The Parliamentary Library as a Bridge between Congress and Citizenship: The Mexican Chamber of Deputies Reference Service

Fabiola Elena Rosales Salinas

Abstract

The scope of parliamentary information is vast and is enhanced by communication technologies. Therefore, parliamentary libraries face the challenge of offering services to Members of Parliament (MPs) that are faster, more efficient, and more diverse. In Mexico the Parliamentary Library represents one of the bridges to democracy, a conduit that disseminates information generated by the Mexican Congress. The Internet ensures the public's access to parliamentary information. But this is not enough. The human factor, the librarian's experience and expertise, is fundamental in assisting citizens to retrieve relevant information. This paper highlights the new services provided by the Analysis, Information and Documentation Center (CEDIA) of the Mexican Chamber of Deputies, particularly the products used by the Reference Service to provide information and assistance to the Mexican MP staff as well as to the general public seeking government information.

The role of information in the daily lives of individuals and institutions has transcendental values, especially when used to assist in decision-making processes related to conflict resolution. Congressional information plays a key role in the legislatures in each of the functions they perform: legislative, financial, budgetary, judicial, administrative, deliberative, control, and political. Democratic governments, which are an expression of citizenship, must generate and provide access to information in a transparent manner. This is why Article Six of the Constitution of the United Mexican States stipulates that "The right to information is guaranteed by the state."

The legislative library is the information unit responsible for serving legislators. Its main objective is to focus on the information needs of the

Members of Parliament (MPs). In addition, the hallmark of this library is to ensure that the information provided to MPs is of high quality to enable them to design efficient legal instruments and to assess and oversee the government's public policies. The reference service is defined as the area responsible for intellectual assistance to readers so that they can rationally and methodically extract resources from the bibliographic and documentary library collections (Martínez, 1989). Reference librarians work directly with users, specifically identifying their information needs with the goal of satisfying them immediately.

Those who provide legislative information play a key role as transmitters, interpreters, and synthesizers of information to the Parliament; therefore, the information delivered must be accurate, accessible, and provided in a timely fashion (Robinson, 1999). Reference librarians must be a proactive group of information providers, the services offered must be of high quality and dynamic, and the information must be current and accurate. Furthermore, personal interactions between the reference librarian and the end user must create relationships that encourage trust through objectivity, political neutrality, and confidentiality (Liahut, 2003).

If it is true that the Mexican legislative library designs services ad hoc to meet the needs of MPs, it should be noted that it also democratizes information with the help of the Internet portal. The website has a wealth of information, but the role of the library staff is very important for organizing the information. Librarians are responsible for customer service. They represent the image the library projects to its customers and make end users feel as though the infrastructure is at their service. These objectives are met through a correct attitude of continuous availability (López, 2004).

THE MEXICAN LEGISLATIVE LIBRARY: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The history of providing information to legislators goes back to the colonial period of New Spain. During a secret session of the Cadiz' Courts on November 5, 1810, members recognized a need for information for their interventions and parliamentary work. This resulted in the establishment of the first Library Committee and the creation of the first library in the Hispanic world (Fernández & Martínez, 2004).

The foundation of the Library of Congress in Mexico is documented in the Congressional Records at the beginning of the postindependence era of Mexican history. During the March 2, 1822, session, the proposal to form the Library of the Courts was presented. The proposal was discussed and approved during the March 8 session. This represents the first decree of the Mexican nation in relation to the country's legal deposit. On April 25, 1823, the Constituent Congress legally established the library through Decree 327 (Fernández & Martínez, 2004).

In 1917 the Constituent Congress passed a proposition to integrate the Library and Archives Commission into one institution. On August 24, 1935, a bill was presented to open the doors of the Deputies' Library to the general public. On November 12, 1935, there was another bill concerning the organization of the Library of Congress. The following year, on September 4, 1936, the Thirty-sixth Legislature founded the Library of the Honorable Congress, also open to the general public and located in the first quarter of Mexico City's Historic Center near the schools and universities of the nation's capital. During those years, the Library of Congress served both as a public library and a university library. Over time, the services this library offered and the tasks of the legislators grew apart, and new departments or units were created to improve the process of providing information to the MPs.

In the late 1970s, the library changed its name to Information Center, setting a pattern for the library's name to be changed periodically:

- During the Fiftieth Legislature (1976–79), the Library of the Chamber of Deputies changed the name to Documentation and Information Center.
- During the Fifty-first Legislature (1979–82), the name was CADI. Supposedly this name was formed with the initials of the Chamber of Deputies plus Information, but no documentation exists to support the fact.
- During the Fifty-second Legislature (1982–85), it was called INFOCADI, which stood for Information Center of the Chamber of Deputies.
- The Fifty-third Legislature (1985–88) gave it the name of LIS, Legislative Information Service.
- The Fifty-fifth Legislature (1991–94) reopened it under the name of SIID, Documentation and Information Integrated System.
- The Fifty-eighth Legislature (2000–2003) named it the General Direction of Libraries.
- The Fifty-ninth Legislature (2003–6) called it CEDIA, Analysis, Information and Documentation Center.

