

Cooperation or Competition: Reflections on the Future of Parliamentary Library and Research Services

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Abstract

Since the first of its kind was founded in the late 18th century, parliamentary libraries have played a critical role in supporting parliamentarians in their legislative and oversight role. Today world over, parliamentary libraries are recognized for supporting elective democracy around the world by enabling members of parliament to obtain information, analysis and advice which is objective and independent because it takes a perspective beyond government policy. At the same time in the changing information landscape characterized by information explosion, competition from other information sources and ubiquitous ICTs, parliamentary libraries face an uncertain future. This paper explores the current information challenges faced by parliamentarians as well as those faced by parliamentary libraries in addressing the information needs of this clientele. The paper argues that there is a need for collaboration as the way into the future if parliamentary libraries are to be effective in fulfilling their mandate.

Introduction

Parliamentary libraries are some of the oldest types of libraries, the first of its kind being founded in about 1796 in France. Their establishment is closely associated with the establishment of modern states late 18th and 19th centuries in Europe which were based on a parliamentary system. Since then these libraries have played a critical role as a source of information for parliamentarians in their legislative work. Today world over, parliamentary libraries are recognized for supporting elective democracy around the world by enabling members of parliament to obtain information, analysis and advice

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The paper argues that there is a need for collaboration as the way into the future if parliamentary libraries are effective in fulfilling their mandate. The first part of the paper outlines the long-standing role of parliamentary libraries and how they have contributed to the operations of parliaments. The second part examines the current contexts and emerging issues facing parliaments, and parliamentarians and their implications for parliamentary libraries. The purpose is to expose the challenges and opportunities that confront parliamentary librarianship at the threshold of the 21st century. The final part of the paper explores the choices these libraries have to make between cooperation and competition with other interested parties as they seek to remain relevant today. The overarching argument is that parliamentary libraries and librarians have to collaborate with all to be able to fulfil their mandate and guarantee their survival in these turbulent times.

Understanding the Role of Parliamentary Libraries

Parliamentary libraries have been defined in several ways which despite emphasizing different aspects of the library are by far similar. For purposes of our discussion, parliamentary libraries are:

Legislative libraries can be seen as special libraries in the narrow sense that they are providing services for a specialized clientele, they differ from many such libraries in that they need to be willing to provide information on the breadth of human knowledge, rather than concentrating on a range of subjects relevant to a specialist clientele. . . . In a nutshell parliament is interested in the whole universe of knowledge. (Cunningham, 2009: p.23)

The existence of parliamentary libraries is based on the fact that knowledge is critical to the quality of parliamentary performance and by extension the quality of democracy. The world parliamentarians need information on which they rely to formulate positions and take decisions regarding the myriad issues up for consideration. In this regard, every day, parliamentarians are confronted with the challenges of finding relevant, appropriate information support to support the decisions they make and the actions they take. The work of parliamentary libraries is to support the parliamentarians and their legislatures by providing them with information services to assist them to fulfil their roles of legislation, liaison between citizens and government, monitoring of the government action and facilitation of society and the government as a whole (Bernier, 2005).

There is an adage that "knowledge is power". We can argue that by providing the appropriate knowledge, parliamentary libraries contribute to empowering

parliamentarians to make the right decisions in the interest of the people they represent. Parliamentary libraries are expected to understand the information needs of parliamentarians to provide them with the appropriate information in their legislative and oversight functions. They are expected at a minimum to acquire and make available and conserve current information resources that cover the different concerns of the parliament. This includes information that informs on the national situation, publications of the government, government departments and agencies, national and local newspapers, and monographs on the country and its regions (Bernier, 2005). In a recent conference the role of parliamentary libraries was summed up thus:

"Access to reliable, timely information is essential to the proper functioning of democratic legislatures. In their legislative role, parliamentarians need information as they monitor issues, develop policy solutions, predict consequences, and influence government decision-making. In their role of overseeing the executive, they need the information to monitor the success of ongoing programmes and to identify areas of weaknesses" (*Informing democracy*, 2009)

There is no doubt in the minds of many scholars that parliamentary libraries have fulfilled their mandate in a commendable manner. For example

- i. There is no doubt in the minds of many that parliamentary libraries have fulfilled their mandate in a commendable manner.
- ii. The traditional expertise of libraries in finding, selecting assessing, organizing and managing sources of information in the context of information
- iii. Skills in dealing with information overload and the permanently changing digital tools to develop services that help our clients find the best possible information
- iv. The ability to provide research services that meet the ever-changing needs of parliaments with time-pressured schedules (Missingham, 2011).

