



Submitted on: 7/7/2014

Engaging Citizens in Parliament: A Comparison of Parliamentary Information Services Extension and Library Networks

Ellie Valentine

Free-lance Librarian, Gloversville, NY

E-mail address: ellieval@aol.com



Copyright © 2014 by Ellie Valentine. This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

Abstract:

Working with parliaments in different environments over the past 20 years, I wanted to share some experiences of how working with libraries can help parliaments better engage the public.

I worked in Ukraine in two different periods 1994-2000 and 2008-2013 both with the national parliament and with the legislature of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. From 2002-2005 I worked with the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia. From 2005-2008 I worked with the bicameral Parliament of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and four provincial assemblies and in 2013, I worked with the Parliament of Bangladesh. In each of these environments our projects addressed information and research needs of parliaments and the engagement of citizens in the legislative process.

In my paper I will address what challenges each of these legislative bodies faced in engaging citizens and in informing members through library and research services in that particular period of their institutional development. I will also address the role of libraries and library associations in those environments and how they became partners with the legislatures in one way or another to help raise the level of information services and citizens' understanding of the role of the legislature and the role of citizens in the legislative process.

Each of these countries faced significant periods of transition in which their legislatures were also changing their role. The legislatures were also adjusting to the increased role that citizens were having in the legislative process and members' increased need for information. The paper will present some of the innovations and partnerships that helped these legislatures in their transition period as well as on the increased role of civil society in these societies.

While comparing these different environments of these legislatures, common threads of development will be revealed.

Keywords: Parliament, Ukraine, Armenia, Pakistan, Bangladesh.

Introduction

Working on my degree in Library and Information Science at Indiana University (IU) in the late 1980s I became interested in the work of special libraries and especially government documents and legal librarianship. Upon completing my M.L.S., I became the Associate Director of the Russian and East European Institute (REEI) at IU. In our work at REEI we had the great fortune and opportunity to work closely with our congressman Lee Hamilton, then the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee in the US House of Representatives. Chairman Hamilton was well respected by both sides of the aisle and always felt that the university was a resource not only for the State of Indiana but with 7 national area studies program was a national resource for schooling the next cadre of foreign policy specialists whether in government, the private sector or civil society. I once attended a “town hall meeting” that Chairman Hamilton held for voters in his district at the Monroe County Public Library in Bloomington, Indiana. This meeting would have a lasting impression on me – both as someone who would later work with legislators and as a young library professional. I found it so appropriate that Congressman Hamilton would choose the public library – not the student union, not the faculty club of the university – for his town hall meeting in Bloomington. I noted at the time that the public library often would serve as a place for meetings with government officials and representatives. It was a place where everyone was welcome, it was centrally located in the community and it had facilities that could accommodate either a large crowd or a small focused group. This was the first connection I made between the legislature and the public library.

Years later I would find myself repeatedly referring to Congressman Hamilton in the context a post-retirement project he initiated – [the Center on Congress at Indiana University](#) – a fabulous resource for citizens and especially teachers and librarians who want to promote the understanding of representative governance in their schools or civil society organizations who want to promote democratic process and citizen participation in their communities. My interest in his Center on Congress stemmed from my new professional involvement with parliaments through my work on USAID legislative capacity building projects. From 1994-2000 and again 2008-2013 I worked with the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada (Supreme Council) as well as with the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea in Ukraine (2009-2013); from 2002-2005 I worked with the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia; and in 2005-2008 with the National Parliament and four provincial assemblies in Pakistan. To each of these projects I brought my librarian’s perspective on democratic processes and citizen participation. In this paper, I hope to share how that perspective contributed to finding or observing a nexus between the parliament and the library world.

Ukraine

In the early 1990s the US Congress’s Frost Task Force worked with colleagues in the parliaments of Eastern Europe and included the work of the Library of Congress and Congressional Research Service with parliamentary partners to build strong library and research services for parliaments. Those efforts have been described in great detail by our colleagues from those libraries on a number of occasions at previous IFLA conferences. Unfortunately the LoC/CRS efforts in newly independent Ukraine came somewhat later and did not meet with the same level of success as in other countries as the Frost Task Force efforts were curtailed in 1995. However, it must be acknowledged that one great success in Ukraine was the support of an excellent IT division and legislative documentation system.

