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Supporting Members: the evolution of European Parliament Library services since 2011[1]

by Alfredo De Feo and Karin Finer[2]

> *This article presents the evolution of the Library of the European Parliament over the last three years. It is the result of the work of the whole Library management team.*
> *In particular, thanks go to Mr Iain Watt[3] for his ability to inspire and his ideas and work on Library strategy over the past years.*

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1. Introduction

In keeping with the theme of the IFLA pre-conference 2013, this paper examines a) how the Library of the European Parliament supports legislators and the decision-making process and b) how it helps Members of the European Parliament to be well-informed.

In the light of previous work done on investigating the value of library services to Members and the EP Library's innovative 'new concept', this paper looks at some of the current projects to focus library services on Members' information needs, and what the future may hold. It builds on previous work by Iain Watt, presented at the IFLA conference in 2009 (published in 'IFLA journal' (1/2010), further revised in 'Library Trends' (4/2010)) and at the ECPRD conference in Copenhagen in 2012.

2. Supporting Members in their legislative work

2.1. Library services impact on decision-making: a theoretical approach

To make a valuable contribution to its organisation's output and be of high importance to stakeholders is naturally the ultimate goal of any supporting service. Striving to play an integral, or at least a considerable, role in legislative work or other parliamentary activities is therefore attractive for parliamentary libraries. However, it is difficult to measure, or even trace, library services' impact on legislative decision-making. No parliamentary library has, as far as is known, published strong evidence of this impact.[4] The arguments in this chapter are therefore to some extent provisional, and combine knowledge from some published works on the role of information in political decision-making and conclusions from operational experience of the European Parliament's Library.

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[1] This paper expresses the personal views of the authors and does not represent the official view of the European Parliament

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[4] Watt (2012), p.2

Members and their staff deal with a vast range of information, which has increased substantially in volume, format and media in recent years. Conversely, research by Ringe (2010) shows that Members of the European Parliament take decisions on rather limited information. Due to time pressure, originating from a high volume of business in the Parliament and a relative low level of support, it is not possible for Members to have knowledge about every single issue on the political agenda. Information and information processing are described as central to Members' work[5], the prime areas where libraries can make an impact if knowledge about Members' use of information is properly understood.

As pointed out by Watt (2010), the concept of bounded rationality and 'fast and frugal' decision-making based on 'sufficient' factual information is closer to Members' actual work. This is in contrast to unbounded rationality, a concept where Members take every decision based on 'full information'. The perception that a) Members need full information to take political decisions and b) that parliamentary libraries historically have evolved as a response to the true information needs of Members are myths. Instead of focusing on the quality of the information produced, parliamentary libraries would do better to focus on the quality of information used. Considering Members' limited time, speed of response and ease of use is crucial. Libraries should therefore provide 'just enough' information to support Members in their 'fast and frugal' decisions.[6]

Here we come up against the issue that library professionals may see delivering 'just enough' information as providing sub-standard results with poor quality. However, the starting point must be to concentrate on what Members really need rather than providing fully comprehensive information (as measured by professional standards). Again, library professionals must listen to what Members want and remain sufficiently flexible to understand the practical and environmental aspects of the political processes. Providing 'full information' simply takes too much time for Library staff to compile and for clients to process, and may only be delivered when it is too late to take a decision. As described below, libraries can still perform good quality work without supplying 'full information' for every political decision. A Fleishman-Hillard survey (2011) on how Members conduct research in their legislative work shows that they mainly search for media coverage and summaries of political issues. Member demand for simple summaries of policy issues indicates a "need for organisations to shift from an approach which has focused mainly on producing in-depth content to a more balanced strategy which also embraces accessible summaries, FAQs, etc."[7]

In the case of the European Parliament Library, how could these theoretical insights be useful for further service development? If the model of providing 'full information' does not correspond to Members information needs, is there another way to make a better contribution to their legislative work? These questions were firmly placed on the agenda by EP political authorities who in 2011 asked the Library to develop a 'new concept' for the Library of the future.

