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Fall 2008

Evidence for Competency N

LIBR 221 – Government Information Sources

Legislative Information Analysis

June 25, 2008

H.R. 6028 Merida Initiative to Combat Illicit Narcotics and Reduce Organized Crime

Authorization Act of 2008

A legislative information analysis: THOMAS versus LexisNexis Congressional Universe

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Government Information Sources 221

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July 13, 2008

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It is the intent of this paper to compare two legislative information resources in their capability to provide the researcher with accurate, in depth information regarding current legislation. The two services to be discussed are the Library of Congress THOMAS (a free resource from the U.S. Government) and LexisNexis Congressional Universe (a paid for commercial service that is offered by libraries and other institutions). To test each service's offerings it is necessary to research a bill through both avenues.

On June 10, 2008, the online news source California Chronicle reported on a piece of legislation that was recently introduced in Congress under bill H.R. 6028. This bill is titled the Merida Initiative to Combat Illicit Narcotics and Reduce Organized Crime Authorization Act of 2008. The proposed legislation aims to reduce the flow of illegal narcotics and related violence by strengthening security assistance to law enforcement efforts in Mexico and Central America.

The bill was introduced in the House on May 13, 2008 by Representative Howard Berman [D-CA], cosponsored by 3 Democrats and 1 Republican, and shortly thereafter referred to the House Committees on Foreign Affairs and the Judiciary for review. After a time frame during which approvals, amendments, and reports were issued, on June 10, 2008 the bill was debated on the House floor and passed on to the Senate. On June 11, 2008 the Senate received, reviewed it and referred it to the Committee on Foreign Relations. The bill remains at this stage.

Despite being a fairly recent bill, already both Thomas and LexisNexis Congressional Universe offer a wealth of information about it. In fact either source by itself can present a complete and thorough overview of the bill and any of its amendments, reports, actions and

current state in Congress. The following analysis and comparison of each service has been done on a per feature basis.

Without a doubt one of the most important features of an online research service is its design. A resource can have a wealth of information but a poor design can effectively render it useless. If a user finds a resource difficult to understand he will most likely give up and try a different one. Nowhere is this more apparent than when designing a website's interface. Some good tenets of interface design include creating an uncluttered "clean" look, implementing intuitive navigation, and organizing all content in a logical manner.

THOMAS has undergone a major transformation over the last few years. Its new interface is modern and easy to use. Content is neatly organized in categories, each with its own powerful search feature. THOMAS was originally conceived to offer free legislative information to the public and that remains its main focus, clearly stated by the prominent place legislative searching occupies on the interface of its main page. THOMAS' main page is somewhat busy because it serves as an entry point to different government services. Finding legislative information related to H.R. 6028 was as easy as entering the bill number in the search box and selecting a search by Bill Number. THOMAS presents results in a consistent, user-friendly, and uncomplicated manner. All search results are presented with the same consistent format. The top portion of the screen contains the header listing the number, title and summary, sponsor and cosponsors, introduction date, last major congressional action, and any reports associated with the bill. The bottom portion of the screen contains self-explanatory categories containing further information about the bill (full text with versions, summary, titles, cosponsors, committees, related bills, amendments, related committee documents, cost estimates from the Congressional Budget

Office, subjects, congressional actions, and links to record pages, votes and reports). Selecting any of these categories will reveal additional bill information. Regardless of which category is selected, the header of the screen, that is the top portion of it, will remain unchanged providing a useful point of reference at all times. Interestingly, when navigating away from the main page through the categories, the only way to return to it is by hitting the back arrow in the browser which sometimes can present difficulties depending on the browser that is being used. It would be useful to put navigational hyper-text markup language (HTML) links at the bottom of each category page. Save for this very minor flaw, this is an outstanding Internet resource, made even more so by the fact that it is free of charge.