Current Contexts of Information Needs of Parliamentarians and Implications for Parliamentary Library Services

Despite the spectacular role that parliamentary libraries have played in the past, at the turn of the 21st century both parliamentary clients and information professionals find themselves in new contexts and are faced with issues that suggest a need to re-examine the way parliamentary libraries operate and go about fulfilling the information needs of their clientele. A review of literature on parliamentary libraries reveals several concerns about the future role of parliamentary libraries. According to Galluzi (2010), "It is time for parliamentary libraries to reinvent themselves by examining recent and current trends in their own development". Cuninghame (2009) has argued that parliamentary libraries, "are in a time of uncertainty about the future... they need to be constantly thinking about

their role and the needs of their users and adapting accordingly. According to her, signals of the ongoing changes include:

- i. The pace of technological change continues and will drive many changes in the way libraries operate,
- i. Parliamentary libraries are only just beginning to grapple with the potential of social networking tools,
- ii. The decline of the importance of the physical library,
- iii. Changing needs of users and how they use information,
- iv. Poor working relationships between information specialists and researchers,
- v. Information overload, in an era of the ubiquity of information resources, and
- vi. transformation of the librarian into an information broker (Galluzi, 2010; 134).

Another set of outstanding issues include the following:

- i. A better understanding of the kind of information that parliamentarians need to do their work.
- ii. The various ways in which parliamentary library and research services fit within the overall mission of the parliamentary secretariat,
- iii. The urgent need for traditional libraries can and must transform themselves,
- iv. How libraries can maintain and improve relations with parliamentarians,
- v. Ways to strengthen parliamentary library and research services, through domestic and international support,
- vi. The challenges facing parliamentary libraries and research services in developed and developing countries (*Informing democracy...*, 2008).

According to *Informing democracy...* (2008), in their endeavours to fulfil the information needs of their main clientele parliamentary libraries services face the following challenges:

- i. Technological advances, which have led to profound changes in the information needs and expectations of parliamentary clients,
- ii. Limited resources and expertise, which sometimes hinder the provision of quality service,
- iii. A decline in requests for traditional library services and materials, accompanied by a growing demand for more complex and multi-faceted analysis, and
- iv. The need to work with partners from other jurisdictions to develop and implement successful, innovative strategies to address these challenges.

At the same time, the parliamentarians themselves suffer challenges associated with technology such as:

- i. Information overload – too much information and information of variable reliability and quality,
- ii. Their multiple roles for their websites, political party websites and parliamentary webpages,
- iii. Dealing with social media such as Twitter and Facebook with limited resources, iv. Understanding the channels of information (including traditional media and new media) and how to use them (Missingham, 2011).

In the opinion of several scholars, parliamentary libraries can measure up to these challenges by:

- i. Developing and promoting standards and best practices in information services to the primary clientele,
- ii. Exchanging experience and knowledge,
- iii. Create forums for identification and addressing emerging issues,
- iv. Develop self-awareness of their uniqueness and of the services they provide,
- v. Consider their duty to the citizens of providing information to citizens about parliaments.

The issues discussed above are already affecting the parliamentary libraries today and will continue to do so in the future. The bottom line is that information forwarded to elected representatives is usually expected to be complete and thorough, exhaustive and qualified, sure reliable, rigorous, specific and objective. One lesson from the above discussion is that there is a pressing need to build the capacity of parliamentary libraries to deliver high-quality information services to parliamentarians both as groups and as individuals and others who support parliamentary processes such as parliamentary researchers, and committees across the globe and especially in our region.

The main question however is how parliamentary librarians deal with these issues. As indicated in the discussion above, there are many players and interested parties. Can librarians on their own be able to address the myriad issues arising thereof? If the answer is yes, how do they deal with competing interests that tend to crowd the information scene? If the answer is no what alternatives do they have to ensure that they transform the parliamentary library while at the same time maintaining their identity? These questions form the crux of the matter which can be summarized as a question, to cooperate or to compete, which is the way forward? This question is addressed in the next section.

Cooperation Or Competition: Which Way for Parliamentary Libraries

The question as to whether libraries cooperate with others has often been taken as axiomatic. According to Neal (2011; 56) “Cooperation is part of the professional DNA of research libraries. From the conditions of knowledge scarcity over the centuries to the oppression of information and data overabundance in today’s and tomorrow’s library context, cooperation has been and will be a constant for service, success, and survival.” A

participant in a past conference was quoted thus "Within our professional competencies, there is ...an ethical requirement for us to be thinking about the future. I do not think I would consider myself a good librarian if I wasn't actually thinking about collaborations across boundaries" (Anonymous, cited in Zorich, Waibel, and Erway, 2008)

According to Watt

“To innovate, to meet member’s needs, libraries have to be able to manage change, to be flexible, to make good use of the knowledge of their staff, to have a culture of collaboration is normal and creativity is welcome”.