2.2 The 'new concept' for the European Parliament Library

In comparison with some of the most-respected libraries and research services in national parliaments, Members of the European Parliament had observed two

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[5] Ringe (2010), p.5-6
[6] Watt (2010). Changing visions of parliamentary libraries: from the Enlightenment to Facebook, p.48-54
[7] Fleishman-Hillard (2011), graph 7 [http://www.epdigitaltrends.eu/s2011/results-2011]

weaknesses at the EP Library; a) it delivered less analytical content and b) it was not as close to Members as some other national services. The review that followed, including visits to other parliaments, confirmed that the Library needed to deliver services that Members really wanted and valued. The EP Library was, in professional terms, very successful with satisfied clients. There was a steady increase in demand and a good track record for following best library practice. However, even if the Library delivered services similar to other parliamentary libraries its efforts were, in a sense, worthless if not recognised as valuable by the Members themselves.

The European Parliament's Bureau asked the Secretary-General to develop a 'new concept' of Library services in February 2011. The overall goal was to increase the value of the Library by three inter-linked supports;

- **engaging with Members** to bring the service closer to them and to better understand and meet all their information needs;
- increasing **visibility and accessibility** of the service to Members;
- building **knowledge** capital for the Parliament of the future.

Strongly supported by Members and the highest parliamentary authorities, the 'new concept' has since made steady progress in achieving its objectives. It is being implemented through a programme that should be completed by mid-2014.

The 'new concept' clearly focuses on value for Members. For the design of the programme, it was considered important to define and somehow measure 'value'. This seemed straightforward - to add value and become more visible to Members – but defining the precise meaning of 'value' actually became problematic. 'Value' is a word with multiple meanings, and it has no clear definition in management or marketing literature. Volume of use and client satisfaction had already been ruled out as measures, as not even a busy library with satisfied clients had been enough to impress the stakeholders. The same applied to any attempt to quantify the Library's contribution to the legislative work of the Parliament - it is too complex to measure. A question about 'value' was included in a survey for Members and their staff in 2011. The rating for this question was lower than the question on 'quality of services'. It seems that clients can be satisfied without necessarily regarding the service as being of maximum value.

The first conclusion reached was that value in the Parliament is defined by Members themselves. To our surprise (considering the 'success story'), the Library was an under-valued service and we urgently needed to address the areas of concern expressed in the 'new concept'. For Members and their staff, libraries cost both time and effort in comparison to searching Google and similar 'quick information' websites. The cheapest and quickest ways are often seen as the best choice. They are regarded as being 'free', while using the library has a 'cost' on account of the time and effort it takes to learn new systems. This is especially true if clients have little experience with information research or have no personal contact in the Library that can help out. In practice this means that we have to look at ways to increase the utility for Members, and at the same time lower the perceived costs of using the Library.[8]

This new strategic direction also initiated a discussion on the level of service the Library should provide. Is the 'full information' material provided actually used? Could we lower the costs and cut services without anyone even noticing? What do Members really want? The previous revelation that Members take 'fast and frugal' decisions based on limited information implies that the Library could reduce its efforts in

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[8] Watt (2012), p.6-7

processing a full range of high-quality products. Efforts could instead be focused on providing good-quality information that is easy to find and process. Furthermore, when offering a large choice of high quality-information products, libraries risk 'over-delivery' in relation to clients' real needs. As a consequence, costs are often out of proportion to the perceived value.[9] To be more valuable, information products need to be as close to their end-use as possible. As an example, if an information request is for a speech; main issues should be provided in a concise, summarised format and not be presented as a list of search engine results.

2.3 Providing analytical content

For the 'new concept', Members considered that the Library delivered too little analytical content. To respond to this concern and to increase the utility for individual Members, it was considered important to further develop the range and scope of the Library's analytical products. Innovation is strongly encouraged by Library management, and there is a continuous discussion on how new products could add value for Members. The Library provides several analytical information products, ranging from briefings to infographics. Summaries within answers to information requests are also regarded as analytical products.

