Parliamentary Libraries: An Uncertain Future?

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Abstract

Parliamentary libraries serve parliamentary institutions on a national or local level. Usually they are founded at the same time as the parliament itself and organized according to the parliamentary model of the country in which they are located. The parliamentary library's mission is to support and facilitate parliamentary activities and make available all useful sources of information to the parliament as a whole. Thus, the parliamentary library is a specialized library from the point of view of the collections' coverage and of patrons as well. Today, parliamentary libraries are at a turning point in their history. All over the world they are radically changing their nature and are reinventing themselves. They are facing two main challenges: the convergence toward a digital and networked society and the changing role of parliaments themselves. Parliamentary libraries are heading in two main directions: they are becoming documentation centers by integrating their services with other parliamentary offices and departments, meaning that they sometimes give up their physical structure; and they are extending themselves beyond their traditional roles by also serving the general public, by acquiring the status of national libraries, or by becoming central research libraries for a specific field such as political science and law.

Introduction

Parliamentary libraries serve parliamentary institutions on a national or local level (Priano, 2000). Usually they are founded at the same time as the parliament itself and organized according to the parliamentary model of the country in which they are located. Therefore, if the parliament consists of only one chamber there is usually only one library, while if there

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are two chambers there are also two libraries. However, this is not true everywhere. Many countries with two parliamentary chambers have had only one library since the outset, or the two existing libraries have been integrated through cooperation projects or unified in a single library. The parliamentary library's mission is to support and facilitate parliamentary activities and make available all useful sources of information to the parliament. Thus, a parliamentary library is a specialized library from the point of view of the collection's coverage and of patrons for whom it is intended as well (Priano, 2000).

At first glance, the definition of parliamentary libraries is clear. One definition seems to fit all the libraries and to justify the common affiliation with a specific category whose peculiarities require a specific approach and an autonomous subfield of library science. Nonetheless, we believe it is time for parliamentary libraries to reinvent themselves by examining recent and current trends in their own development.

The Origins of Parliamentary Libraries and Library Types

The historical roots of parliamentary libraries are directly linked to the birth of parliamentary institutions. While some of them date back to the first half of the nineteenth century, libraries serving newer democracies were founded more recently.[1] Notwithstanding the different periods in which they were created, it is worth noting that even the most recent parliamentary libraries were conceived based on the principles used to develop these libraries from the outset.

The establishment of the first parliamentary libraries did not automatically mean that there was a need to differentiate these libraries from other special libraries on a theoretical basis or to create an autonomous identity. However, during the second half of the nineteenth century, libraries became more diversified, particularly in Great Britain and in the United States (Harris, 1999). During this period there was a steady increase in the number, aims, and functions of libraries for several reasons. Economic growth and increasing wealth provided the resources to build cultural institutions and libraries, while population growth supplied a workforce for factories and industrial activities, resulting in a greater demand for cultural activities. The second phase of the industrial revolution brought a heightened need for sources of information and promoted higher education levels of workers due to the democratic nature of Anglo-American society, which promoted self-development of citizens.

In particular, during the second half of the nineteenth century, academic libraries proliferated thanks to increased funding and reform of the education system. School libraries began to develop though they were not completely well-shaped before the twentieth century. Special libraries serving public institutions and governmental bodies grew in number and

quality, and, above all, public libraries were founded to address the needs of all citizens and were supported by taxes paid by the local communities (Harris, 1999).

This quick overview points out that the birth of different types of libraries is the consequence of a historical process linked to the development of libraries in general and the understanding of the many possible roles libraries could have within society. This process was the manifestation of a society that was moving toward a higher degree of specialization and where extensive, in-depth services were considered a sign of advancement. Nowadays, we have to wonder whether there is the same need or if the surrounding circumstances require a different approach (Galluzzi, 2009). To this end it is essential to analyze recent trends and their possible reasons.

Recent Trends

As already mentioned, over a long period of time parliamentary libraries have evolved on common grounds and, notwithstanding the institutional differences between countries, have shared similar issues and needs. Today libraries in general, and even more so parliamentary libraries, are going through a phase of transition and are trying to respond to many different challenges.

At the moment there seem to be two opposite trends occurring in parliamentary libraries: the first is toward the broadening of functions and user population beyond the boundaries of the parliamentary institution; the second is toward a stronger specialization of services and collections under a more strictly parliamentary point of view. Both these trends are the result of changing contexts and are based upon shared theoretical grounds.

