



Hansard in the Age of AI and New Media: Challenges, Prospects, and a Path to Enduring Relevance

Nana Agyemang-Prempeh, Reporter II
(Committee Reporting Office), Parliament of Ghana

CHEA-AR

11th Biennial Conference of the Commonwealth Hansard Editors Association (CHEA-AR)

Alisa Hotel, Ridge
Accra, Ghana

Wednesday, 13th August, 2025



Introduction: The Conclusion of the Matter...



Central Question: How can Hansard maintain its relevance as the official record of parliamentary proceedings in the face of the exhilarating advancements in AI and pluralism of new media as a strategy in charting the future of Hansard across the African Commonwealth?

A Key Issue: As Parliaments across the globe are progressing toward greater openness, transparency, and engagement with the public, how does Hansard deal with the threat of misinformation and disinformation?

Core Argument: Hansard must evolve beyond its traditional functions by adopting AI technologies to create interactive and engaging public interfaces **through the development of new, value-added products** that will support open parliament initiatives, bolster participatory democracy, and combat false information.

A New Opportunity: Through inter- and intra-parliamentary collaborations, Commonwealth African Hansard editors and practitioners can leverage AI-assisted value-added products to generate internal funds (IGF) and thus, justify our call for sustained funding and greater recognition.

Paper's Objective: To attempt to proffer workable ideas for ensuring Hansard's continued importance in an expanding digital landscape as a strategy to expand our frontiers beyond the status quo.

The Evolution of Hansard: From Secrecy to a Symbol of Transparency

Early Days: A Banned Product

Before 1771, it was a punishable offense to publish any account of parliamentary debates.

Editors resorted to publishing debates of fictitious societies to avoid prosecution. Notable was Dr Samuel Johnson's *Debates in the Senate of Magna Lilliputia* in the *Gentleman's Magazine*.

With time, public pressure and calls for press freedom led to the lifting of the ban around 1771.

The Hansard Legacy

In 1774, Luke Hansard began publishing officially sanctioned accounts of debates from the British Parliament.

By 1889, the name **"Hansard"** had become synonymous with the official parliamentary record due to the professional and impartial work of the Hansard family's printing firm.

Though the name was briefly dropped in 1909, it was reinstated in 1943 and is now adopted across the Commonwealth as a symbol of legislative transparency.

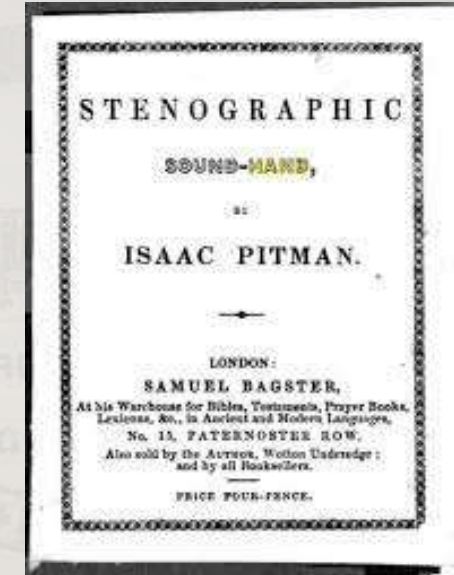
Technological Evolution: From Quills to QWERTY and AI

❑ FROM MANUAL TO MECHANICAL

Quill & Ink: Early records were summaries, not verbatim accounts.

Shorthand: The growing public interest demanded more comprehensive records, making skills like Pitman Shorthand essential for reporters.

Typewriters & Stenography: These tools made the process less strenuous and reduced production time.



ISAAC PITMAN
PUBLISHED THE
STENOGRAPHIC
SOUND-HAND IN 1837
IN LONDON AT THE
PRINTING FIRM OF
SAMUEL BAGSTER,
WHICH PUBLICATION
INTRODUCED THE
PITMAN SHORTHAND
BASED ON PHONETICS





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❑ THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION



Audio Recording: Provided a crucial backup, allowing reporters to verify accuracy and fill in details.



Computers & Internet: The transition to digital formats in the early 2000s streamlined transcription, editing, and storage, and enabled online publication with powerful search functions.



AI and Respeaking Technology: Technologies like AI-driven Speech-to-Text and Respeaking are now further accelerating the transcription process, though not yet fully adopted in many African Parliaments.

THE EVOLUTION OF HANSARD IS A HISTORY WELL-DOCUMENTED AND KNOWN AMONG HANSARD PRACTITIONERS, RESEARCHERS, AND CSOs WITH A HEART FOR PARLIAMENT AND PARLIAMENTARY BUSINESS

BUT, A QUICK OBSERVATION...

