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Abstract

Parliamentary libraries' founding ideal is of unbounded rationality: Members making decisions using full information, aided by the library. This is assessed as a necessary myth projecting the modernity of the parliament and the value of the library. The standard narrative of parliamentary library history – that changing visions are responses to the needs of Members – is questioned. In reality, the library may not fulfil its idealized role and in any case it no longer signifies modernity. The myth has become a liability. An alternative paradigm of Members' information work is proposed based on the concept of bounded rationality and, in particular, the work of Gigerenzer on 'fast and frugal' decision-making. Rather than focusing on quality of information produced/delivered, parliamentary libraries should focus on quality of information actually used. Improving ease of access to information and focusing on specialist Members may have more impact than incremental improvements of product quality. Parliamentary libraries must also consider the growth in Members' support staff and adapt their marketing to a business-to-business model. A focus on core competences and their deployment in new areas of parliamentary information work is one vision for the future. The paper represents the personal views of the author and does not reflect the views of the European Parliament.

Keywords

parliamentary libraries, use of heuristics by politicians, use of information in political decision-making, history of parliamentary libraries, information history

Introduction

The parliamentary library is based on the ideals of the Enlightenment: to serve a curious and well-informed Member who uses reason and science to hold the executive to account and to contribute on legislative and policy issues. But while this vision may have been realizable in 1800 when the parliamentary library was born, is it any longer? The executive has grown in scale and in scope, covering many more issues in which policy choices and consequences are complex.¹ The populations represented are more numerous. Information has increased in volume, turnover and diversity of format and channel. Individual Members, by contrast, are not necessarily more numerous than in the assemblies of the 19th century.² Looked at simply, Members should be in a situation of gross task and information overload. How can they still be the fully-informed decision-makers of the 18th century

ideal? What relevance has a service that potentially *adds* information to the supposed overload?

The references in the paper lean very heavily to Westminster and, to a lesser extent, the US Congress and European Parliament. There appears to be little independent work published on *any* parliamentary libraries and there has, apparently, been "little investigation of information use as part of political decision-making".³ The research base is narrow and the conclusions must be provisional. The paper combines evidence from published works with operational knowledge from the European Parliament library.

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This has been supplemented by knowledge generously shared in the IFLA Section, where parliaments from around the world are represented. The discussion does not refer in particular to the European Parliament Library (unless specified) and the analysis is my responsibility, not that of the Section.

For convenience, in the paper 'parliamentary library' is used to signify the whole range of services provided by IFLA Section members *including the parliamentary research function and those styled as 'information' or 'documentation' services*. 'Member' is used throughout to refer to elected representatives. 'Assistant' is used as the title for the personal research staff of Members.

Whose 'changing visions'?

Change in parliamentary libraries seen as an internal process of parliaments

The 'changing visions' of the parliamentary library can be broadly summarized:

1. Origins: a 19th century book collection for the educated gentleman.⁴
2. From the late 19th century – the new scientific librarianship and 'documentation'.
3. From c.1914 – the development of reference services; and then, later, analytical and research services.⁵
4. From the 1960s/1970s – the use of computers to store and communicate information.
5. From the 1990s – web-based services; the decline of the book.

Histories of parliamentary libraries tend to present change as local adaptation to the needs of Members. This explanation is undeniable but it is not the whole story. The history of change is one of importing ideas and standards from elsewhere, not only spontaneous adaptation to local need.

The Assemblée Nationale in France had the first parliamentary library (1796) closely followed by the United States Library of Congress (1800), their origins in revolution and the Enlightenment.⁶ Since then, the library of the US Congress (and, later, others) have acted as references for adequacy, for what a modern institution requires.⁷ There is no universally-accepted method of measuring information service need, use, value or workload. So using benchmarks is a practical solution – but then the process is not a simple response to local need. For example, in 14 of the EU member states the parliamentary library was founded in the same year (or very shortly after) the parent institution came into its modern form.⁸ This suggests that the

library was created as a 'normal' attribute of a modern parliament; it cannot have been a response to Members' direct experience. One only has to look at some of the magnificent buildings of 19th century parliamentary libraries to get the message: 'this institution takes knowledge seriously', they are 'knowledge palaces'. But how much was this message aspiration, how much a reflection of daily work? Further, as a hypothesis based mainly on the UK history, the modernization of library services has been advocated forcefully by, at most, a few Members. There is little evidence of mass demand for reform based on practical experience.⁹ In the UK case, 1945 marked a turning point but interest mainly came from *newly-elected* Members. External experts appear regularly in the UK case as motive forces for improved library services, from the 1930s onwards.¹⁰ The developing body of parliamentary library professionals has also played an increasing part in reform worldwide.¹¹

Adaptation as an outcome of change in information management at societal level

The models for service development come also from the wider information world. The first parliamentary libraries emerged in a new age of information:

"It was during the age of reason and revolution, between roughly 1700 and 1850, that information . . . 'came of age'. During the Enlightenment new institutions, techniques and formats began to emerge, furthering knowledge and enhancing the storage and communication of information: the encyclopedia, the scientific academy, the salon . . . Existing elements of the information infrastructure – publishing activity and libraries for example – intensified and proliferated . . ." ¹²

The scientific parliamentary library of the late 19th century emerged from an information world where new technology was speeding transmission and proliferating formats – "Documentary chaos ensued. Contemporaries testified to the information overload of the time."¹³ Library science was one solution to this overload. This period saw also the rise of mass production and of large corporations – a 'second industrial revolution' "marked by a realization of the importance of scientific and technical knowledge to production, thereby enhancing the value of research and development and of information sources and services".¹⁴ In the United States this spawned new corporate and public information services that created the professional framework used by parliamentary libraries in the 20th century, beginning with the US Congress Legislative Reference Service set up in 1914. In Britain,

company libraries developed mainly after 1914. They tended to exist in new industries, where the library was often a prominent and expensive showpiece demonstrating the modernity of the company.¹⁵ They were also seen as practically useful, but

“the ‘output’ of early company libraries in respect of value added to corporate profits and efficiency could not be determined precisely. This did not concern the enterprises that pioneered company libraries. For them, the high utility of the company library, although not quantifiable, was unquestionable.”¹⁶

The use as a symbol of modernity; the willingness to accept a high cost and confidence in its value despite the lack of data on outcomes – this is reminiscent both of the grand 19th century parliamentary libraries and the more recent case of company websites. For the UK, the interest in a scientific approach to information seems to have peaked around 1945–1950 – precisely when complete reform of the House of Commons Library was proposed. Historically, the service visions of the modern parliamentary library have been established elsewhere.