The latest designation has brought organizational restructuring in that the Archives and the Legislative Museum (both independent before) as well as the Research and Analysis Services are all now part of CEDIA.

Reference Services at the Chamber of Deputies Library: The Present

There are many services offered by CEDIA, but we will focus on the reference service. Policy makers require relevant, objective, and timely information tailored to their needs along with selective and rapid documentation services, all of which are crucial for their important activities. Based on the above, a professional team consisting of former faculty members

who used to teach reference services at the library school was appointed by the Fifty-eighth Legislature in 2000. It is assumed that until this date there were reference activities during each period listed, however, no documentary evidence was located to this effect.

The reference staff is expected to be prepared to respond promptly to requests and possibly to anticipate the needs that MPs might have. On the one hand, according to Merlo (2000, p. 97), the reference service in general consists of the following:

- *Information.* Responding to the information requests received. The query could be a simple browse or may involve specialized research.
- *Training.* Teaching patrons how to use the collections and how to locate secondary information sources.
- *Guidance.* Advice is provided on the further use of special collections and papers.

On the other hand, according to Escalona (2004, p. 16), there are two ways to provide reference assistance:

- *Direct Service* involves individual assistance to users, including specific questions, guidance on searches for information, and guidance to patrons regarding the use of library resources.
- *Indirect Service* is related to the preparation of tools to improve access to collections.

Based on the latter definition, some of the services and products offered by the Mexican Chamber of Deputies Reference Service to legislators, the congressional staff, and external users will be featured.

To provide direct service, information requests are received by phone or email. Generally the user is given instructions for efficient use of information sources such as the *Daily Debates,* the *Parliamentary Gazette,* and the subscription databases. At times a compilation of different kinds of documents and bibliographies on a topic previously defined by the user are produced. In addition, the library has implemented a Selective Dissemination of Information service consisting of sending bibliographies (a selection of books, articles, statistics, court decisions, research, multimedia, and other documents) and other relevant information related to bills to parliamentary committees via e-mail.

As part of the indirect service, Internet guides and thematic compilations are prepared for the public. An alert about parliamentary laws is also published and sent periodically to members of the Online Parliamentary Researchers Network (REDIPAL by its initials in Spanish). Information organized through indexing techniques helps the user find information quickly in a document and get an idea of its content to see if it is relevant to his or her information needs. This is the reason for publishing the

Mexican Parliamentary Encyclopedia index. All these indirect services can be consulted on the Chamber of Deputies' website (http://www.diputados .gob.mx/cedia/sia/re.htm).

Reference Librarians

Parliamentary reference librarians are not traditional librarians. They are information agents who play a key role as information transmitters, interpreters, and synthesizers. Their main role is to find accurate information, corroborate and integrate it with other materials, synthesize it to a size that the patron can digest, and disseminate it as widely as possible in a nonpartisan manner and as objectively as possible so that it can be trusted (Robinson, 1999).

It is very important to internally evaluate reference service achievements and failures in order to optimize the service and to improve the library's products. An external evaluation is undertaken by the Comptroller of the House of Deputies, which quantifies the queries received and the final information product delivered. An internal assessment is conducted through a database in which there is a record for each and every user. It registers their data, lapse of time required for consultations, description of the request, and details of the documents used to answer the query. The assessment has also implemented a customer satisfaction index whereby each customer has to rate the service received. However, the best evaluations are those received daily and directly from the users. These are what encourage us, the parliamentary reference librarians, to continue treating them with the same commitment.

The Parliamentary Library: A Bridge between Congress and Citizenship

The website of the Chamber of Deputies offers access to the thematic content of each of the departments that produce or manage parliamentary documentation, thus diversifying and specializing the relevant web-based information. In thinking of the old refrain, "information/ knowledge is power," technology offers a powerful infrastructure that can benefit people (Bustamante, 2007). This reinforces the idea that the Chamber of Deputies website, by offering transparent information and worldwide access to a rich collection of documents, enriches the consolidation of the knowledge society not only in Mexico but throughout the world.

Over the years, the website has increased its content and improved its interface, thus becoming more intuitive and user-friendly. But with exponential information growth occurring daily and with the impressive accumulation of data being published on the Internet, the existence of an information facilitator/interpreter is becoming imperative. Citizens interested in cameral history can search through the Chamber of Deputies

records from 1917 to date, as well as in the *Daily Debates*. At present, each session can be viewed in real time, thanks to the video library, and can be read in the stenographic version.

Citizens who are part of an educational, media, or business institution, or individuals interested in parliamentary work can consult the publication that features activities of the Chamber of Deputies, the *Parliament Gazette*, which, since its creation in 1997, has been published online. It contains bills, nonlegislative propositions, guides, minutes of committee meetings, attendance and votes of the Deputies in the plenary parliamentary agreements, work plans and reports, invitations, calls, reports of parliamentary visits, and other relevant information. There are also print publications that have recorded more than a century of legislative activity. Both online and traditional formats allow a variety of searching. The website makes it possible to find the composition of the legislature by parliamentary group, by gender, alphabetically, and by method of election. It also offers summaries and relevant information about each session. Thanks to the Internet, we can access the research that has been conducted at different study centers, for example, Analysis and Research Services (SIA), as well as the committee's publications.