The design of the LexisNexis Congressional Universe interface is quite different from THOMAS'. The home page defaults to the basic screen for the Congressional Publications search. From this screen searches can be basic (i.e. by terms) with a few restrictions such as date or congress number, or advanced (i.e. more than one search term) with more sophisticated restrictions such as the type of document that is needed (i.e. committee prints, hearings, congressional documents, reports, legislative histories, serial sets, or serial set maps). However, for the search being discussed here, it is more effective to navigate through the "Legislative Histories, Bills, and Laws" menu item on the left sidebar which takes the user directly to the search screen for public law, pending legislation, and the United States code. This is not apparent to the inexperienced LexisNexis user who will most likely arrive here by trial and error or by taking some time to read through the extensive help area. As a side note, it is a common complaint among users that LexisNexis is a complicated engine to use which takes some time to master. Perhaps this is so because of the sheer amount of content it boasts. The search feature is

very accurate with the exact result retrieved after entering a few restrictors such as bill tracking, representative name, bill number, and current congress number. One click on the retrieved link, brings up a very detailed one screen summary and bill tracking report with details of the bill's title, sponsors and cosponsors, summary, CRS index terms, reports, and major congressional actions. Links are sprinkled throughout the page which if followed will bring up additional information such as detailed accounts of congressional actions and the text of the bills or the reports. In contrast to THOMAS, LexisNexis main page has a less cluttered main page design. This is not so, however, for the screen that displays search results which can list several versions of the same bill that are not clearly identified as so.

The full text of the bill can be accessed through both THOMAS and LexisNexis. Simple navigation in THOMAS reveals that there are four versions of H.R. 6028 which correspond with its passage through the House: introduction, report, engrossed as passed, and referral to the Senate Committee. LexisNexis also offers the full text of all versions but it is not easily apparent. For example, a search for the text of H.R. 6028 generates eight entries, each with identical titles, summaries, and dates. Unless the user is an experienced one, he would not know the difference between each of the links presented. Furthermore, the navigation through all the information pertaining to the bill is done by way of selecting one of the eight search result entries, which presents selection confusion and a considerable delay in research time.

Each piece of legislation introduced in Congress amasses an impressive amount of trail documents as it goes through the processes of being approved or getting rejected. It is nothing short of amazing how both THOMAS and LexisNexis can track, report on, and maintain all this information up to date. Both resources are fairly comprehensive in their coverage offering the

following in terms of information: titles, full text, CRS summary and index terms, sponsors and cosponsors, committees, timeline of congressional actions, reports, related bills, and amendments. It must be noted that LexisNexis bill tracking feature seems to offer better coverage of the congressional actions associated with each bill. For example, for H.R. 6028, THOMAS indicates that the last action took place on June 11, 2008 when it was received and read in the Senate, and referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations. LexisNexis further reveals that since that date there have been four remarks entered by different representatives of the House supporting the bill. While they are not considered major actions, they do offer valuable information on arguments in favor or against a bill, as well as provide background on congressmen records.

By far the biggest difference between the offerings of both services is the availability of related resources they offer. LexisNexis offers numerous links to the wealth of information related to Congress such as records and rules, members and committees, regulations, legislative histories, U.S. history sources, legislative information by states, statistical information, and political news from several publications (i.e. The Washington Post, The Hill, and Roll Call). This last feature can be useful to search for background or for different opinions on current political topics or proposed legislation. THOMAS' main page also offers links to a variety of resources, all by the government, that include several of the ones LexisNexis offers in addition to current congressional activities and calendars and learning sections on other aspects of government.

All in all it is hard to justify having a paid subscription to LexisNexis Congressional Universe when THOMAS offers the same results for free. Other factors influencing the decision

to use THOMAS over LexisNexis are its revamped cleaner design, and its intuitive interface which makes research, even to the most inexperienced users, a cinch. LexisNexis is a powerful tool in a researcher's arsenal but it involves a substantial learning curve. Regardless of how much information a service has, it can remain unused if users do not know about it, or worse, cannot figure out how to retrieve information from the system. LexisNexis' superiority to THOMAS is limited to its availability of historical congressional records and publications, and its offering of different resources without leaving the system. However, these two aspects are not enough to justify the cost investment in LexisNexis unless it is being purchased by a school or an institution that can specifically benefit from such features. Otherwise, THOMAS does a great job of providing the user with a wealth of free information.

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