The double life of the parliamentary library

In summary, parliamentary libraries have developed in part as *symbols* signifying that their institution is modern and properly informed. Further, the changing visions of the parliamentary library derive primarily from the wider world and from professionals, academics and a few parliamentarian reformers; and not directly from the practical and expressed needs of most Members. To stress: the argument is *not* that the parliamentary library has lacked real utility; rather that its utility and evolution has perhaps been something apart from the public myths. The myths have justified resources and innovation and in those terms can be seen as ‘necessary’.

Is ‘parliamentary library’ still a potent concept?

Is ‘library’ a powerful image of modernity for parliaments today?

If parliamentary libraries are founded on a myth, what happens when that myth loses potency? Does ‘library’ still signify modernity? One indication came when a new parliament was established in 1999:

“Those of us who were planning the research and information service...made a number of crucial decisions...First of all, we decided *not* to call it a library. There was no collection of books, no room

to house them...no suggestion that there would be a quiet atmosphere in which to study them. The emphasis was on speed, service, and innovation. We needed a brand; we needed to make an impact, and we needed to capture the imagination. SPICE, the Scottish Parliament Information Service, was born.”¹⁷

A far cry from the apparent confidence in ‘library’ of the 19th and earlier 20th century! With positive motives, it was consciously decided to *obscure* that the service was a form of library.¹⁸

If the library was the corporate website of the 19th and earlier 20th centuries, what is it in the 21st century? Parliamentary libraries, like other libraries are in

“a ubiquitous information environment, where information professionals and knowledge providers are no longer the dominant players nor, indeed, the supplier of first choice. Short of appropriate consumer theories, visions and a robust and appropriate evidence base there is a danger that the information professions are becoming increasingly rudderless and estranged from their users and paymasters. The warning signs are already there. Public libraries are in real trouble and academic libraries risk being decoupled from their user base as users continue to flee the physical space.”¹⁹

Parliamentary libraries have been less concerned with book collections and reading rooms than public or academic libraries but may still be affected by the decline of the ‘library’ concept. And it is doubtful if the research service component of ‘parliamentary library’ is immune to scepticism – as can be seen in the work of Wu discussed below.

Does practical performance compensate for loss of potency as a symbol?

If historically there was no *necessary* connection between library functions and the needs of most Members, then do they actually fulfil their supposed role? One survey of the available research reports: “Overall, such research as has been carried out paints a somewhat bleak picture of decreasing awareness and use of parliamentary library services, suggesting a growing gulf between service and user understandings of “need”, while users turn increasingly to a growing variety of alternative sources of information.”²⁰ Another observer summarizes the ideal model of parliamentary research:

“This model is simple: a problem first exists, and then researchers study the problem and come up with

compelling, empirical findings. Members . . . in turn, construct a public policy to deal with the problem on the basis of these empirical findings. The result is a policy moulded by the preceding scientific analysis.”²¹

Wu argues that, for the US Congress, the model lacks evidence to support it – he claims that “Instead, there is widespread agreement that the research findings that go to Congress hardly have a direct impact on public policy outcomes.”²² Wu suggests that research products are used mainly when they reinforce an existing political position. He summarizes his explanation for why research does not make the intended impact:

“Congress usually does not apply scientific knowledge in the making of public policy because: first, members of Congress are more interested in adopting policies that will help them get re-elected than policies that conform to standards of rationality and efficiency; second, bargaining, compromise and the reconciliation of political interests are a necessary part of the legislative process; and, lastly, members of Congress favour popular conceptions of causal logic. Policy-oriented research, in turn, does not compel legislators to adopt a certain alternative because research findings are often ambiguous, inconclusive, incongruous and even contradictory to other research findings.”²³

It is important to stress that Wu presents no original evidence for lack of impact. His paper relies on earlier studies which would themselves require review before accepting his conclusions²⁴. Discussion in the IFLA Section indicated that it is difficult to trace impact, let alone measure it, even with inside knowledge that library information has been used. With regard to the Congressional Research Service (CRS) in particular, it is understood that they aim to perform a consultative role throughout the deliberative process. It is not simply a question of isolated research reports on a topic but a dialogue with individual Members in which information is delivered as needed to clarify options throughout the process. The impact of a (confidential and extended) dialogue might be difficult to assess even for the participants. So how external academic researchers can accurately determine impact is unclear. But the fact that Wu can even propose the argument is itself an indicator: if the oldest and probably the most powerfully-equipped parliamentary library does not make an impact that is clear and indisputable, if it does not unequivocally fulfil the ideal role, what chance for the rest?

Towards an alternative paradigm for members' use of information

The traditional paradigm: unbounded rationality

The ideal Member served by the ideal parliamentary library is a vision that seems to be melting into air after two hundred years of post-Enlightenment life. Can we reconsider the question of how, really, Members work with information? Writing of libraries in general, Nicholas et al make the accusation: “information professionals have been bleating on about ‘users’ since time immemorial, but they have not really made that much progress in understanding them, certainly not their behaviour at the coal-face”.²⁵ Parliamentary libraries may have a better understanding of their clients but this is not a time for complacency.