There are important examples of each trend, although each case is unique and each library has chosen its own way. As far as the first trend is concerned, some parliamentary libraries, without changing their main mission and policies, have opened up their services to the general public, usually under a wider policy of openness on the part of the parliament itself toward citizens and other institutions as well as an attempt to better defray expenses. For instance, this is the case in respect to the two Italian parliamentary libraries, the Biblioteca del Senato "Giovanni Spadolini" (http://www.senato.it/biblioteca) and the Biblioteca della Camera dei Deputati (http://www.camera.it/index.asp), now in the process of establishing a joint library, Polo bibliotecario parlamentare (Joint Parliamentary Library, http://www.parlamento.it/polobibliotecario/home.htm), and the Swedish parliamentary library, the Riksdag Library (http://www.riksdagen.se/templates/R_Page____21039.aspx) (Brundin, 2004; Committee of the Nordic Parliamentary Librarians, 2000).

In other cases, parliamentary libraries have undertaken the role of national libraries or central research libraries for specific disciplinary fields, such as political science, law, and administrative studies. For example,

the parliamentary library of Finland, the Eduskunta Library (http://lib.eduskunta.fi/Resource.phx/library/index.htx?lng=en), is a national research library and has a central role in the research and academic libraries' network (Committee of the Nordic Parliamentary Librarians, 2000), while the parliamentary libraries of Estonia (http://www.nlib.ee/html/inglise/teen/parl.html) and Japan (National Diet Library of Japan, http://www.ndl.go.jp/en/index.html) are also the national libraries of their countries.

Some parliamentary libraries have turned into documentation centers, integrating their services with other parliamentary offices and departments, mainly those involved in documentation activities, and sometimes giving up their physical structure. In some instances, parliamentary libraries have decided to focus on information services and document delivery, strengthening their electronic collection and referring to other specialized libraries when paper documents are needed. For example, this is partially the case for the Norwegian parliamentary library, the Stortinget (http://www.stortinget.no/en/) (Committee of the Nordic Parliamentary Librarians, 2000).

Overall, the parliamentary libraries of the oldest democracies are changing and are in search of their own way to fulfill their mission and to regain a meaningful role inside the institution and the national library system. Parliamentary libraries founded in new democracies are surprisingly much more similar to the original model and much more traditional than the oldest ones.[2] This phenomenon is consistent with the above-mentioned trends, because they are connected to changes that are affecting some world areas more than others, particularly the West. Consequently, new democracies and new parliamentary libraries, which are mostly located in developing countries, are less affected by the processes occurring in Western society.

What follows is a discussion about why the oldest parliamentary libraries are moving in these directions and what external and institutional inputs they are trying to respond to.

Why These Changes?

There are multiple reasons for recent trends in the oldest parliamentary libraries. In order to facilitate the analysis, it is useful to focus the discussion on three main areas: how parliamentary institutions and political life are changing, how the digital revolution is affecting everything, and how user habits and cultural approaches are changing.

How Parliamentary Institutions Are Changing

First of all, there is no doubt that parliamentary institutions in the West are changing dramatically when compared to their origins, and many phenomena are shaping parliaments and political life differently.

Various scholars (Barbera, 1999; De Micheli & Verzichelli, 2004; Deffenu, 2006; Flinterman, Heringa, & Waddington, 1994; Mastropaolo & Verzichelli, 2006; Sartori, 2000) mention a decline in the perceived efficacy of the parliamentary assemblies and point out the reasons behind this situation. They agree that these days, parliaments are not the only places where political debate occurs, nor are they the only institutions having a representative role.

Moreover, the process of lawmaking has been facing new challenges. There is a need for high-level technical specialization in order to manage the increasing complexity of the topics on the agenda; consequently, a rising number of external experts, groups, and institutions are involved in the lawmaking process. Secondly, assemblies are often asked either to simply ratify—without an adequate debate—decisions and agreements reached through mutual consensus outside the parliaments or to merely turn governmental initiatives into laws. At the same time, governments are only formally accountable to parliaments, but in fact, legislatures work thanks to the balance of power among parties. Currently, general interests are usually safeguarded outside parliaments, while only particular interests are debated in parliamentary assemblies. The debate has partially moved outside the parliamentary institution and has invaded the mass media, private communities, and lobbies.