Our USAID Parliamentary Development Project for Ukraine (run by Indiana University and known as IUPDP) worked with the parliament as a whole and was not focused primarily on the library and research services – and indeed in the early years was minimally focused on staff of the parliament. However, my librarian’s perspective was applied in other ways in IUPDP. We produced briefing papers and translation of scholarly articles for MPs and their staff in Ukrainian. In late 1995 I was honored to be invited to the founding conference of the Ukrainian Library Association. There I met a young library director who had just returned from the Library of Congress and was extremely excited about what she had seen in the US public libraries and government documents libraries, especially the Federal Depository Library program. I told her about what we were doing in our project with parliament and together we decided that the papers that we were producing for parliamentarians should also be read by the public at large if citizens were going to understand what to expect from elected representatives. As a result of our serendipitous meeting, I received from the fledgling library association a list of the 27 main libraries for each oblast (province) and this became our project’s core mailing list. Eventually, we added university libraries to the list, then law school libraries, civil society organizations and eventually local government offices and government libraries that were beginning to emerge. By 1998 we were sending our papers and publications to more than 200 recipients (access to internet in Ukraine at the time was still limited so snail mail delivery was necessary). I later learned from some CSO leaders that PDP publications formed the core of their resource center libraries. Similarly, when we started working with the Autonomous Republic of Crimea Verkhovna Rada in 2009, on my first visit the legal specialist pulled out of her cabinet a stack of IUPDP newsletters from the past decade saying that she had read every article.

IUPDP was not the only project to make this connection with libraries and the parliament. In Kyiv, the National Parliamentary Library of Ukraine (NPLU) is actually not a unit of the Parliament, but is one of the largest public libraries in Kyiv and serves as a National Library. The NPLU is located down the hill from the parliament and soon after independence dedicated a reading room for MPs and their staff assistants and a “Department of Information Services to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine.” It was, therefore, a natural partner for a project initiated by the “Friends of Ukraine” group in Canada with sponsorship of the Canadian International Development Agency -- the Canada-Ukraine Parliamentary Resource Center (CUPRC) opened in November 2000. The CUPRC offered MPs access to databases of research literature and was staffed by multilingual Ukrainian librarians trained at the Library of Parliament of Canada. They provided MPs with selective dissemination of information services, alerts to international news, and research on specific topics.¹ Even prior to the opening of the CUPRC the NPLU librarians provided a bibliographic survey of holdings in Kyiv libraries to the Verkhovna Rada Information Services unit and Reading Room on topics related to upcoming legislation. These were disseminated to MPs directly and through the 20+ committees of parliament to which MPs were assigned. Bibliographies on major issues and were prepared. This may seem to be a standard service but it is worth noting that up until 1990 Ukraine was a relatively closed society. Most libraries received literature from centralized services through Moscow. Some libraries had some exchanges with other libraries, but access to non-soviet literature was rare and scattered. So being able to point out to legislators and their staff in Ukrainian what books might have been written on a topic and directing them to the public or university library that had those resources was a fairly innovative and proactive service. This service opened the world of diverse opinions and perspectives that previously had not been available – and was still limited due to linguistic barriers. The CUPRC librarians facilitated MPs access to these resources. They also

understood from their training in Canada that most MPs are interested in what is written about them. So the CUPRC began a database of articles from the Ukrainian press about different MPs and government officials. Come election time, the CUPRC was overrun with requests from MPs for their dossier. The services of the CUPRC continue still as the “Department of Information Services to the Verhovna Rada of Ukraine.”

A primary focus of IUPDP was on parliamentary processes and procedures. Among our goals was to strengthen the committee system in parliament and to open parliamentary committee meetings to the public. We encouraged committees to regularly conduct hearings to collect evidence and information for their decision-making responsibilities and not rely only on information provided them by the government. The first public committee hearing was conducted in the Committee on Culture and Spirituality on the proposed amendments to the Law on Libraries. Librarians from different public libraries, academic libraries and special libraries as well as officers from the Ukrainian Library Association were invited to present their views on the issue. Minutes of the meeting were taken and made public. This committee hearing became a model for many which were to follow- and the library law passed with provisions about which only the librarians could have informed their legislators. Since then the relationship between the librarian community and the Committee on Culture and Spirituality has been strong and filled with mutual respect.

In 2008, I returned to Ukraine and to the Parliamentary Development Project for Ukraine II (PDP II), having worked in several other parliaments and had already attended my fifth IFLA conference participating in the work of the “Library and Research services of Parliament Section.” I had learned of many ways that parliamentary libraries were helping MPs to reach out to citizens through public library connections. For example, parliaments of New Zealand and Scotland had partnerships with public libraries that promoted the dissemination of parliamentary business through public libraries. An opportunity arose to build the Ukrainian Library Association’s relationship with parliament, an ever more complex parliamentary website, and the introduction of a new Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Initiative in Ukraine under their Global Libraries project called “Bibliomist” in Ukrainian (literally – “biblio-bridge”).