That modern Members face information overload is a commonplace amongst information professionals.²⁶ (Curiously, neither Members nor political scientists say much about it. They speak of *time pressure* as the critical problem – which is not the same thing).²⁷ But information overload is not new in human evolutionary terms or in the historical case of Members.²⁸ The problem stands out now because of the volume of information which, *in the context of a belief in full-information decision-making*, appears unmanageable. One study of Members summarizes this full-information model:

“A decision-making process is a course of action or procedure that results in a formal judgement or choice being reached. For this to be possible, choices or options must be provided from which selection can be made. The ability to evaluate or choose from options is underpinned by access to accurate, reliable and comprehensive information about the choices available. It is essential that decision makers have access to information that is free of bias and/or that reflects the full range of opinion existing. The transformation of information about these options into knowledge or intelligence is central to the effectiveness of the decision-making process. [It is contended that] the quality of the decision relies upon the quality of the information available.”²⁹

It assumes that a rational political decision can be reached only by comprehensive information gathering and analysis. But as the lead author (Marcella) herself noted in a later study, it is impossible to achieve this for all decisions: “Many of those in parliament do not know what they need to know, *cannot possibly know everything that they need to know*, and frequently cannot predict what they will need tomorrow or next week” [emphasis added].³⁰ Wu describes

“members of Congress who are flooded with scientific data, research findings and cost-benefit analyses from the support agencies, from the executive branch, from various interest groups and independent research institutes, and from epistemic communities and academic world, on almost every imaginable policy issue.”³¹ Is it feasible for parliamentarians to deal with that flood and to work according to the unboundedly rational model? Is it even how they *should* work? Do we require them to be scientists or to be representatives who can reach good decisions in good time?

An alternative paradigm: bounded rationality

In the field of economic theory Herbert Simon developed the concept of ‘bounded rationality’ as a model of decision-making. One of the leading followers of Simon’s work is Gerd Gigerenzer.³² Gigerenzer, writing with Selten, summarizes that “models of bounded rationality...dispense with the fiction of optimization, which in many real-world situations demands unrealistic assumptions about the knowledge, time, attention, and other resources available to humans”.³³ They argue that it is “possible that simple and robust heuristics can match or even outperform a specific optimizing strategy”.³⁴ Information is the critical issue:

“A key process in bounded rationality is limited search. Whereas in models of unbounded rationality all relevant information is assumed to be available already, real humans and animals need to search for information first. Search can be for two kinds of information: [for] alternatives....and [for] cues (that is, for reasons and predictors when deciding between given alternatives). Search can be performed inside the human mind (memory) or outside it (e.g. library, internet, other minds). Internal search costs time and attention, and external search may cost even further resources, such as money. Limited resources constrain institutions, humans, animals, and artificial agents, and these limitations usually conflict with the ideal of finding a procedure to arrive at the optimal decision.”³⁵

Gigerenzer and Selten argue that “contrary to conventional wisdom, limitations of knowledge and computational capability need *not* be a disadvantage”.³⁶ Taking ‘cues’ from the environment, people can use simple decision rules to reach a useful conclusion. Complete information optimizing may take too much time, and be achieved too late for a decision – “Simplicity, by contrast, can enable fast, frugal, and accurate decisions”.³⁷ Bounded rationality is not necessarily less rational than unbounded rationality. Significantly, these ‘fast and frugal’ methods are not

universal but depend on knowledge of particular environments.³⁸

Gigerenzer and Selten describe three typical processes of bounded rationality models:

“1. *Simple search rules*. The process of search is modelled on step-by-step procedures, where a piece of information is acquired, or an adjustment is made...and the process is repeated until it is stopped.

2. *Simple stopping rules*. Search is terminated by simple stopping rules, such as to choose the first object that satisfies an aspiration level. The stopping rule can change as a consequence of the length of search or other information...Simple stopping rules do not involve optimization calculations...

3. *Simple decision rules*. After search is stopped and a limited amount of information has been acquired, a simple decision rule is applied, like choosing the object that is favored by the most important reason – rather than trying to compute the optimal weights for all reasons, and integrating these reasons in a linear or nonlinear fashion...”³⁹

The search process “distinguishes two classes of models of bounded rationality: those that search for alternatives (e.g. aspiration level theories such as satisficing...) and those that search for cues (e.g. fast and frugal heuristics...)”.⁴⁰ The term ‘fast and frugal’ in this paper therefore refers to one type of bounded rationality.

Gigerenzer and Selten summarize that simple heuristics work because they

“can exploit structures of information in the environment. That is, their rationality is a form of ecological rationality, rather than of consistency and coherence. A second reason is the robustness of simple strategies compared to models with large numbers of parameters, which risk overfitting. Third, there are real-world situations involving multiple goals (e.g. accuracy, speed, frugality, consistency, accountability) that have no known common denominator, which poses serious problems to optimization, but can be handled by models of bounded rationality”.⁴¹

Relevance of ‘bounded rationality’ to information issues in parliaments

Gigerenzer uses ‘search’ in a broad sense but his description has parallels in the description of the information search methods of Members and Assistants – if we ignore the negative interpretations placed on them:

“users are relatively easily satisfied with any information on a subject that will serve a short-term,

uncritical need, the primary concern being that it is swiftly and easily achieved. Searchers will often seek information that will suffice, rather than a comprehensive or rounded view of an issue.”⁴²

A more positive interpretation of this behaviour is possible. *If* these Members and Assistants have a good understanding of their political environment, *then* they may be able to use poor or limited information – and be aware of its poor quality – but still reach a ‘good-enough’ decision. Professionals see what they consider poor quality searches and results but they lack the environmental knowledge to understand the process in the same way as the Assistant or Member. This is not to deny the existence of major information literacy challenges in parliaments, as elsewhere. It is only to suggest that the issue is not as clear-cut as it might seem for library professionals.

Environmental knowledge is part of the professional differentiation of the Member:

“Members of Parliament possess a special and important body of knowledge and apply this knowledge in their political work: knowledge about rules of the game (both constitutional and parliamentary); detailed knowledge about political ideologies (complex goals and the most effective means to reach those goals); and very considerable knowledge about...parliamentary roles... These are the principal components of Westminster’s political culture which is not, in anything like its fully developed form, acquired by anyone besides members of Parliament.”⁴³

Wu notes that scientific research raises the level of debate: “scientific research has a... subtle, indirect, and cumulative effect on congressional policy by changing the way legislators and their staffs look at the world, by setting the terms of debate, by transforming the way problems are identified and addressed, and by altering the very nature of legislation”.⁴⁴ This refers in part to giving cues to reduce the number of options considered; and also in part to improved environmental understanding. Both can impact positively on the quality of decisions.