Despite these affirmations to cooperate or competition is not a matter that can be easily settled. We live in a world where competition is part of the social fabric and influences many of our decisions and actions. This mainly is due to divergent opinions, diverse values, not to mention economic pressures. To explore further the desirable way forward for parliamentary libraries, this paper has examined two models. First is the so-called *Cooperation and Competition Theory*, which is concerned with understanding the processes involved in cooperation and competition, their effects, and the factors that contribute to developing a cooperative or competitive relationship (Deutsch, 2006). The second is *Collaboration Continuum* which seeks to explain how individuals and groups move from a neutral position or point of competition to that of convergence characterized by a shared vision and mission.

Theory of Cooperation and Competition: A Possible Entry Point

This theory has two main ideas about the social interactions that individuals or groups of people are involved in: First, there exists interdependence among the goals of engaging in a given social interaction and secondly that people choose a specific course of action in their involvement with others (Deutsch, 2006). It identifies two types of goal interdependence: a positive one (where goals are related such that the probability of an individual or a group attaining the goal is positively correlated with the probability of the other individual or group attaining their goals) and a negative one (whereby the goal is linked such that the probability of one attaining their goal is negatively correlated to the probability of the attainment of the others goal. In other words, in a positive linkage if one succeeds the other succeeds but if one succeeds then the other fails. The positive goal correlation is found in interactions that we refer to as cooperation while negative goal correlation exists in a situation of competition.

Cooperative relations, that is, where the goals of the parties involved are positively interdependent as compared to competitive ones are characterized by

- i. Effective communication with ideas being shared as members listen to each other and accept the ideas of others to influence them
- ii. Friendliness, helpfulness and less obstructiveness

- iii. There is better coordination of effort, division of labour, focus on task achievement, orderliness and high productivity
- iv. The feeling of agreement with the ideas of others and sharing of beliefs and values
- v. Recognizing and respecting others by being responsive to their needs In a positively interdependent relationship
- vi. Willingness to enhance the other's power (for example, the knowledge, skills, resources, and so on) to accomplish the other's goals increases. As the other's capabilities are strengthened, everybody else is strengthened and is of value to others

In contrast, competition has the opposite effects:

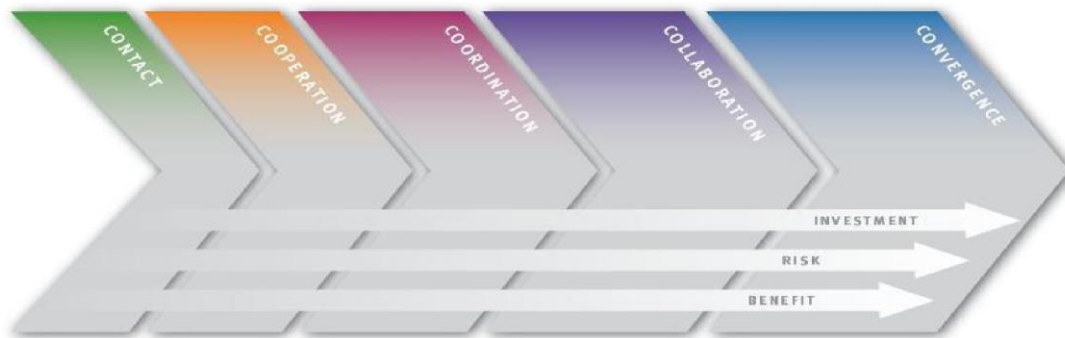
- i. Communication is impaired as the parties seek to gain the advantage of the others through the use of false promises, and disinformation.
- ii. Trust is reduced and seen as futile as they recognize that they cannot trust one another's communications to be honest or informative.
- iii. Obstructiveness and lack of helpfulness lead to mutual negative attitudes and suspicion of one another's intentions.
- iv. The parties to the process are unable to divide their work, duplicating one another's efforts.
- v. The repeated experience of disagreement and critical rejection of ideas reduces confidence in oneself as well as the other.
- vi. The conflicting parties seek to enhance their power and reduce the power of the other. Any increase in the power of the other is seen as threatening to oneself.

