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# *Legislators and Newspapers: A Preliminary Survey*

Gaston Bernier

**M**embers of Parliament and politicians cannot limit themselves to looking at only one source of information. In the course of their work, they rely on a wide variety of sources. Sometimes they consult their colleagues, sometimes they look to specialists, sometimes they draw inspiration from their constituents.

Any regular visitor to a parliament building will readily acknowledge the importance of newspapers in these halls: newspapers are read at breakfast, political attachés and colleagues of parliamentarians always have a newspaper in their hands. Even during sittings of the House, they continue to catch up with the latest news by reading media reviews.

It seems obvious that newspapers, current affairs and the news are of primary importance for the political world. However, the extent of the written and electronic press phenomenon as a source of information remains to be assessed. In this study we will try to do this in three separate ways. First, we will give you the highlights of a survey of members of the Quebec National Assembly; second, we will try to assess the degree to which newspapers are consulted for question period, finally, we will evaluate newspaper holdings and services related to newspapers in parliamentary libraries, for if it is true that the news provides important information to parliamentarians, then newspapers must also play a very important role.

During the months of September and October, a questionnaire was sent to a total of 86 backbenchers in the National Assembly. The purpose of the questionnaire was to assess parliamentarians' view of the utility of the news and newspapers in comparison with other sources of information. However, the popularity of newspapers is not as clear-cut as we had assumed. Perhaps the questionnaire (with only ten questions) was too short and perhaps it was too rudimentary. Since we did not want to take up too much of the member's time, we made it possible to answer all the questions in 10 minutes.

The first question was, "What do you think is the most useful source of information?" Members were asked to identify the most useful source from among a list of seven – constituents' mail, telephone calls, newspapers, media

reviews, press clippings, radio and television news, and the full proceedings of debates. Overall, 39 per cent checked the media reviews, 18 per cent newspapers and 12 per cent the press clippings service. A small number went with telephone calls (9 per cent) and constituents' mail (6 per cent). Radio and television news, and proceedings of debates, were completely ignored or considered unimportant.

The second question asked each respondent to arrange the sources of information listed in the first question in order of usefulness.

In general, the choices made in the first question were confirmed. The media review continued in first place and was followed by newspapers, radio and television news, press clippings and telephone calls. Once again, little importance was given to the proceedings of debates and mail to members from constituents. We must however avoid hasty conclusions: if a weighing were to be given, the order might change.

The next question dealt with the most reliable source of information. We found it interesting and somehow surprising that the highest marks went to mail from constituents (39 per cent) when this source of information had been almost totally disregarded until this question. Other highly reliable sources were telephone calls and newspapers (15 per cent each), the record of proceedings (12 per cent) and press clippings (3 per cent).

The fourth and fifth questions dealt with the source of information preferred by members depending on whether they were in their riding or in the capital.

Briefly, when members were in their own riding, it appeared that they greatly preferred the local press (60 per cent). The percentages fell rapidly: 18 per cent of members checked telephone calls and 9 per cent correspondence.

Responses were more evenly distributed when members were in the capital. Major daily newspapers were considered more important than local newspapers but they did not hold a monopoly: 36 per cent of members felt that they were most important, the same number felt that the media review was most important, and 18 per cent (half as many) said that telephone calls were their preferred source of information.

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The record of proceedings, and radio and television news, appear relatively less important, no matter whether the member is in his home riding or the capital.

The seventh question read as follows: "Among official publications, which are the most useful to you as a member: annual reports from departments and agencies, revised statutes, regulations, record of proceedings, press releases, statistical publications, texts of press conferences, media reviews (such as *Argus*), studies, reports of committees, task forces, and so forth, and other sources?" As you can see, the list contained both publications related to current affairs and others of a less transient nature. Members once again favoured publications of short-lived value: the media review (rather artificially classified as an official publication) was rated the highest (23 per cent), followed by annual reports and press releases (13 per cent each), Regulations and revised statutes came at the bottom of the list.

The eighth question, and the last question for which I will give the results, dealt with the publications that a library should have on hand. It read as follows: "Among the following holdings, identify the two that are the most important for a parliamentary library to keep." Six were listed: newspapers, official documents, monographs and books, scientific magazines, reference works and, finally, brochures. This time, the newspapers were beaten, for members rated official documents the highest (35 per cent), followed by reference works (23 per cent), newspapers (20 per cent), monographs (17 per cent) and, in last place, scientific magazines (12 per cent).

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## Preliminary Observations

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I think that we can state that current affairs counts for a great deal among members in their daily lives, and that they are very appreciative when it is given to them in a consolidated form, in a manner that is manageable and easily digested. Furthermore, it seems that despite a marked preference for journalistic writing, members look nostalgically to the wealth of so-called official documents and would like libraries to keep them.

Members' perception of the importance of the press as a source of information is interesting from several points of view. However, the exactitude and fairness of this perception still have to be assessed. In order to do so, we scanned a number of plenary sessions in the National Assembly, chosen at random, and we paid special attention to the question period: the weeks we selected were February 5 to 8, 1963, December 13 to 16, 1982 and March 17 to 19, 1987.