Bounded rationality appears much closer to what is known of Members’ and Assistants’ working styles than a model of ‘unbounded rationality’. We might expect that they have a repertoire of approaches including that of ‘full information’ and the ‘fast and frugal’. The latter supposes that they use limited information, their own knowledge and some cues from the environment to reach a decision. The cues might be e.g. “what are the Members who are expert in this field saying”; “what is the political party research on this”; “how would this policy position

look in the tabloid press/in my constituency”; the views of personal contacts, trusted NGOs or experts; media commentaries. Is “political instinct” just a good understanding of their environments and heuristics to identify what is politically viable or advantageous?

I have not, so far, traced any studies of individual parliamentarians that discuss this fast and frugal model. There are some related references in other areas of political science. The first case discusses a model of political decision-making which

“presumes that the government is able to evaluate the entire range of policies... In the fields of political science and cognitive science, an increasing body of research has led to believing that this assumption cannot be realistic... First of all, budgetary procedures involve a broad array of expenditures, which implies a quasi-infinite number of possible policies. Second... governments usually make use of reference sources [which are complex documents, so that]... evaluating the consequences of a single policy proves in itself a costly process in terms of time spent... Third, many experimental results from the psychological literature show that human beings have a tendency to use heuristics (i.e. easily learnt and applied procedures) when dealing with complex problems, complex decisions, or incomplete information.”⁴⁵

The second refers to studies of foreign policy decisions by politicians:

“potentially a very lengthy decision-making process is simplified dramatically by eliminating all those options that are... ill-advised [in terms of domestic politics]. They are not even considered as potential decisions. Whatever options are left... are then examined through a number of heuristic processes that narrow the choices until a course of action is chosen”⁴⁶

Lost in the myth?

We arrive at what appears a bleak conclusion for parliamentary libraries. They owe their existence in part to being a symbol of modernity but that symbolic power is waning. They are exposed to external trends over which they have little control, so are they anyway free to have a ‘vision’ of their own? The research function faces a claim that it has made little direct impact on policy outcomes. They ostensibly exist because decision-making should properly be driven by scientific information but there is a shortage of conclusive scientific evidence of their own value!⁴⁷

They are founded on a model of Member behaviour that was probably never valid and appears superseded. The parliamentary library presenting a balanced and comprehensive portfolio of scientific information is not *necessarily* part of a fast and frugal decision-making world. Where do parliamentary library managers go from here?

Beyond the myth: developing a new agenda for parliamentary libraries?

Adapting to the bounded rationality model

For some, the bounded rationality model may be a liberation. Within the myth of full-information decision-making, 'sub-optimal' information processes were perceived as a problem for clients to which a solution had to be found; and their existence was a failure of the library. If those frugal processes are understood as both inevitable and (sometimes/often) superior then libraries are released to accept the clients for what they are (what they must be). Limited use of library services is not a failure, and an expensive research report that is read by only one or two people can be excellent value for money. Libraries can pull back from trying (or pretending) to serve all Members with all things and concentrate on where they can actually make an impact.

Members and their offices deal with a vast range of information problems. The approach to these problems can range as illustrated in the scale below, but time pressure prevents all decisions being made with 'full information'.

'full information'	informed frugal	'fast and frugal'	'own knowledge'
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Those topics located further left in the scale should be more promising for uptake of research or information services. The approach will vary in part according to the perceived importance of the topic – impact, public profile, contentiousness etc. Specialist Committee issues may receive more time. Carey reports work by Gilligan and Krehbiel on the US Congress that offers one explanation for this:

“individual legislators are motivated to collect information on policies that improve outcomes for all in exchange for policy concessions on the margin that can be translated into personal electoral support. Committees serve as seed beds both of policy expertise and, via their control over the legislative agenda, of opportunities for their members to secure advantageous policies on the margin.”⁴⁸

It will also vary according to the style of the Member. A seminal analysis of Members by Searing identified four main informal roles for backbenchers: 'Policy Advocate', 'Ministerial Aspirant', 'Constituency Member', and 'Parliament Man'. These then divide into subtypes, which for Policy Advocate included 'Generalist' and 'Specialist'.⁴⁹ Policy Advocates are likely customers of library services and in the Westminster of the 1970s they accounted for around 40 percent of Members, two-thirds of them being 'Specialists'. The 'Specialists' “don't spend much time in the Chamber... they concentrate on research and leverage, on gathering information and then applying pressure behind the scenes...”.⁵⁰ The intelligence gathered is not primarily formal information: “While important books in the field are read, and research is done in the House of Commons Library, Specialists seek current and first-hand knowledge, much of which comes from contact with organizations and individuals outside Parliament” and “Contacts with key individuals in the field can be very useful too, particularly for collecting inside information”.⁵¹ This pattern is still familiar today.

If we adopt (or adapt) Searing's categorization then the assumption is that the *normal* market for information-rich products such as research reports is not 'all Members' but only a proportion of them. The proportion for specific topics will be much smaller again. The task of the library, then, becomes more precise: to identify 'Specialists' on a topic and ensure they receive the detailed information useful to them *and* presented in a way that is useful to them. This focuses resources where they will get results rather than dissipating them in trying to deliver a specialist product to suit all Members.