Furthermore, in recent years many Western countries have registered a decisive decrease in citizens' participation in elections and political life, which a number of scholars consider another signal of political crisis. Citizens are increasingly uninterested in traditional forms of political life and are asking for deeper and more innovative involvement in the management of public affairs. Therefore, the balance between institutions inside the state organization and other political and social actors is shifting, and the way in which political life interacts with social life and weighs upon citizens' behaviors is very different from the past.

While on the one hand important aspects of the lawmaking process have moved outside the parliaments, on the other hand, legislative and nonlegislative activities and acts have gradually increased and are further increasing in number, variety, and level of specialization. Consequently, the internal organization of parliaments has become more and more complex over time, and currently the number of departments managing documentation is far higher than in the past. The number of documents produced by parliaments or necessary to respond to their needs is so huge that the only way to manage them is through a cooperative effort by different entities. These trends create paradoxical situations. While parliaments are overcrowded with documents and expand their activity in redundant ways, more and more laws come directly from the government's initiative and are passed, thanks to governmental majority, almost without debate and amendments.

These problems are particularly evident when compared to parliaments in new democracies. In fact, in countries that have recently switched over to parliamentary systems, parliaments tend to be more traditional and central in political life. They are inspired by the original institutional arrangement of this form of government, and citizens tend to be much more interested in political participation, claiming the classic idea of democracy as the result of an ongoing debate between opposite parties and ideas.

Nonetheless, the point of view that counters the proposition that today's parliaments are pointless and redundant institutions that simply undersign decisions and have lost their original status as places of popular sovereignty is theoretically weak. Parliaments, as any other social and political institution, must evolve alongside the society and its needs in search for new internal and external balances**.** At the same time, their internal organization must adapt to changing requirements.

Last, it is worth mentioning that another overall trend recognizable in developed countries, the trend toward efficiency and cost reduction, has become much more important in the current economic situation. The need for stricter budget control and a renovated legitimacy**,** together with requests for transparency and involvement by citizens, pushes parliamentary institutions toward deeper exploitation of their resources and the offering of their services to the general public.

All these aspects should be analyzed together with the observation of the current internal use of parliamentary libraries; and account should be taken of common practices and rules across the parliamentary libraries sector in order to point out possible links between general trends and internal usage statistics. Most existing parliamentary libraries have seen decreased use by internal users during the last few years, while requests for consultation by external users and scholars have proportionally increased. At the same time, institutional users use the services of parliamentary libraries more and more in response to other needs (related to their own lives or to personal research interests) rather than to institutional needs. The same happens for retired members of parliament and staff, who are considered primary users by many parliamentary libraries and consequently have a right to access all library services and to be primarily served by the library staff, regardless of whether they still have active roles in parliamentary or political life (Verrier, 2003). Each of the highlighted trends deserves an in-depth examination in order to recognize possible changes in the role and organization of parliamentary libraries.

Consequences of the Digital Revolution

Parliamentary libraries show the effects of the above-mentioned internal changes, but also are taking part in the shifting processes that are affecting libraries in general because of the digital revolution and the consequent

changing habits of users (Anderson, 2007; Galluzzi, 2009; Pine & Gilmore, 1999).[3] The digital revolution is a widespread phenomenon that cannot be summarized in a few words. With respect to libraries, the two most important aspects of this revolution are the creation of a global network that allows people all over the world to be constantly and promptly in touch, and the convergence of all media toward a digital format. These two trends directly affect libraries from many points of view and, above all, deeply modify society as a whole and the way in which people relate to each other and go through their everyday lives.

There is no doubt that the digital revolution is putting library identity under pressure, insofar as the majority of information sources are going digital, most reference transactions are moving toward a virtual network, the physical premises of libraries are becoming less important, the mediation role is being overcome by Internet access, and the number of competitors offering media is constantly increasing.

Some scholars and many librarians point out that there is a risk of marginalization of libraries in the new global and digital framework (Conti, 2006; Osif, 2008a, 2008b). According to this opinion, libraries should, on the one hand, focus on their most traditional and distinctive functions, such as the preservation of historical content, and, on the other hand, contribute to the global availability of these sources in a digital format. Therefore, from this perspective, the future library will take up a very small niche of the information society and will engage in very specific activities intended for restricted groups of users.