Since PDP II was working with parliament to find ways to more fully inform and engage citizens in the legislative processes, I turned once again to the Ukrainian Library Association with the idea of developing “Citizen Access Points” (CAPs) in public libraries with access to internet. The CAPs concept hinged on the idea that librarians be trained on how to find legislative information on the parliamentary website and then provide specialized search services to the clientele in their libraries. Additionally, these libraries would form a network to help each other improve their skills at finding information through deep-web searches, but also become advocates and provide feedback to the parliament on how the presentation of information on the parliamentary site could be improved. An incentive for the libraries was not only to receive training, but also to receive copies of the publications of USAID’s PDP II created primarily for MPs but which could also help citizens better understand the parliamentary system and process. Our expectation in June 2008 was that we might have all 27 provincial capital libraries participate in the network. I presented the CAPs concept at the IFLA pre-conference in Rome which was attended by the head of the IT Division of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. At that conference that our colleague became convinced of the contributions that libraries and librarians could make to improving public access to legislative information. He understood that it was not enough to put the information on the web, but it was important for people to understand what information was available and how they could use it in their daily life.

I am happy to report that the CAPs network grew beyond our wildest dreams. We found that many libraries wanted to be part of the network. They were happy to share their successes and discoveries with each other. They became a partner not only of the parliament, but also the government public outreach office recognized the network as an important channel to announce new government initiatives such as an interactive online platform for citizens to provide their feedback on proposed government regulations or new draft laws. Thanks to the expanded work of the *Bibliomist* project, librarians were able to continue to be trained at regional library training centers. The Ukrainian Library Association also created two new units for the library studies curriculum on providing access to government and legislative information as well as a similar course for continuing education for librarians. The CAPs network in 2012 expanded to include academic and scientific libraries. In addition to the PDP publications, other USAID projects began disseminating their publications through the CAPs network – on such important and diverse topics as judicial reform or agriculture and land reform. Today CAPs has an active BLOG run by the Ukrainian Library Association as well as a Facebook page. Paul Anderson from the Scottish Parliament in his 2000 report on a study tour to the US to compare the SPICE Library Partners’ program in Scotland to the US Federal Depository Libraries Program (US FDLP) noted how impressed he was that the US FDLP had also made a link with the schools in their communities. I also observed how CAPs has been particularly innovative in youth libraries in Ukraine, in particular the Ternopil Library for Youth which has combined the CAPs concept with civic education programs. Many of the CAPs libraries also partnered CAPs with pro bono legal clinics. In 2013-2014, the ULA and *Bibliomist* also promoted an expanded role for e-governance assistance in public libraries – to a large degree including many of the CAPs network librarians.

Some of you may remember as well colleagues from both Crimea and Kyiv who attended some of the IFLA meetings in recent years. I wanted to briefly report on those efforts and to thank you for your kind feedback and encouragement to those colleagues. The European Information Support Centre (EISC) was established by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (VRU) with support of the European Delegation’s Ukrainian-European Policy and Legal Advice Center (UEPLAC) and USAID’s PDP II in July 2011. The service was managed PDP II and implemented by the Interns’ League (the alumni association of the very successful parliamentary internship program) from July 2012. The EISC services were available to all MPs, their aides, and all staff of the VRU and its committees. The EISC intended to support the work of the parliament relevant to Ukraine’s entering into the European Association Agreement, which requires closer scrutiny of legislation to enable it to be brought into line with European Union norms and standards. The EISC staff worked with the staff of the CUPRC at the National Parliamentary Library and also connected with a [Network of European Information Centers](#) at public libraries throughout Ukraine initiated in December 2009 the by the International Renaissance Foundation.ⁱⁱ Initiated by the request of the parliamentary Committee on European Integration, the EISC worked closely with the IT services since a vital component of the centre’s work was the effective use of electronic resources and development of knowledge management databases made available through the EISC webpage on the VR website. However, when the USAID project closed in July 2013, the Verkhovna Rada had still not found the resources to continue the high-demand service to the MPs. Perhaps in the current circumstances, the EISC services might be revived.

The Verkhovna Radaⁱⁱⁱ of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea Information Support Center (VR ARC ISC) sadly closed when the USAID project closed in July 2013. While the

services were highly valued by those who availed themselves of them— including research and public outreach including very popular school tours – whether and how those services might be continued is under question. The VR ARC ISC was an experiment which was successful during its run thanks to the enthusiasm and dedication of young Crimeans who saw the possibility for such a service to make a difference in their community. That it ultimately failed as a model is due less to the model than to the environment into which the model was introduced. For me the VR ARC ISC is not a failure but a lesson and I do believe that it may be revived in a future time. And it did not fail entirely – the VR ARC continues, for example, to promote and conduct tours of the parliament.^{iv} Like the EISC in the national parliament, the VR ARC ISC associated with the public libraries in Crimea – including the Ivan Franko Universal Scientific (Public) Library which previously had provided very limited service to the parliament. Crimean colleagues participating in IFLA in Stockholm learned of the Swedish Riksdag’s partnership with public libraries including “Parliamentary Corners” in more remote areas and were impressed then with the potential of public libraries for such partnerships. I remain hopeful that this concept--a system that will help citizens understand representative governance and how to hold elected officials to account--might someday soon find fertile ground.

