for headlines the difference can be noticeable. There are several ways to bypass this problem and obtain 1200 dots per inch for a surprisingly low price.

The Human Factor

Adoption of any new technology can alter traditional working patterns and relationships. This aspect deserves as much or more thought as any of the above-mentioned technical considerations. Innovation must also be defended against those who trot out old arguments about the dehumanizing or alienating effects of technology. Ironically the self sufficiency which is at the core of true desktop publishing may actually rekindle interest in some traditional skills and attitudes such as pride in workmanship and individual responsibilities - qualities often mourned as victims of the modern age.

Similarly desktop publishing may well force a rethinking of the way large enterprises, including legislatures, organize their human resources. One option has always been centralized control over technology offering the same services to every member of the organization. This has advantages from the management point of view. But for the users overcentralization encourages uniformity which taken to the extreme can lead to a situation where users are forced to adapt their needs to meet the technology rather than vice versa.

No one embarks upon a new technology without a nagging fear that once the equipment is purchased some new model will come out rendering the old one obsolete. There is no escape from this problem. The same situation will exist in five or ten years but the risk of obsolescence can be reduced by refusing to become tied to a single supplier and by using off-the-shelf hardware and software as much as possible.

Any savings in time and money gained by waiting for more sophisticated or cheaper equipment must be offset by the longer time it will take to learn that equipment compared to starting immediately with existing technology and upgrading every few years.