The information published by CEDIA contains the legal framework of the Chamber of Deputies, current federal law, amendments to the constitution, the OPAC, the virtual library (containing over a hundred full-text works published in books and journals), the complete collection of the works from SIA, the Online Parliamentary Researchers Network (REDI-PAL), and some documents of the Legislative Museum. Thanks to the Federal Law of Transparency and Access to Government Public Information, citizens can send their requests to the Transparency Portal and expect reference librarians to address them in a timely manner.

The Social Communication Department publishes the activities of MPs (such as newsletters and photo galleries), checks over the mass media for relevant news, and produces television shows to spread the parliamentary culture throughout the country, among other activities. All the services described above and many other services are available on the website to serve the people. It is extremely important to showcase them and to disseminate them to create awareness about their existence so that an ever-growing number of people can start using them.

CONCLUSION

Ongoing communication and response to requests for information from the Mexican people is a very important task and responsibility of parliamentary reference librarians. If the librarians are not able to answer with the level of ability and efficiency that is expected of them, the users may develop a negative image not only of the library, but also of the entire Congress. Hence, maintaining high quality information delivery

is expected of parliamentary reference librarians along with accuracy, efficiency, objectivity, and political impartiality.

REFERENCES

Bailey, C. W. (2005). *The role of reference librarians in institutional repositories.* Retrieved March 3, 2009, from http://escholarlypub.com/cwb/reflibir.pdf

Bustamante Donas, J. (2007). Los nuevos derechos humanos: gobierno electrónico e informática comunitaria. *Revista Venezolana de Información Tecnología y Conocimiento, 4*(2), 13–27.

Díaz Santana, H. (2000). Los servicios de información y asesoría en el Poder Legislativo mexicano: Una reforma pendiente. In G. Pérez & A. Martínez (Eds.), *La Cámara de Diputados en México* (pp. 179–218). México: M. A. Porrúa.

Cavero Pérez, E. (2003). Sistemas de información e investigación parlamentaria. *Boletín del Centro de Estudios Sociales y de Opinión Pública, 3,* 8. Retrieved October 23, 2009, from http://www.diputados.gob.mx/cesop/boletines/no3/3.pdf

Escalona Ríos, L. (2004). La evaluación del servicio de consulta ¿calidad o cantidad? *Biblioteca Universitaria, 7*(1), 12–22.

Fernández de Zamora, R. M., & Martínez Leal, M. (2004). *La biblioteca del H. Congreso de la Unión 1821–1994: Su historia, sus recursos, sus servicios.* México: Senado de la República.

Kohl, E, (Ed.). (1997). *Lineamientos para bibliotecas legislativas.* La Haya: IFLA.

Liahut Baldomar, D. M. (2003). *Pautas generales para un servicio de información parlamentaria.* México: Cámara de Diputados, Dirección General de Bibliotecas.

López de Quintana, E. (2004). Servicio a usuarios y relaciones interpersonales en el ámbito de los sistemas de información. In J. Magán Wals (Coord.), *Tratado básico de biblioteconomía.* (5th ed.) (pp. 319–340). Madrid: Complutense.

Martínez de Sousa, J. (1989). Bibliotecario de referencia. In J. Martinez de Sousa (Ed.), *Diccionario de bibliología y ciencias afines* (p. 101). Madrid: Fundación Germán Sánchez Ruipérez.

Merlo Vega, J. A. (2000). El servicio bibliotecario de referencia. *Anales de documentación, 3,* 93–126. Retrieved October 23, 2009, from http://revistas.um.es/analesdoc/article/viewFile/2471/2461

Nair, R. (2005). Information services to the legislators. *Kelpro Bulletin, 9*(1–2), 59–64.

Ortega Martínez, J. (2004). Sociedad de la información y derechos humanos de la cuarta generación. Un desafío inmediato para el derecho constitucional. In M. Carbonell (Ed.), *Derecho constitucional: Memoria del Congreso Internacional de Culturas y Sistemas Jurídicos Comparados* (pp. 663–684). México: UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas.

Robinson, W. (1999). *El papel que juega la información en una legislatura democrática.* México: Cámara de Diputados, Sistema Integral de Información y Documentación.

Fabiola Elena Rosales Salinas started to work as a reference librarian at the Mexican Chamber of Deputies at the end of 2000. In 2006 she became the head of the reference section. She is a member of REDIPAL (Online Parliamentary Researchers Network, for its acronym in Spanish). Following her attendance at courses on draft bills, transparency, archives organization, parliamentary research, and legislative journalism, she started teaching specialty courses such as "Legislative Work: An Introduction." She has published her research in *Liber: Revista de Bibliotecología* and has contributed to the TV show *Vuelta a la hoja* (The Turning Page) broadcast via the closed circuit television of the Mexican Chamber of Deputies.