Changing Users

The success of the Internet and its evolution toward Web 2.0 has affected user behaviors as well. Firstly, users are far less inclined to spend their scarce time on activities that could be carried out over the Internet, above all those activities that do not belong to leisure time, but to "obliged" or "bound" time. It is worth mentioning that according to sociological studies, "obliged" time encompasses all those activities that cannot be avoided and cannot be freely managed during the day and the week, like work and school, while "bound" time refers to all those activities that are necessary for our life but can be planned only to a limited extent, like administrative proceedings and medical examinations (Guerra, 2002; Richeri, 2002; Trimarchi, 2002).

Secondly, users are more and more used to the "one-stop-shop" approach and prefer service points and places where more than one activity and need can be satisfied. Moreover, it must be stressed that the unique character of the Web as a conduit where all digital content merges independent of the level of specialization or source, has emphasized the "one-stop-shop" approach of users toward services not only over the Web, but also in real life (Online Computer Library Center, 2005).

Thirdly, some aspects of users' lives are merging, and this is particularly true for everything pertaining to education and entertainment. In the so-called "edutainment society," work, study, cultural activities, hobbies, and spare time are mixed up in everyday life and are not linked to specific moments of the day or of the week, nor are they tied to different periods of life anymore.

One of the main consequences of these changes could be a need to rethink library types, particularly those libraries of a certain size. As already highlighted, the different kinds of libraries recognizable under the library label are the consequence of a process of diversification linked to a growing specialization of societal needs. However, nowadays similarities are becoming much more important than differences, particularly as there is a general trend that emphasizes convergence in usage. This trend pushes toward a decrease in the number of library categories to such an extent that, in some cases, traditional classification can turn into a powerful historical heritage rather than be a useful management tool.

There is no doubt that the library categorization that started to emerge at the end of the eighteenth century is now showing its rigidity. Therefore, maybe it is time for libraries to rethink their position with respect to their users' needs and for parliamentary libraries to better identify their role with respect to the other types of libraries. Moreover, the changing characteristics of knowledge and its evolving relationship with the digital context should be taken into account thoroughly and studied as another phenomenon affecting the nature of parliamentary libraries and libraries in general. In particular, the interdisciplinary character of knowledge, together with the merging process of theoretical, organizational, and practical knowledge, has deeply modified the way in which research is carried out as well as the nature of its content. Together with a growing specialization in individual disciplinary fields, there is a need for an interdisciplinary approach and a decrease in the gap between popular and academic knowledge.

Consequently, the range of interests expressed by users is, at the same time, wider, deeper, and far less foreseeable than in the past. Obviously it is impossible for one single library to have everything a user needs, because physical constraints limit endless possibilities; however, each library should be the front-office of publicly accessible information held elsewhere, both immediately and remotely available, in a transparent way. In addition, libraries should make available all digital content in an integrated manner or searchable in an integrated way. The long tail paradigm (Anderson, 2007) points out that libraries need to strike a balance between physical coverage and digital or remote availability in order to remain economically sustainable. In my opinion, depending on the library type, size, primary role, and characteristics, some libraries should go completely digital, achieving their mission by connecting pieces of

information and making them readily available for users, while others should enhance and broaden their offerings in terms of bibliographic material and services and focus on the added value of physical and social exchange through an adequate marketing strategy.

Conclusion

Parliamentary libraries cannot avoid dealing with these new challenges and need to make their missions clear in order to choose effective development policies. However, it seems that parliamentary libraries are not sufficiently used or willing to undergo this kind of analysis. A quick look into the scientific and professional literature specifically regarding parliamentary libraries points out that the overall number of papers on this particular topic published in the last ten years is small, and most of them focus on one library, describing its history, collections, and services, or on specific projects carried out by one or more parliamentary libraries (Library and Information Science Abstracts, 2009).

Very few essays debate the nature and role of parliamentary libraries. One inevitably gets the feeling that apart from some common basic characteristics, the majority of parliamentary librarians are strictly bound to their specific libraries and not very interested in wider considerations of parliamentary libraries in general or possible common ground with other types of libraries. Even internal relationships with other research and documentation departments inside their institutions are not often at the center of the debate. Librarians are much more worried about their libraries' survival than about thinking of better ways to serve their institutions; they are unwilling to change their perspectives unless absolutely necessary. However, there are also numerous exceptions, and many contributions by scholars and librarians are enlightening. But there is no doubt that libraries in general, and parliamentary libraries in particular, tend to be self-referential, which could be a great risk at a time when some question the need for libraries.