From this discussion, it is no doubt that collaboration or if you call it cooperation is a positive force and a desirable undertaking for parliamentary libraries as they face the prospects and challenges of the future.

Collaboration Continuum Model

The *Collaboration Continuum* propounded by Zorich, Waibel, and Erway (2008) Cooperation is to be viewed in the context of processes that more often than not have been used interchangeably namely contacts, coordination, cooperation and collaboration. The ultimate goal of these processes is a collaboration which refers to a "process in which two or more groups work together towards a common goal by sharing expertise, information and resources" These processes are distinguished by increasing levels of effort, aspirations and expertise that is required to engage as partners move from the left to the right along a continuum (see diagram below).

The Collaboration Continuum



The process starts with making *contact* whereby participants start in the initial conversation and explore areas of common interest in terms of activities and needs. At this stage partners lay the foundation for trust which will allow them to move to the next level. The next stage is what we popularly refer to as *cooperation* in which organizations engage informal initiatives which yield limited but useful benefits. Such initiatives are revolved around sharing information, experiences and ideas and this could at times be one way.

In the third stage, *coordination*, there is a development of a framework which stipulates the roles and expectations of different parties. Activities are carefully planned with due consideration of efficiency, accountability and work with a definite agenda and schedules. The collaboration stage goes beyond cooperation and coordination to a "process of a shared vision: two or more [groups...] interacting to create a shared understanding that none had previously possessed or could have come on their own" (Schrage, 1990; 140). In this case, new knowledge and skills are acquired which in turn are used innovatively and creatively to create new products and services which yield benefits and transform the collaborating institutions through innovation and creativity. This transformation could be quality re-organization and better leverage of assets. According to Watson,

"True collaboration...devises a new vision for a new way of doing things. It inevitably and fundamentally involves change. Collaboration is transformational and the elements, institutions and individuals in collaboration must change [for the better] (Cited in Soehner, 2005).

The final stage of collaboration is *convergence* which involves "collaboration around a specific function or idea has become so extensive, engrained and assumed that it is no longer recognized by others as a collaborative undertaking" (Zorich, Waibel, and Erway, 2008). The new product or service or activity is so ingrained in the processes of the

parties that they make it part of their core activities and make it a priority seeking to fulfil the requirements.

A review of current literature reveals rewards gained by different types of libraries out of participation in collaborative endeavours. Key benefits to be gained from collaborating with others.

- i. Reach out to the various audience in the parliamentary community. Each partner brings in a new perspective which will clarify, and deepen services to the various user categories of the parliamentary community.
- ii. Enlarged capacities and expanded knowledge and skills: Partners offer complementary skills, services, technology, and assets that broaden the libraries capacities in a positive way

If we both exchange 1 Rupee coin, we both have 1 rupee each. But if we exchange 1 Good Thought, We both have 2 Good Thoughts...

- iii. Greater attention, attraction and publicity and appreciation of the role, mandate and contribution of parliamentary libraries in the legislative, oversight function of the parliament and the deepening of democracy in the respective countries. This will result in better allocation of resources to the services.
- iv. Networking with various partners will help to place parliamentary libraries at the centre of the community and deepen our contribution to the community.
- v. Expanded perspectives: Different partners provide fresh ways to view our experiences and those of our clientele. We acquire new eyes and ears to recognize the needs of the clientele
- vi. Improved ability to create and nurture more relationships: In initiating collaborations we are building value and
- vii. Opportunities to create more new information products: Combined resources and skills, and a better understanding of our clients provide opportunities to create new products
- viii. We shall energize the members of our very noble profession as parliamentary librarians: New challenges, new ideas, new opportunities participation and for personal and professional growth

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the above discussions, it emerges that parliamentary libraries play a critical role in supporting people's representatives in their legislative and oversight roles. By so doing, they support the maintenance of democratic practices in any given country. Parliamentary libraries have been particularly noted for their providing unbiased information and innovativeness in ensuring that parliamentarians access and use the

right information. However, at the turn of the 20th century, these institutions face the challenges occasioned by rapid advances in ICT, changing information needs of parliamentary clients, limited resources and expertise, the decline in requests for traditional library services and materials, accompanied by a growing demand for more complex and multi-faceted analysis and the need to work with partners such as researchers, ICT specialists, professional colleagues from other areas. Parliamentary librarians are not able to single-handedly deal with all the emerging issues and much less can they afford to engage in competition with any of the other players. On the contrary, they need to engage in collaborative efforts with other stakeholders. This is the only way they can evolve near knowledge and skills, come up with new information products and services and achieve a transformation.

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Biographical note



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