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Authors	Whelan, Darius
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Moving statutes captured on disk

Review: Darius Whelan welcomes a new legal CD

Irish Times, 1 February 1999

Irish Statute Book on CDRom, Government Publications, £20

Governments around the world have been making enormous quantities of useful information available in electronic form, and the Irish government has been catching up slowly but surely. The Irish State's usage of electronic publishing techniques has increased over the past few years and the publication of Irish legislation on CD-Rom at a reasonable price is welcome. It was a daunting task - converting 42,000 pages of print, which occupies 4.5 metres of shelf space, into one disk.

Release 1 includes the full text of all Acts of the Oireachtas passed between 1922 and 1997 as originally enacted, in their English language versions (with some exceptions). The CD-Rom was produced after a tendering process by the Attorney General's office in 1997. Nine tenders were received and the contract was awarded to Juta and Company of South Africa. Release 2 will include the English language versions of all Acts and all Statutory Instruments up to the end of 1998, together with the Chronological Tables of this legislation. The total cost of the project will be (pounds) 824,000.

The CD-Rom comes with a well-written information booklet and guide. A telephone support service and the email address of the British office of Juta are provided. The installation runs smoothly in stand-alone mode although network installation is also possible. There is an animated tutorial to guide the user through the basic features of the product. If a person takes the time to learn how to use the database, it is possible to view each Act, conduct basic or advanced searches, make annotations, tag records and create user bookmarks, highlighters and jump links. However, first-time users might be confused by the cluttered layout and the idiosyncrasies of the design.

The search facilities work well on the CD-Rom. The user can search for an exact phrase, or use various Boolean operators (e.g. a search for "marriage or divorce"). There are two query templates especially for the Irish Acts database, which allow searches for a section within an Act or for an Act by title.

The Acts can also be viewed on the Web, by following a link from the Attorney General's office website at www.irlgov.ie/ag/ The link leads to part of Juta's website, a site which responds very slowly. The Web version needs testing and improvement. The opening page refers to the animated tutorial which I was not able to run either in Netscape or Internet Explorer, both browsers being unable to suggest a plug-in which might help. In the absence of

this tutorial, we are referred to very general help files on the Folio Views software which do not help us easily to begin using the Web version of the Irish Acts.

This CD-Rom will obviously be welcomed by the legal community. The first batch sold out very quickly and apparently the Law Society has asked about the possibility of obtaining 2,000 copies for solicitors.

As this is Release 1, it is to be assumed that the product will improve in subsequent releases. It will be particularly important to see up-to-date Chronological Tables of legislation being included, as in the meantime the printed Chronological Tables need to be consulted to check amendments. Eventually the State may produce periodic revised versions of legislation, so that amendments will be incorporated into the original texts. It is also possible that court judgments will be made available on the Web in the future, as a sample judgment was placed at the website of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform in early 1998.

Darius Whelan (d.whelan@ucc.ie) is a lecturer in law at University College Cork