To serve Members adopting the 'fast and frugal' route on an issue there appear several options. One is to target the 'pathfinders' such as specialist Members. This should have a ripple effect as Specialist Members are likely guides for others. The notion is similar to the concept of 'information gatekeepers' but with the variation that they do not distribute information but rather give cues for decisions. By keeping specialists well-informed the quality of decision-making *in general* may be raised. In parliaments (or committees within them) where turnover of membership is high then Member expertise does not develop⁵² – so presumably there are fewer cues, making for a more difficult information environment. The second obvious group of pathfinders is the political party research apparatuses which in some parliaments may be another important source of signals. The CRS concept of consultancy to individual Members is one method of clarifying options (but it is resource

intensive, possibly even for the Member). Another option is publishing research reports so the salient points may reach Members through the mass media – the story of parliamentary research on ‘Echelon’ is one, probably accidental, example of how this can work.⁵³ Libraries may also produce ‘briefings’ rather than research studies – defining briefings as short summaries of the literature with known policy options and stakeholder positions clearly and concisely presented. This offers what, apparently, Members want – a guide which they can quickly assimilate and fit with other knowledge to reach a conclusion. As one study on information research in a parliament noted:

“For political group advisors and MEPs’ assistants, volume was significant, with a vague sense of what this desired volume might be – “comprehensiveness without volume”.

In the case of processed information which had been already analysed and synthesised, clarity and conciseness were also mentioned as important qualities, in particular where respondents must make a judgement on very complex issues...”.⁵⁴

It is striking that lobby groups’ communication of information is often in clear language; concise; and with a graphical presentation that encourages reading and highlights key points. The products of parliamentary research services, by contrast, tend to be drafted in an academic style and to be conservative in their graphical presentation. Are lobby groups wasting their time or do they know their readers better? Is making something easy and attractive to read necessarily ‘dumbing-down’? *What value has high-quality content if it is not actually read or used?*

There is also an indirect route for the library to improve the quality of information in decision-making. The bounds put on search are not fixed – if the cost/benefit of search is improved then it may be expanded. The critical point in this resource decision is *not* necessarily intrinsic information *quality* – understandably the professional focus of parliamentary libraries – but how *easy* it is to get the information and to process it for decision. Client research in the European Parliament points to ease of use and speed of response as critical. The *perceived* transaction costs (in time) of using the library are a major barrier to potential users testing the service. For actual clients, the *helpfulness of staff* is ranked first as the reason for using the service, ahead of quality of information and other factors. Frequently, in today’s environment, clients call on libraries only when their own methods fail. If they are (fancifully) considered to be on the ‘information superhighway’, then the library is

the emergency breakdown service. Of course people in a crisis want reassurance and a friendly and fast response. But in parliamentary libraries, what level of management support or attention is given to daily person-to-person service or service processes compared with e.g. the management of research processes or of library resources? (Library staff are naturally helpful but this is not the same as an approach supported by the whole organization). Yet the quickest route to improving the quality of information *actually used* by Members may come from such measures. The priority could be to make access easier, faster and more user friendly – and ensuring that this is perceived by potential clients – rather than adding increments of quality to library products.

Current innovations in parliamentary libraries

Away from the myths, parliamentary libraries are busy innovating worldwide. A short catalogue based on contributions from members of the Section was presented at the IPU/ASGP/IFLA conference in Geneva.⁵⁵ In summary, the main components of innovation are:

1. Methods to understand Member needs as the basis for innovation.
2. Developing the capacity to change; fostering creativity and collaboration.
3. Improving practical quality of *service*, not just of *products*.
4. Increasingly customized information, with more attention to speed of delivery and ease of use.
5. Stronger marketing of the added-value in information quality that libraries give.
6. Improving access to information resources (in-house and external)
7. Enabling clients to help themselves – training in technology and information work.
8. Politically useful information – e.g. constituency data, media monitoring services.
9. The library and research functions are converging.
10. Integration of information work into parliamentary work processes.
11. Knowledge-sharing and communication roles – in-house and externally to citizens.
12. Mobile and audio/video services.
13. Contracting out of research; developing an in-house ‘intelligent client’.
14. Providing information for politics – (quality but not necessarily balance, on demand).

Many of these indicate an understanding of a more realistic role for parliamentary libraries.

In terms of change, we can add that the rise of Assistants in relatively recent history creates a new marketing environment. Libraries in general have customarily faced a market of individual consumers. It is indeed individuals who present themselves for service. But much of the time the parliamentary library is *not* really dealing with an *individual client*. Many Members are running an office of several staff. The Member is the equivalent to the owner of a small business with a more or less structured team working in it. Approaches to information search and processing are not decided by *individual* clients but as an outcome of how the business functions. If there is any doubt about the categorization as a kind of small business consider the case of the US Congress where a Representative may hire up to 18 full-time staff, typically organized in a developed structure.⁵⁶ The much smaller Members' offices at Westminster were subject to an observational study of information seeking behaviour:

"In the Case 1 office, staff meetings were not held and staff were not systematically apprised of information need. This style had drawbacks in that the strict demarcation of roles within the office may have hindered the flow of information. The office often felt hectic and pressurised and the lack of full-time staff was not conducive to the full exploration of information possibilities. The Case 2 office was characterised by its openness and by the manner in which the work in hand was discussed. Regular staff meetings were held which allowed for free discussion and delegation of the workload. Staff could develop a clear understanding of the information required and of the parameters of the search to be conducted."⁵⁷

Understanding this context would surely be important to effective service – it is not enough to know the individual client. Most marketing advice concerns *consumer* marketing but parliamentary libraries need also to consider *business-to-business* marketing methods. One significant difference is the emphasis on building long-term relationships with the buying organization (not just with the 'owner' but with others who influence 'buying' decisions) more than on advertising.

This understanding of a 'business' market indicates a weakness in the concept of the 'bookless parliamentary library'. In feedback within the European Parliament, library books are indeed sometimes disparaged as a product which simply is not relevant to daily parliamentary business. Yet book loans in the European Parliament have increased threefold in the last 10 years. Much of this individual use is by Assistants and can be classed as 'keeping up to date' and

'understanding the environment'. Such environmental scanning should facilitate better information decisions by Assistants. But the process is individual and not always seen as connected with the 'business'. The heads of business (Members) are more likely to perform environmental scanning through personal contacts and networks. Future development, presentation and justification of services can be more effective with this understanding of distinct 'business' and 'individual' market sectors.