It seems there is a need for second thoughts about the role of parliamentary libraries. The answer is neither easy nor obvious, and the simple application of a theoretical model cannot work because the "one-size-fits-all" approach does not match the current multifaceted issues in parliamentary librarianship. As mentioned earlier, over the last few years, parliamentary libraries seem to have evolved in two different directions. At this stage, the two possibilities are clearly understandable and can be seen as common to libraries in general: on the one hand, widening the range of activities and competencies, and on the other hand, focusing on a strictly specialized role (parliamentary role, in this case) and relying mostly on digital services. Parliamentary libraries have to decide if their mission is to support and facilitate parliamentary activities or to serve members of parliament and staff members regardless of the purpose of their information needs.

Parliamentary libraries are supposed to broaden their functions beyond the institutional needs and address their services to a larger public, which could be a specialized public or the general public of citizens. This way, they can function as a link between the parliamentary institutions and the citizens, thus contributing to increasing transparency and better knowledge of the sources and ways of legislative activity. This can be done in a number of ways, for example, experimenting with new forms of agreement with other libraries of the local network, promoting forms of jointly-used libraries inside the same building, or creating new services in the old library.

The underlying idea driving this change should be a new way of categorizing users. For instance, users should be considered not as belonging to a well-defined category (student, scholar, member of parliament, or parliamentary administrator), but as having multiple needs at different moments in time and under different aspects of their lives. For example, a single person could be a member of parliament (with all the needs related to this position), but also a scholar or a lawyer from a professional point of view as well as a simple citizen interested in various kinds of hobbies from a private point of view. After all, the fact that some parliamentary libraries already have some collections of travel literature and fiction and the fact that these kinds of materials are appreciated by institutional users proves that they already act toward the library in a hybrid manner.

In the past, the answer to this situation was the existence of different kinds of libraries where users were directed according to their needs; nowadays, all the above-mentioned phenomena suggest a new approach. In particular, parliamentary libraries, which suffer from budget cuts less than other libraries and usually continue to have significant funding at their disposal, cannot afford to stay out of the picture. Parliamentary libraries are supposed to assume a leading role in the national library system, even incorporating other library types and assuming other functions.

From one perspective, parliamentary libraries should stop pretending to be so close to everyday parliamentary activity and place the richness of their collections at the disposal of a wider audience. From the other perspective, parliamentary libraries should move toward what is essential for them and develop their digital services to the highest degree. In this case, they must remain close to parliamentary activities by focusing on their documentation role and cooperating with other parliamentary offices and departments. This choice could be labeled "being a library without looking like one." In order to face these issues and stay tightly linked to parliamentary activities, parliamentary libraries should completely change their appearance, their way of working, and their current priorities by giving up all redundancies and focusing on having highly specialized and trained information specialists, the widest possible digital collections, and an efficient local library and information network. This is why

some parliamentary libraries are experimenting with being open 24/7, having open-shelf collections available, and offering certain services to internal users as powerful retention tools for both old and new customers. From this perspective, they should give up some of their traditional prerogatives and focus on selecting from the huge amount of information available online.

To sum up, in order to maintain a prominent position, parliamentary libraries should either concentrate on their unique role or strive to meet more needs than in the past. Obviously, there is a continuum, and each library should find its own place; nonetheless, the theoretical assumption for doing so should be kept in mind. After all, many public and private services around us are at the same crossroads and are moving in one direction or another. In both cases, there could be renewed and recognizable added value to library services from the users' perspective.

In the end, are parliamentary libraries as traditionally conceived disappearing? Maybe. For sure they are dramatically changing. Is this good or not? From my point of view, it is not a matter of "good" or "bad." In 1931, Ranganathan wrote: "Libraries are living organisms" (p. 382). If true, this means that they are expected to adapt themselves to the context in which they perform, without giving up their intrinsic mission and role in society, and to give up useless theoretical prerogatives.

Notes

The article represents the personal views of the author and does not reflect the views of the Italian Senate of the Republic or its library.

1. For more information about currently existing parliamentary libraries, consult the World Directory on the Bundestag (German Bundestag, n.d.).
2. An example of a recently founded parliamentary library is the Iraqi parliamentary library whose staff and internal organization show an enthusiastic adhesion to the original spirit of these libraries as vital engines of the legislative process and instruments for democracy.
3. In addition to the cited references, see the results of a survey concerning the way in which the so-called next generation" faces life, politics, and society (Pew Research Center, 2007).

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