❑ SOCIO-POLITICAL EVOLUTION



❑ TECHNOLOGICAL EVOLUTION



❑ ECONOMIC EVOLUTION



While my advocacy is not on commercialising the Hansard itself as a document, which of course would be a drawback on the gains of an open and transparent Parliament, and the ease of access to the public, my argument is that we can derive very useful and critical products from the vast amount of data that we produce in the Hansard everyday, which with the blessings of the House, and the tool of AI, could be monetised in a way to generate some of the much needed funds for our operations.

The AI Nexus: Quantum Leaps and Lingerings Shadows

- ❑ AI is increasingly transforming the entire production process of Hansards globally.
- ❑ The most recent frontier involves the use of Natural Language Models such as Speech-to-Text, which can automatically transcribe audio recordings into text
- ❑ However, while these models have significantly reduced the initial transcription workload, they still require considerable time for editors to check for accuracy, especially with accents, interjections, or complex terminology, as most of these models are used in their general functionality and are not customised to parliamentary language.
- ❑ The Question of Speed and Accuracy? **MORE ACCURACY NOW THAN EVER!**

❑ INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION'S INDEX OF PARLIAMENTARY USE CASES FOR AI

- In the publication of the September 2024 Index of Parliamentary Use Cases, the **Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)** shared some insights on **Use Cases for AI in Parliament**, highlighting the growing integration of **AI** in parliamentary functions.
- It brought to the fore the increasing use of AI for transcription and translation, managing records of debates, and subtitling video content.
- For example:



Estonia's Parliament automates stenography



Italy's Senate leverages AI for translating documents



Finland's Parliament uses AI to summarise documents and create podcast audio



Brazil's Chamber of Deputies uses AI to transcribe audio and video files.



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HOW CAN WE HELP OUR PARLIAMENTS?



Generate Concise

Summaries: Use AI to automatically summarize key arguments and decisions from long debates, improving digestibility for the public and policymakers.

Legislative Drafting

Assistance: AI could help generate initial drafts of legislation based on the text of Hansard.

Opportunities for AI in Commonwealth African Parliaments

Sentiment Analysis: Use AI to analyse the mood of debates by tracking the sentiment expressed by speakers, which can provide deeper insights for procedural officers and even aid in judicial interpretation of legislation.

Semantic Search: Use AI to create semantic search functionalities in archival Hansard portals to allow users to search for concepts and relationships within the Hansard, not just keywords, for more nuanced research.



Key Challenges for AI Adoption in African Parliamentary Reporting



The Digital Divide: A significant technology gap exists in the ability to absorb, adapt, and improve upon imported technologies. According to an article written by Ralph Mathekga and published online on 27th June, 2024 by GIS Reports Online, African countries remain the least integrated into the digital economy worldwide, despite measurable improvements in some jurisdictions such as South Africa. He argues that many African states are still rolling out 4G networks, with only 14 countries that have deployed 5G

Financial Constraints: Hansard divisions rely on government-allocated service-based budgets, making it difficult to autonomously procure innovative digital systems.

Training and Capacity: Linked to the digital divide challenge is the problem of low training and capacity of Hansard staff to effectively adapt to and use new and innovative AI tools to enhance their work. This makes it very difficult to harness the full potential of AI for the benefit of Hansard.

Cybersecurity: As systems become more interconnected, the risk of cyber threats to parliamentary data, including those targeting AI algorithms, increases. The main challenge is when the Parliament is not able to put in place any robust cybersecurity infrastructure to counter.

Ethical Concerns and the Redundancy Threat: Increasingly, one critical aspect worth considering is the potential of AI to make people less critical in thinking and thereby making them overly reliant on the digital tool without much mind work going into the output or final product. This sometimes, goes against the ethical use of AI. Closely akin to this is the threat of redundancy, as it is feared that the predominance and pervasiveness of AI in the work of producing the Hansard could bring about massive redundancies and retrenchment for Hansard staff who do not upgrade or adapt quickly in response to the changing dynamics brought on by these new digital tools.



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The New Media Challenge: A Monopoly Questioned?



Access to Parliament and its debates and proceedings has been expanded beyond what was traditionally made possible by the publication of the Hansard. This has arisen through live and real-time streaming of House sittings, plenary and committees, on television, over the internet, and via popular and most-visited social media platforms.

❑ THE NEW MEDIA ADVANTAGE:

Immediacy: The public can now access live-streamed parliamentary proceedings on platforms like YouTube and Facebook, long before the official Hansard is published. What it also means is that the public no longer has to wait for many hours or sometimes days, for the Hansard to get approved before it is published online for their access.

Accessibility: New media offers instant access and powerful archival search functions that respond to queries with supersonic speed, which is usually more dynamic and user-friendly for persons interested in accessing information on parliamentary proceedings and debates than traditional Hansard online archival search outputs.

- Some new media platforms, such as YouTube, also feature Closed Captions or subtitles that do text transcription of the video content, albeit to a very limited extent of accuracy, but, of course, this can also be improved over time.