In total, over the eight sittings when question period was held, the Government was asked 54 questions on current affairs. In 12 out of the 54 questions, members specifically identified newspapers as a source of information or the starting point for their interventions.

This means that on 12 occasions members referred to newspapers in their questions. I will give examples from among the 12 cases found. On February 8, 1963, Mr. Maurice Bellemare asked about the traffic on the Sainte-Anne-de-la-Perade Bridge as follows: "[trans] ...I saw again, in the newspapers, a statement by the Minister that there was urgent work to be done there...." Example 2: on December 13, 1982, Mr. Polack asked a question about the language of government advertising and his introduction read, "[trans] I have read and I have in front of me a copy of *The Gazette* for December 1...."

In all, if the weeks selected are representative, approximately one-fifth of all questions addressed to members are based on the written press. This is probably a very low estimate for it is very possible that the source used for the question was not always explicitly mentioned. I think that if we systematically compared the oral questions with the newspapers for the preceding days, we would find other relations and connections between the questions and the news. Furthermore, the replies to the tenth question of the survey provided by the members of the National Assembly indicate that newspapers are used much more frequently than a review of the proceedings of the debates would lead us to believe.

The question read as follows: "What are the sources of information that are used for preparing or planning question period? Please name three."

The questionnaires received up to now show that newspapers are the documents or sources used most frequently during the preparation of question period. More than four out of five members identified them specifically. Three out of five members cited radio and television news as an important source of information. In all, newspapers, radio and television excluded almost all other sources.

The usefulness of the media as a source of information can also be measured by the number of subscriptions and collections in parliamentary libraries, services downstream from the first publication (media reviews, repeat broadcasts of radio and television bulletins) and work instruments designed to make it easier to consult back issues of newspapers.

One conclusion must be drawn in this regard: parliamentary libraries are major subscribers to and users of newspapers.

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## International Comparisons

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In Europe, results of an inventory of services provided in the parliaments of member States of the European community were published in 1980. Statistics were given on the number of subscriptions held by each institution. Two points come to light in a review of these statistics: there is considerable difference between libraries: for instance, regarding only

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newspapers, the library of the Luxembourg assembly received eight, and the lower houses of the British and Belgian parliaments received 100 each; if we exclude the Luxembourg extreme, the average number of subscriptions to newspapers was 85.

A few special cases in other areas deserve some attention. According to the study, the library of the lower house in Denmark received 80 newspapers and 25 local newspapers at the beginning of the 1980s. In France at that time, the library of the National Assembly received 584 newspapers, periodicals and reviews. It is difficult to compare this figure with the average of 85 established earlier. Fortunately, a more recent publication, published under the direction of Mr. D. Engerfield, states that the institution makes available to French members the Paris dailies (about ten) and the 67 newspapers from outside Paris in their 300 different editions. This information seems to indicate a certain infatuation with this type of document. Similarly, the case in the German Bundestag is interesting: the library received 220 national and foreign newspapers and, in addition, 280 media reviews.

The space given to newspapers in Canadian legislative libraries is similar to that in comparable institutions in Europe.

For many years, the library of the Canadian Parliament has made a wide range of newspapers available to its members. A study on the libraries' research holdings published in 1974 by the National Library of Canada states, "[trans] It is interesting to note that the Library of Parliament receives approximately 640 daily and weekly Canadian newspapers reserved for the exclusive use of members and senators, Supreme Court judges and parliamentary correspondents." At present, the Library receives 620 newspapers, including 129 dailies and 473 weeklies.

In Toronto, the library at Queen's Park received 298 newspapers in March 1987 and 304 in March 1988.

At the National Assembly in Quebec City, tradition prevails: the library subscribed to 251 newspapers in 1986/87 and 254 in 1987/88.

In and of themselves, these data do not give a complete picture; they are above all ambiguous, for the situation may well be the same in other types of libraries such as university and municipal libraries. Mini-surveys of Laval University and the municipal library in Quebec City show that they receive 120 and 46 newspapers respectively. This means that the library of the National Assembly receives twice as many newspapers as Laval University and five times as many as the Gabrielle Roy library.

Therefore, legislative libraries are large consumers of newspapers and this is probably because of the interest parliamentarians and their colleagues have in these publications.

The importance of the news and current affairs in general for parliamentarians is also illustrated by the existence of

press clipping services within the parliamentary libraries, by the existence of thematic or subject files, and by the broad distribution of the clippings.

In the European community, five parliamentary libraries out of nine, or six out of ten if the European Parliament itself is included, provide a press information service, which is mentioned specifically in the description of services. It is very possible that other libraries provide the same type of service without identifying it as such.

Canadian parliamentary libraries provide a similar service. Teams tasked with scanning and preparing files of press clippings were set up in the sixties in the Library of Parliament, in the seventies in the National Assembly, and later in the Ontario Legislative Assembly.