A practical vision for an uncertain future

Any information business today can encounter abrupt, unexpected and fundamental change. But in developing a vision in the European Parliament Library in 2008/9 we concluded that we can secure future development on four anchors. None of these involve buildings; or collections; or particular technologies, services or products. It is a vision that puts people at its heart – Members, Assistants and the Library staff.

1. ***The mission: 'a well-informed parliament'*** – whatever that takes to achieve, without undue regard for traditional preconceptions and limits to what 'library' means.
2. ***Continuous learning about clients.***
3. ***The core competences*** (see Figure 1). The "daisy" in Figure 1 shows the critical areas of knowledge for the European Parliament Library. Individual elements are held by other units of the parliament also; it is the combination which is distinctive. This set of capabilities may not be relevant in other libraries but the exercise of identifying key capabilities might be. Recognizing them already gives a direction for the future: to hold, share and build these areas of knowledge within the library. As other parliaments demonstrate, the peculiar combination of skills can be used beyond library walls. It may be deployed externally in improving communication with citizens, as the Chilean parliamentary library has done using 'Facebook' as one tool. (This is arguably a new symbol of modernity – the 19th/20th century parliament demonstrated its commitment to involving scientific knowledge in decision-making by building libraries; the 21st century parliament demonstrates commitment to developing and involving the knowledge of citizens in decision-making). The bundle of competences can also be deployed internally to improve access to internal parliamentary information (as in some institutions) and to support a wider 'knowledge management' agenda.



Figure 1.

Although we did not use their work as a direct source, the 'daisy' approximates to the notion of 'core competence' put forward by Hamel and Prahalad.⁵⁸ For them, a "competence is a bundle of skills and technologies rather than a single discrete skill or technology... [It] represents the sum of learning across individual skill sets and individual organizational units".⁵⁹ This bundle must be integrated: "A core competence is a tapestry, woven from the threads of distinct skills and technologies".⁶⁰ To be a *core* competence for Hamel and Prahalad it must offer some specific advantages and especially it should offer routes to new products, new product markets and to the markets of the future.⁶¹ For the European Parliament Library, this focus on competences gives a long term perspective in a time of rapid change.

4. **The values and the way we work.** This is the heart of the 'daisy' presented above. Without social integration of staff to hold the parts together; organizational and individual capacity to change successfully; ways of working that meld the areas of knowledge and realize creativity – then the library cannot function and has no basis for the future. Many skills and areas of

knowledge can be hired quickly but one cannot quickly replace integration, trust, common ways of working, group creativity or a sense of common purpose. For the Library of the European Parliament, holding on to values and ways of working and ensuring their transmission to new staff – even through periods of intense change – are *the* critical tasks for the future.

While anchored on these four points, the service must (paradoxically) show agility as well as resilience and opportunism in finding ways and places to add value and connect with customers.

Conclusion

Parliamentary libraries are lively places constantly innovating to engage with the real work of Members. But they work around a dead heart – the foundation myth of the scientific Member and decision-making based on unbounded rationality. This myth pervades discussion of parliamentary libraries. If this myth was once at least glorious and potent, it now seems more of a liability, failing to convince and trapping services with a role in which they must fail. Bounded rationality is more plausible as a model of Members' work.

The agenda that this opens is centred on living, breathing Members and Assistants. Parliamentary libraries are already working in this direction but the change in paradigm is not publicly acknowledged. It is a challenging future with few certainties. But the value of library competences also extends beyond the conventional library and may never have been higher. Parliamentary libraries risk irrelevance and decline if they rest on their myth and on their historical value as symbols of a modern informed parliament, just as much as if they rely only on their physical assets, collections, or academic research capacity.

Notes

1. In terms of scope, for the UK Rush (2001) reports research from 1970 showing that 80–90 percent of parliamentary questions could not have been asked in 1900 because they were not matters of government responsibility (p. 29). An indicator of complexity is the volume of legislation: for Acts the average number of pages per year went from 237 in 1831 to over a thousand after the mid-1960s and almost three thousand in the 1990s. Secondary legislation increased from 995 pages in 1900 to 3327 in 1994 (*ibid.* pp. 34–35). An indicator of scale of the executive in the UK is the number of non-industrial civil servants: 1832 21,000; 1902 50,000; 1930 111,000; 1960 380,000; 1980 542,000; 1998 430,000 (*ibid.* p.31).
2. In the UK since 1800 the number of Members has varied between 615 and 670, while the population was 16 million in 1801 and 59 million in 1998 (*ibid.* p. 221).
3. Marcella et al. (1999) p. 168. The situation appears unchanged ten years later.
4. See e.g. the House of Commons in the 19th century: “it came to resemble something between a large-scale country-house library and an aspiring national collection.” *History of the House of Commons Library* (2005) p. 5.
5. “In 1914, Congress passed legislation to establish a separate department within the Library of Congress. President Woodrow Wilson signed the bill into law, and CRS, then called the Legislative Reference Service, was born to serve the legislative needs of the Congress.” (*About CRS*). “In the first decade of the present century, legislators throughout the United States became increasingly aware of the growing complexity of legislation and of the importance of having at hand the fullest possible data regarding legislative proposals. In many States this awareness led to the formation of legislative reference bureaux, charged often with the dual function of seeking out and presenting the basic facts pertinent to any given legislative matter and of drafting appropriate Bills” (Galloway (1954) p. 261). In 1946 statutory recognition was given to the research function - the Legislative Reorganisation Act authorized the Librarian of Congress to make the service a separate department of the Library to (a) advise and assist any committee in the analysis, appraisal and evaluation of legislative proposals (b) provide “a basis for the proper determination of measures before the committee” (c) prepare summaries and digests. The Act provided for the appointment of senior specialists in broad legislative fields. (*ibid.* p. 262). “With the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970, Congress renamed the agency the Congressional Research Service and significantly expanded its statutory obligations. The services provided today by CRS are a direct result of congressional directives and guidance.” (*About CRS*). In the UK the shift from classic library to full-blown scientific information/research service can be seen in the staffing figures for the House of Commons Library. In 1946 it had seven staff, just before the transformation began, and this increased to 35 in 1965, 55 in 1972, 126 in 1982 and around 200 in 1992–2000 (Rush (2001) pp. 129–130).
6. Wu (2008), on the US Congress, notes that Jefferson’s offer to sell his book collection to supply Congress with a new library as a new source of knowledge and information (after the original was destroyed) was based on the Enlightenment ideal that people should be guided by reason and scientific knowledge (p. 357).
7. To give one historical example, Mehennet reports the House of Commons library using data from the Australian and Canadian parliamentary libraries to show that their own staffing was inadequate (Mehennet (2000) p. 96). There have been similar cases even recently within the IFLA Section.
8. In two further cases the delay exceeds two years; the UK is a special case; the precise chronology of the other ten is not clear from the sources used (*The World Directory of Parliamentary Libraries* and the *World Encyclopaedia of Parliaments and Legislatures*).
9. Switzerland is a possible exception – see footnote 47. For Westminster pre-1945 “the concept of a parliamentary library as a dynamic institution having the supply of information as its prime function was taking a very long time to get itself accepted – by Members as well as by others” (Mehennet (2000) p. 65). “There was a certain amount of criticism in the inter-war years . . . mainly that [the Library] did not afford Members a satisfactory and active information-giving service. *Though there is no particular evidence that the majority of Members felt this way* [emphasis added], Sir George Benson . . . wrote, “as a back-bench member in 1930, I was appalled to find the House of Commons served by a Library which had hardly progressed since 1850.” (*The House of Commons Library*’ (2005) p. 5). “In 1945 there was a very large influx of new Members who, it became rapidly clear, required a more sophisticated information service than the Library could offer. Accordingly, a Select Committee was set up, and its Reports . . . remain the fullest investigation ever held into the Library. In many ways, the Committee’s recommendations still form the basis of the modern remit of the Department. “Your Committee feel that the Library of the House of Commons . . . should be made into a unique institution . . . far more than a repository of books

