

Internet service is keeping the first verbatim archive of Legislature's debates

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JEFFERSON CITY Members of the Missouri Trial Attorneys Association can get a taste of the state Senate even though the legislative session is over.

With a computer, a sound card and a password, they can click on the association's Web site and listen to the Senate's debate from March 2. The topic: allowing jury trials in state discrimination cases that now can be heard only by judges.

In one exchange, Sen. Sarah Steelman, R-Rolla, says that while big business may oppose the bill, protecting a person's right to trial by jury is the true conservative stance.

"You made that up," responds Sen. Bill Kenney, R-Kansas City. "Who says that?"

Stelman shoots back: "Maybe you should consult the Constitution

of the United States."

Linda Simon, the group's executive director, says the audio clips have been surprising for members who underestimated the political obstacles the group faces in the Capitol.

"Members have said, 'What do you mean, you can't pass that bill?' It lets them know the reason," Simon says.

While live audio from the Legislature has been available on the Missouri radio network's Web site for three years, this year is a watershed for public access. For one thing, the Legislature itself provided free live service. And second, Missouri is keeping a complete archive.

It will be the first time the debates have been preserved in full. The journals printed by each chamber simply state the motions made and amendments offered; no verbatim transcript or summary of argu-

On the Internet

The journalism school Web site is www.mdn.org

Missourinet's Web site is www.missourinet.org

The General Assembly can be found through the Missouri House Web site at www.house.state.mo.us/home.htm

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ments is included.

Learfield Interactive, a branch of the company that owns Missouri radio network's Web site, came up with the archiving idea after the Legislature decided to offer the debates for free. To provide a unique service, Learfield decided to help its \$500-a-year online subscribers — such as the trial attorneys group — set up links to audio clips of interest.

Steve Mays, who heads the service for Learfield, says there's a niche market for the material. "While nobody cares about all of

this stuff, there's always somebody who cares about some of it."

Another free service is available through the University of Missouri School of Journalism. It has begun offering a stereo high-fidelity quality version of the debates. That allows radio stations to rebroadcast legislative highlights. The Missouri Press Association and Missouri Broadcasters Association are partners in that effort.

Making political ads out of the clips could be the next logical step. Daryl Duwe of the Missouri Republican Party said he has heard of no one planning that. But he predicted the idea would take off fast once people realize the technology is available.

Some legislators seem oblivious to their voices going beyond the marbled chambers. Others admit they keep it in mind.

"When I want to tease somebody, I hook the mike down here," says

Sen. Franc Flotron, R-Chesterfield, pointing to a spot low on his lapel where his voice would barely be picked up. "I think it's the wrong message for us to send to be overtly silly" to strangers listening from who-knows-where.

The performances are not a box-office hit yet. The Legislature's Web site, which can accommodate 1,000 users at a time, never had more than 240 concurrent listeners, says Cliff Gronauer, House director of information services.

While there's a slight delay between the time a word is spoken and it's heard on the Internet, that stems from the time it takes the sound to travel from the third-floor chamber to the Capitol basement and be converted to a digital sound-stream.

"We don't have somebody with a button waiting to bleep" censored words, Gronauer says. "It's merely a technology delay."

Missouri is one of 22 states providing Internet access to its debates, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Some do more: South Carolina has closed captioning, Nebraska includes a daily video clip and some states keep archived records online.

Missouri officials are studying adding closed-captioning next year. Mike Benzen, the state's computer chief, said officials will determine a cost estimate for that feature and then see if legislators want to pursue it.

Other features would make the service more consumer-friendly. For example, unless you're familiar with the Capitol, you won't know who's speaking. They are identified only by the presiding officer's query to "the gentleman from St. Louis County" or "the senator from the 14th." The latter refers to the senatorial district number.