The popularity of press clippings in parliaments, as shown by the existence of specialized services, can also be measured by the wide distribution of photocopies of newspaper articles.

In Toronto at the Legislative Assembly, an average of 1,700,000 photocopies of newspaper articles were distributed between 1983/84 and 1987/88 – 13,000 photocopies of articles per year per member. At the National Assembly, the floodgates are not open as widely, but newspaper articles are also distributed here in industrial quantities: more than 800,000 photocopies per year have been sent to various users since 1983, which represents about 6,400 copies per member.

The usefulness of information taken from newspapers is also confirmed by the establishment and continual updating of clippings files and especially by how intensively they are consulted.

In 1985/86 at the Library of Parliament, users had access to 2,961 current files and 4,293 so-called historical files. During that year, the collection was used to find answers to 5,168 questions submitted to the Library, and the files have been consulted nearly 16,000 times in total.

In Quebec City, the staff at the library of the National Assembly updates on a daily basis nearly 450 files of articles from newspapers. However, the files seem to be consulted a great deal less frequently than at the federal library: only 700 questions were answered in 1987/88. This may be a consequence of the wide distribution of newspaper articles.

Coming after the number of subscriptions and the establishment of clippings files, a third indicator – the establishment of alphabetical tables and indexes – makes it possible to illustrate the usefulness of news in the eyes of parliamentarians and their colleagues.

At the Quebec National Assembly, an alphabetical file of news and articles published in a number of Quebec's daily newspapers was set up between 1956 and 1966. This achievement is forgotten today when there are so many newspaper indexes and essential needs have been met. However, the index that was begun in 1956 is none the less symptomatic.

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Other Canadian legislative libraries have developed the same type of system. I am thinking in particular of British Columbia, and there are no doubt others.

In Europe, newspapers are indexed in one form or another at the libraries of the Belgian parliament, the Danish Folketing and the French National Assembly.

The current presence on the market of excellent alphabetical tables for national papers, at least in North America, has led to the abandonment of the National Assembly's indexing program. It is possible that it may be revived, for local and regional newspapers are still not indexed and are difficult to access. I think that sooner or later the needs and desires of parliamentarians will lead to the re-establishment of some kind of indexing program that is of course complementary to the indexes that are currently available.

The compulsive consumption by parliamentarians of any type of news has produced a new offspring: media reviews. Since 1977 the Quebec National Assembly has published during the session a daily bulletin containing a selection of articles that might be of interest to the members, their colleagues and parliamentary staff. With a limited number of copies and limited distribution, this periodical has been enormously successful and is in its eleventh year of publication. Other media reviews have sprung up since: *Quorum* at the federal parliament, and *Toronto Press Today* and *Provincial Press* at the Ontario Legislative Assembly.

The services described above linked with the news – newspapers in their original form, clippings, indexes and media reviews – are related to traditional forms of support. They probably will not disappear because of new technology, but newspapers and their by-products will have to compete with newcomers to the market which contribute to the diversification of sources of information: repeat broadcasts of television news programs in the assemblies' internal broadcasting networks, and their establishment of tape and audiovisual libraries, and, finally, on-line use of textual data banks for certain newspapers.

The systematic playback of television news programs in the internal communication networks and the broadcasting of public affairs programs on these networks on request is relatively recent. The Canadian federal Parliament has used this service for a few years. The Quebec Parliament recently

followed suit. If the others do not already have this service, they will soon.

The Library of Parliament also have an audiovisual library which had more than 3,000 titles in 1985/86, 560 more than 1984/85. At the beginning of October 1988, Quorum mentioned video cassette number 3186.

Video cassettes appear to respond to a need if we look at statistics: 67 cassettes were loaned in 1981/82, 600 were loaned in 1985/86.

Finally, the last piece of the picture: textual data bases. For a number of months, and years in some cases, it has been possible to have direct access to the texts of some newspapers: the *Financial Times*, the *Toronto Star* and the *Ottawa Citizen*.

I have not seen any statistics on the use of these data banks by parliamentary libraries. However, if we rely on the intense use of printed papers, we have serious reason to believe that parliamentary libraries are major users of these data banks. On the other hand, on-line access to computerized newspaper indexes may suggest trends that can be observed in the future. At the National Assembly, Quebec was the third most frequently consulted data base in 1987/88, behind *Repéré* and *Dobis*. The National Newspaper Index was used eight times less frequently than Quebec.

These scanty data seem to indicate: 1) the importance of databases on current affairs, and 2) that their use is more frequent when they concern the news about a specific political entity.

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## Conclusion

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The efforts and the resources devoted by parliamentary libraries to services involving newspapers are significant. The diversity of services provided is rarely found in other types of libraries. One who was unaware of the milieu might well believe that unjustified importance is granted to this source of information. It has been shown that current affairs are a basis for and are used by parliamentarians in preparing for question period. In addition, the results of the survey show that the members always look to the media to find the line that they or their party could develop, or the crack that needed to be sealed urgently. ■