- and parliamentary papers.” In their first report, they had declared...”the essential purpose of the Library is to supply Members with information rapidly on any of the multifarious matters which come before the House, or to which their attentions are drawn by their parliamentary duties” *ibid.* p. 6. The chair of this Committee was the George Benson referred to in the previous paragraph, underlining the importance of individual reformers.
10. Mehennet (2000) reports that Ivor Jennings of the University of London was promoting ‘parliamentary reform’ and quotes from a document of Jennings from 1934 “at a time when the House was having to cope with an ever-expanding range of subjects, many of them highly complex and technical, no serious attempt was being made to supply Members of Parliament with up-to-date literature and current information” (p. 64). Jennings argued that the Parliament needed a modern library on relevant topics, a capacity to catalogue and index, and research capacity. (Members at this time lacked their own staff). Another critic of library facilities mentioned by Mehennet is H.G. Wells (in 1932) – Wells was an enthusiast for the new science of ‘documentation’. Later, “The ‘information explosion of the sixties brought unprecedented attention to bear on the needs of Parliament for sound, up-to-date information and for adequate research assistance; ... When one seeks to explain the undoubtedly rapid growth of the Library from 1965 onwards, one’s conclusion must be that pressure for improvements from Members, *combined with an increasingly articulate awareness of the importance of such information services among academic and other outside observers*, proved to be a very strong force indeed.” [emphasis added] (*ibid.* p. 90). Rush, with Barker, was one of those influential academic commentators, outlining criticism of Parliament and other institutions and offering better information provision as one solution (*ibid.* p. 85). Another prominent academic commentator was Bernard Crick whose ‘Reform of Parliament’, published in 1964, claimed that the House of Commons library was under-powered compared to provision in the USA. His work was linked to the set-up of the Study of Parliament Group in 1964. It is still running and seems to have been a key (and discreet) location for academic reformers to engage with parliamentary officials and for a reform agenda to be shaped. It was apparently behind reforms for 26 years from 1964 (*ibid.* p. 90). “Although its findings are published, the Group’s meetings are usually private” – Study of Parliament Group website <http://www.spg.org.uk> retrieved June 2009.
 11. A separate IFLA Section for parliamentary libraries was founded in 1966. Amongst the other professional forums: the Nordic parliamentary libraries have had formal cooperation since 1922; the Association of Parliamentary Librarians in Canada (APLIC/ABPAC) was founded in 1975; the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (ECPRD) in 1977; the Association of Parliamentary Libraries of Australasia (APLA) in 1984 with informal cooperation dating to 1972.
 12. Black et al. (2007) p. 11.
 13. *ibid.* p. 16. The Library Association was “founded in 1877 as a result of the first international conference of librarians” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chartered_Institute_of_Library_and_Information_Professionals.
 14. Black et al. (2007) p. 25. The US association for specialist information libraries/librarians, the SLA, was established in 1909; the British organization for special libraries and information bureaux – ASLIB – was established in 1924 (*ibid.* p. 29).
 15. *ibid.* p. 150.
 16. *ibid.*
 17. Seaton (2007) p. 2. (In 1994 a project was launched to merge the then European Parliament Library with the research and internal documentation functions in a new service ‘EPiCentre’. When this project was aborted in 1997 the Library was renamed ‘Parliamentary Documentation Centre’ (Tomlins (1999) pp. 32–36). The title reverted to ‘Library’ c.2004 – the new name had confused potential clients.
 18. ‘Library’ can = ‘information service’ and in any case SPICe actually appears to have (on a small scale) the elements of a conventional library service – see Mansfield (2009). For the description of the conventional elements of a library, see especially pp. 21–22.
 19. Nicholas et al. (eds.) (2008) pp. 5–6.
 20. Marcella et al. (2007) p. 922.
 21. Wu (2008) p. 356.
 22. *ibid.* To justify his analysis Wu cites work by: Carol H. Weiss; David Whiteman; Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram; Allen Schick; Charles O. Jones; Robert H. Haveman; David R. Mayhew; E. C. Banfield; R. Douglas Arnold; David K. Cohen and Janet A. Weiss; and A. Frye.
 23. *ibid.* pp. 361–362.
 24. *ibid.* p. 356.
 25. Nicholas et al. (eds.) (2008) p. 4.
 26. E.g. “With the increase in the range of subjects, issues, interests and disciplines of interest to parliamentarians, there has been a parallel increase in the quantity of information available, until we have today a general awareness of the concept of “information overload” Marcella et al. (1999) p. 171.
 27. E.g. “The main constraint on members is time” Corbett et al. (2007) p. 57 and “an individual MEP is faced with tough choices... How much time should they spend in parliament and at home? Should they remain generalists or seek to become policy specialists? What activities should they concentrate on?” *ibid.* p. 58. Anecdotally, the information issue is more often presented in terms of ‘how do I easily get hold of the right information which I know is out there somewhere’ rather than in complaints about ‘too much information’. There is a possible parallel with the academic world. Nicholas et al., in a study of the use of specialist