For analytical work done in anticipation of client demand, a strategy has been developed to target delivery of products at the stages in the legislative process when they are most useful for Members. Coming back to Ringe's research, different types of Members are identified. For each piece of legislation there are; 'experts' (with in-depth knowledge), 'invested non-experts' (interested, but not well-informed) and 'indifferent Members' (not interested in the topic or any form of Library support).[10] This knowledge has been useful for the Library in determining how and when is the best time to deliver different types of analytical products. Even though the expert Member is already well-informed and gets strong support from other internal and external information providers during the legislative process, this category of Members should be targeted with the more in-depth and comprehensive analytical Library products. The experts often act as guides for other Members and give cues for decisions, so any information provided to them could potentially spread to others through a multiplier effect.

Considering that at least some Members form their opinion on legislation at an early stage, a good strategy for the Library is to focus on providing information as early as possible in the legislative process. Even better would be to catch a potential political issue already when it first emerges in the media. Analytical information products that summarise the issues at stake can help Members grasp the arguments and form an opinion. Once opinions are formed, Members usually only look for information in support of these points of view. There are however Members that need information later in the legislative process. The 'invested non-experts', Members who have an interest but don't need in-depth knowledge, can still need information closer to decision. This makes them a primary target market for the Library, who can provide lighter information products in the form of concise briefings and summaries just in time for voting.[11] Facilitating Members' participation in the legislative and political process in this way can allow the Library to make a real impact.

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[9] Watt (2012), p.8
[10] Ringe (2010), p.91-93
[11] Watt (2012), p.2-3

A further development of this strategy is the idea of following selected key policy themes from the early public opinion phase through to transposition into national law. Creating an information product in the early stages means that it is available if/when it becomes an EU issue. If so, the Library has already developed some knowledge on the topic and knows the most useful sources. It gives credibility and creates a positive image of the Library as being forward-thinking when contributing to key legislative dossiers. Concentrating input on the phases (pre/post-legislative and plenary) where parliamentary support services, lobbyists and other interest groups are least present makes great strategic sense.

3. <u>Keeping Members well-informed - increasing accessibility and visibility</u>

This chapter looks at how the European Parliament Library keeps Members informed and how it is addressing the second concern of the 'new concept', i.e. perceived Library distance from EP Members. There are of course many ways to inform Members, including the provision of analytical content (as previously described) and raising the level of policy knowledge amongst staff. Apart from more traditional Library tasks such as selecting relevant information resources etc., the EP Library is also faced with the additional challenge of achieving staff coverage for all 27 EU Member States and 23 official languages. The Library offers the possibility to ask questions in any of the EU official languages, and this service is appreciated by many clients.

The EP Library's mission statement aims at a 'well-informed European Parliament', dedicated to providing information of value to its Members. The statement was revised when the 'new concept' was adopted, and the status of individual Members as top priority clients was strengthened. Raising the Library's public profile and making Members more aware of its services are therefore crucial elements to keep the Parliament well-informed and add value. As a consequence, many of the 'new concept' projects aim at increasing the accessibility and visibility to Members.

Accessibility has recently been greatly improved by the development of online services for mobile devices, access to e-books, a well-designed new alert service and a comprehensive training programme (including e-learning). To further enhance response to Members, a new 'Hotline' procedure was implemented to prioritise and fast-track their requests coming from the Library's established contact points (online enquiry system, email, telephone). These requests take immediate priority over any 'non-Member' related work. Client feedback had shown that Members were not always contacted by Library staff in relation to their requests, and this was seen as a weak point. A system ensuring that Members are contacted for a reference interview within 3 hours of sending their enquiries is now in place. The vast majority (89%) of respondents to a client survey in December 2012 were positive about contact from Library staff. Some appreciated the opportunity to discuss the details of a request, while others valued the reassurance that work was in progress.