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❑ THE HANSARD ADVANTAGE

While new media contribute immensely to expanding access to Parliamentary proceedings and debates beyond what was traditionally made possible by the publication of the Hansard, its pluralism, combined with the manipulation of the algorithmic biases of generative AI, creates a fertile ground for misinformation, disinformation, and deep fakes that can distort parliamentary proceedings.

Herein lies a more compelling argument for the need to sustain the relevance of Hansard:

In the dilemma of whether a particular decision on a tax policy or the government's budget was approved or rejected, as it happened in the case of Ghana's Hung Parliament, the only answer lies in the procedural and editorial integrity, as well as the substantive accuracy of the record as reflected in the Hansard.

Thus, it is the Hansard that would come to the defence of Parliament if someone decides to put a spin on the ruling of the Speaker or on a statement made by an Hon Member in a deliberate attempt to misinform or disinform the public.

❑ **YET A LINGERING QUESTION...CAN WE DO MORE?**

CAN WE GO AHEAD OF THE TRAIN AND NIP THE TIDE OF MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION IN THE BUD, AND PLACE OUR PARLIAMENTS ABOVE REPROACH?





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THE QUESTION OF THE BIGGER-THAN-LIFE GUY

That answer, most certainly, would go beyond our procedural and editorial integrity, as well as our substantive accuracy, to a more policy-driven approach to dealing with these societal monsters.

□ THE CALL

By the end of this conference, Commonwealth African Hansard Editors and reporters should chart a path for maintaining the traditional relevance of Hansard, and most importantly, develop strategies to expand its frontiers, leveraging the positive capabilities of AI and new media.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND KEY PROPOSALS

❑ RECOMMENDATION 1: INVEST IN HUMAN CAPITAL

- **Train Staff as Prompt Engineers:** Specialised training is non-negotiable to ensure Hansard officers can use the right AI tools effectively and ethically. Such a technical user-end training would build the capacity of Hansard officers to fully understand the thinking of AI to be able to adopt the right tool for the work, and feed the technology with the right queries and operational cues for the required output.
- **Establish Editorial Standards:** There is a strong need to create in-house standards for the use of AI to ensure quality and consistency. This would ensure the ethical and beneficial use of AI in fostering the public trust in our work, and by extension, our Parliaments.

❑ **RECOMMENDATION 2: INNOVATE AND DIVERSIFY PRODUCTS**

- **Hansard Bulletins/Newsletters:** Use AI to automatically analyse long parliamentary debates and generate concise summaries, identify key arguments, and extract critical decisions or policy points.
 - These can be published (generally online) weekly and issued on a subscription basis, especially to targeted groups and organisations with parliamentary research interests, thus creating a new revenue stream.
 - We can include QR codes or hyperlinks that redirect readers to the full, official Hansard record.
 - ✓ Inter-departmental collaboration is key in this endeavour.

❑ RECOMMENDATION 2: INNOVATE AND DIVERSIFY PRODUCTS **cont'd**

- **Hansard-Generated Research:** Highly informative research work, such as **Sentiment Analysis**, which deals with sentiments expressed by speakers on particular issues, providing insights into the mood of the debate, could be generated with high-powered large language models.
 - ✓ This valuable data can be sold to think tanks and academic researchers.
 - ✓ Judges and the courts can benefit greatly from this, as it would help with their interpretative jurisdiction (*Purposive interpretation: The Spirit of the Law*).
 - ✓ Thus, upon the passage of a Bill, such an analysis could be done with the debates and considerations and issued to the Judicial Service, as well as court-room practitioners for a fee.

❑ RECOMMENDATION 3: MONETIZE AND ENHANCE RELEVANCE

Paid Compilations for MPs: Encourage Members of Parliament to pay for customised compilations of their contributions to share with constituents.

- This provides a valuable resource for MPs to showcase their work and enhances the image of Parliament.

Generate Internal Funds (IGF): These initiatives can create a sustainable funding model for Hansard operations, as, for example, a Parliamentary Service Fund is being considered in Ghana.



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❑ RECOMMENDATION 4: INTER-DEPARTMENTAL COLLABORATION

- We can achieve this through inter-departmental collaboration:
 - ✓ ICT for training and capacity building, and cybersecurity.
 - ✓ We can leverage the initiative of the Media Relations Department: **Parliament in Review bulletin**, albeit not limited to the debates in the House.

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Conclusion: The Path to Enduring Relevance

The Challenge Has Shifted: The modern fight is not for the right to publish, but for relevance in a complex technological and media landscape.

Go Beyond the Traditional Role: Hansard must be more than just a record-keeper. It must proactively combat misinformation by being the unimpeachable source of truth.

Embrace AI Strategically: We must leverage AI to expand Hansard's frontiers, diversify its products, and chart a path toward financial sustainability.

The Ultimate Goal: By innovating, we enhance transparency, accessibility, and public participation in our legislative democracy.



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Thank you!