- databases, ask a rhetorical question: “How does all this activity [searches of specialist databases] square with the concerns that dominated the [information] profession 20 years ago that the huge availability of data would result in overload? Well, in interviews we have conducted with academics in 2008, the term rarely came up and when the interviewer prompted the interviewee, they simply shrugged their shoulders. They are resigned to it; it is just part of the scenery or the academic assault course, and it is a small price to pay for the unbelievable level of access obtained” Nicholas et al. (eds.) (2008) p. 125.
28. Rush (2001) quotes an 1820s pamphlet on the UK parliament “Parliament is now overwhelmed with business... [acts, public petitions and]...There are piles upon piles of reports. From the Colonial Department alone, in 1825, were laid on the table papers amounting to 5,000 pages. The printed papers of a session, entirely exclusive of the bills printed, the votes of the two House, and Journals, exceed twenty-five full-sized and closely-printed folio volumes” p. 53.
 29. Marcella et al. (1999) p. 170.
 30. Marcella et al. (2007) p. 931.
 31. Wu (2008) p. 359.
 32. A psychologist and Director of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development. Gigerenzer offers an accessible overview of his work in: *Gut feelings – short cuts to better decision making*. London: Penguin, 2008.
 33. Gigerenzer and Selten (eds.) (2001) p. 4.
 34. *ibid.* p. 4.
 35. *ibid.* p. 5.
 36. *ibid.* p. 7.
 37. *ibid.*
 38. *ibid.*
 39. *ibid.* p. 8.
 40. *ibid.*
 41. *ibid.* p. 9.
 42. Marcella et al. (2007) p. 926.
 43. Searing (1994) p. 372. Note also Marcella et al. (1999): “Barker and Rush’s (1970) study of the information needs of the British MP, although dated, concludes that speed is the most significant aspect of information retrieval for MPs, and that less experienced MPs are more inclined to request additional information in the form of reports and policy analyses” (Marcella et al. 1999). Members with less environmental knowledge and accumulated experience have to scan a larger quantity of formal information to reach a conclusion?
 44. *ibid.* p. 357.
 45. Le Maux (2009) pp. 201–2.
 46. Tchantouridze (2007) p. 3.
 47. Some processes are just too complex to track at a reasonable cost. In as far as impact is made via decisions in individual minds involving multiple factors; or through general environmental knowledge influencing specific decisions; then can it be tracked at all? Is it a problem beyond current scientific solution? One scientific method would be to run an experiment depriving a parliament of a library. This experiment has already been run and it is available for historical study. In Switzerland the present form of parliamentary secretariat has “only been in existence since 1972. Previously, any services required by parliament were provided by the [executive]. The legislative committees were directly served by the relevant offices of the Federal Administration. In the 1960s, these structures were increasingly the target of criticism. The Mirage Affair... clearly showed that the existing structures had to be improved and that they were incompatible with the principle of the separation of powers.” [The Parliament relied on the executive for information and as a consequence was perceived as failing to hold it properly to account – see for background http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Swiss_Air_Force#Mirage_affair] As a consequence of the Mirage Affair, the first services were set up...: a Secretariat for the Auditing Committee and a Documentation Service... documentation tasks (the provision of information and knowledge independently of the administration) were central tasks of the Parliamentary Services from the start.” Frischknecht (2003) pp. 2–3.
 48. Carey, in Rhodes et al. (eds.) (2006) p. 442. That Committees are a major source of information for individual members is noted also by Searing (1994) p. 59.
 49. Searing (1994) pp. 32–33.
 50. *ibid.* p. 58.
 51. *ibid.* p. 58 and p. 59.
 52. Carey, in Rhodes et al. (eds.) (2006) p. 442.
 53. The affair is referred to in Corbett et al. (2007) p. 288. A research unit of the Parliament (STOA – Scientific and Technical Options Assessment) contracted a study that included reference to this telecommunications surveillance system. According to a more detailed account by the author of the research report “The section dealing with ECHELON in the STOA report only ran to a few pages” and when it went to Committee in December 1997 “it would have been largely ignored had it not been for a Daily Telegraph article... which alerted the international media.” (Wright (2005) p. 213). Wright notes that “Nothing in the STOA report was new but its packaging in a formal report for the European Parliament led to a ‘tipping point’. Interest in ECHELON mushroomed and all the European Member States had parliamentary debates about it”. This in turn led to the commissioning of further STOA research and the set-up of a temporary European Parliament Committee “which created some of the best [and] most informed organized knowledge on the existence of ECHELON, its activities and limitations. Almost every serious newspaper in the world has now covered ECHELON. Why? Because one package of organized knowledge, put together in a serious format was able to catalyse subsequent interest.” (Wright (2005) p. 213).
 54. Marcella et al. (2007) p. 927.

55. <http://archive.ifla.org/VII/s3/conf/ipu-asgp-ifla-seminar-watt.pdf>
56. A diagram of a 'typical' office is found here: http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Congressional_Offices_and_Staff. For an actual example, see <http://burgess.house.gov/Contact/Staff.htm>.
57. Orton et al. (1999) p. 209.
58. Hamel and Prahalad (1994).
59. *ibid.* p. 223.
60. *ibid.* p. 236.
61. *ibid.* pp. 224–228.

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