In addition to these improved online services, the Library has embarked upon several innovative outreach projects to increase awareness amongst Members' offices. A particular issue is that Library services were under-valued, or even completely unknown to some Members. If the Library is only used through Members' staff, there is a strong possibility that the work done is not credited to the Library. Trying to earn a place in Members' awareness is therefore a difficult, but very interesting challenge.

3.1 Creating partnerships with Members and their offices

Providing information is a competitive business, and ensuring timely delivery of targeted information products will probably never be enough to make a long-lasting impression on stakeholders. When comparing the Library services to other information providers during the 'value' discussion, it was found that the Library had no advantage in any single area of permanent value to most Members. Assistants, lobbyists and research functions deliver more customisation, personal and political knowledge, etc. etc. Providing high-quality, objective information (the traditional lead areas for the Library), did not however seem to be valued by all Members. A new angle was sought, and we concluded that the Library can, as the only information provider in the European Parliament, offer Members a <u>unique package</u> of services to improve the effectiveness of their offices.[12] While other EP information providers support Members with policy analysis, impact assessments etc. in relation to the legislative process, the Library concentrates on briefing and documentation services to all Members on any topic related to their mandates.[13] In addition, Library staff cover most EU languages/ countries, which creates a great opportunity to offer this fully comprehensive package. This includes many services, from training of Members' staff to providing a selection of tailor-made, good-quality information.

An interesting and innovative pilot project, aimed at testing the idea of providing Members with a dedicated individual Library contact or 'account manager', was introduced in September 2012. The account manager's task is to explain Library services, provide training, make sure that services are delivered as requested and raise awareness of the Library with Members themselves. This service package forms part of a structured support to the entire office, based on a long-term relationship rather than single library transactions. Building long-term relations with clients that can generate multiple transactions across multiple products brings more value in relation to its costs than single transactions for many clients. Making the Member aware of the project has the additional benefit of assigning value to the Library. As previously mentioned, the most relevant offer to Members is the 'unique package' to improve effectiveness, not to deliver 'better information'. Very importantly, this approach allows us to analyse and better understand Members information needs (which will in turn help to prioritise the daily work of the Library). This level of outreach requires the Library to be very flexible and demonstrate a real understanding of individual offices' needs. It is not only necessary to have a broad knowledge of Library services, the account managers also need to have a personal knowledge of the office and be able to adapt quickly to different demands.

The pilot project has been running for eight months to date. It started on a small scale to test the idea and allow for potential increases in demand or any other issue that might arise. It is currently being evaluated and the final outcome is not yet known. However, it can be said that the approach has, with very few exceptions, been well received by Members and the cooperation with many offices has been fruitful. The personal touch in assigning an individual contact person has been particularly appreciated by Members and their staff. Irrespective of the future of the project, it is clear that the Library, with its current staff, cannot serve all 754 Members in this intensive way. Participation most probably has to be based on self-selection by active Members who want, and believe they can, increase their impact with the Library's help.

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[12] Watt (2012), p.9
[13] Clark (2012), p.245

In attempting to bring Library services to where Members are, other new interesting ideas have been tried out. We have set up a 'pop-up library' close to public places such as coffee bars and committee meeting rooms in the parliament buildings. Visitors to these temporary 'mini libraries' can look at the latest briefings, borrow books, have a coffee or simply just have a friendly chat with Library staff. The idea has been well received (both amongst visitors and staff), and offers great opportunities to approach passing Members and other clients to market library services, take pictures for the Library Facebook page etc. These outreach initiatives have, together with organising popular book launches and debates in the Library's reading room, helped to raise the public profile.

3.2 Supporting Members communication with citizens

Social media has played an important role in making the Library more visible and to enable dissemination of information products to a wider audience. A strong reputation for the Library is seen as a professional asset for the whole Parliament, so strategies to boost recognition of the Library brand are in place. Selected library products are present on the internet since the beginning of 2012, instead of (as previously), only on the intranet site inside the Parliament. This has led to greater awareness, and the Library has managed to reach Members and other clients (who we might not have reached otherwise) through their use of internet search engines. It is hoped this strategy will help to further strengthen the long-term reputation of the Library and its information products.

Another important objective for developing presence on the internet was to facilitate Members re-use of Library products when communicating with citizens. The Library is present on social media with a blog, Twitter and Facebook accounts, which give all citizens free access to selected Library products. The blog is the hub that hosts and provides the content, making it the only place where visitors can view other Library products. The other social media channels (Twitter and Facebook), but also to a great extent search engines, attract traffic to the steadily growing blog. Facebook turned out to be very successful in creating a general reputation for the Library, but has not attracted that many Members directly. Twitter (operational from November 2012) is on the other hand popular amongst Members and growing very fast. Several Members have re-tweeted Library information, which enables reaching a much wider audience.

The blog was created because the Library urgently needed an externally available website to upload its products. It is seen as an intermediate step before a long-term solution can be presented. In the near future, the Library intends to deliver a new intranet site providing easy access to information sources. The site use should be optimised for Members and their staff through mobile devices or desktop PCs, and functions of interest mainly to Library professionals will have a lower priority. The second step is to deliver an external internet site, offering a similar user experience and selection of Library information to citizens. (At least some paid content will however only be available on the internal intranet site). The external site will be integrated with social media, and eventually replace the blog. Another linked project, proposed by the EP Secretary-General, aims at informing the wider legislative process by providing access to background documents used in preparation of legislation to citizens. The Library is, together with other Directorates-General, reviewing how this project could work in the context of the new external website.

4. <u>The future</u>

With European elections in 2014, more than 50% turnover in the Library's priority customer base is expected. The elections will bring new Members into the European Parliament, and the balance amongst the political groups could easily change. The whole Parliament, including the Library, is now looking at what information services can be offered to returning and a new, possibly younger, generation of Members. The future direction for the Library is difficult to predict in detail, which makes it all the more important to prepare for changes in the Library environment, EP organisation and internal cooperation patterns. It has just been announced that the Library will be part of a new Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services from 2014, which will have a significant impact on the internal organisation. Austerity measures across EU institutions will most certainly have an impact with continued pressure on budgets and staffing, and an increase in internal and external partnerships to raise efficiency and reduce costs is expected.

Radical developments in technology and online services are certain to occur, and the use of social media will most probably continue to grow. The effects are equally hard to predict, but work will for sure become more mobile and portable with new requirements of open communication and flexibility. The work on delivering value for individual Members will continue to be the over-riding strategic objective for the Library. Establishing contact with new Members and giving a positive image of the Library at the earliest possible stage is vital. This could be achieved through the new external Library website by offering, for example, a special candidates page with tailor-made information of interest to that particular Member.

Basic information research will certainly become easier and more automated in the future. Analytical work will therefore be required to add value to most information products. Members will demand more and more customised services, and the need for the Library to respond flexibly increases accordingly. It is therefore of great importance that topics and information sources are sufficiently understood. Specialisation, either in a subject area or service function, will become more important for Library staff in order to deliver analytical information products. An ability to present, educate, train, network and sell will be equally important.

In preparation for welcoming the new parliament, the Library is undertaking a zero-based review of all its information products and services (meaning imagining we had no products at all). Which products would then be of most value to new and returning Members? In what order of priority? How could they support Members' legislative work? The starting point for this reflection is the accumulated knowledge about value for Members and what would work well in the online environment. New innovation of products and services is encouraged, as well as proposing elimination if costs are higher than the perceived added value. With more staff time spent on increased demand from the highest priority clients, less time will be spent on areas with lower priority. Outsourcing or discontinuation of lower-priority services (i.e. not directly related to delivering value for Members) might come onto the agenda. It may even be possible to outsource basic information research and briefings work to external suppliers with access to a range of relevant databases.

To conclude, the last three years have brought many changes but evolution is still underway. The EP Library will continue to adapt further to contribute to the development, and success, of the Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services.

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