Armenia

Like Ukraine, Armenia gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and similarly the National Assembly inherited the physical plant, staff and library from the central committee of the single party “supreme soviet.” The personnel of these soviet institutions were expected suddenly to meet the demands of a multi-party representative body with a diversity of backgrounds and opinions. By the early 2000’s the Chief of Staff had understood the need to recruit professionals into the Library of the National Assembly. In 2002 the new NA Librarian had taken stock of what was inherited from the previous institutional collections and had identified a strategy to build a modern parliamentary information service even on a very limited budget.

In typical librarian style, she turned to her networks and partnered with public and academic libraries throughout Armenia. She initiated interlibrary loan agreements. She also began collecting publications of international assistance organizations and embassies that provided current information on international practices, surveys on different topics of the Armenian general public, and descriptions of aid programs that were affecting the lives of the MPs constituencies.

The NA librarian also turned to the membership of the Armenian Library Association tapping the talents of IT specialists to help develop a multilingual online catalog (based in WYNISIS) that also served as an indexing tool for Armenian periodical literature to which the NA subscribed (there were no commercial indexing services or Armenian journals at the time).She was constantly reaching out to librarians throughout Armenia and in other countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States – and in the neighboring countries thanks in part through her participation in a Carnegie sponsored 1999-2001ALA International Relations Office project in the South Caucasus.^v Recently I saw that the National Assembly celebrated International Day of the Child with a huge open air festival on the grounds of the parliament. I am sure that the puppet show I saw documented in the photos on the NA website came from the National Children’s Library in Yerevan – where the NA librarian had previously served as Library Director. So through library outreach a community activity can become an even for the parliament and the nation.^{vi}

Pakistan

In Pakistan from 2005 the USAID Pakistan Legislative Strengthening Project (PLSP) worked with MPs and staff in the national parliament and four provincial assemblies. Parliament's library and research services which had suffered during Pakistan's long period of "disrupted democracy" were identified immediately for assistance. The Parliamentarians' Resource Center (PRC) was an initiative meant to bring on-the-spot services to members in the parliamentary lodges where their apartments also served as their offices. Though modest in physical plant and collection, the sheer enthusiasm and professionalism of a young librarian made the PRC a model for similar centers to be established in each of the four provincial assemblies. The PRC had computers for MPs to write documents or conduct internet searches, journals and newspapers, fax and photocopying services. The PRC also had a small conference room for meetings and offered one-on-one courses for MPs on computer skills and English language. The PRC maintains an electronic database of current topics and references resources in the collections of academic libraries in Islamabad. The PRC in Islamabad is now part of the Pakistan Institute for Parliamentary Services (PIPS) and continues to serve MPs. The PRC is constantly innovating to meet MPs new demands.^{vii} PIPS provides research services to MPs as well as different training programs for MPs and staff. Since early 2014 PIPS also has library services associated with its research mission.

The PRC also served as a test case for the customization of KOHA for online library catalogs in the four provincial assemblies, but which also have been adopted for use in the libraries of the national parliament. Originally adapted for use by library school faculty under the USAID project, it is now maintained by the Pakistan Library Automation Group (PakLAG) a not-for-profit trust, established in 2000 by young library & information science professionals wanting to institutionalize their volunteer work.^{viii} The main library services for the national parliament remain within the Senate and the National Assembly. Both libraries have strong links to the Pakistani library community. For example, they partner with the Higher Education Commission's digital library program providing online access to books and journals.^{ix} Though established in 1986, by 2007, the Senate Library collection was lacking in order and still had not been computerized. However, thanks to the enthusiasm of library school volunteers, the collection was inventoried and in 2010 a professional librarian was engaged to bring the library services back to life.^x

Bangladesh

My final and most recent example of parliamentary services and partnership with the library community is the example of the development of the legislative document repository system for the Parliamentary Library of Bangladesh which was developed with the assistance of the BRAC University Library team under USAID's Promoting Democratic Institutions and Practices program in 2013-2014. This digitization project allowed the documents of the house to be made available to the public through an online interface for the two most recent terms of parliament (8th and 9th sessions). The university library team developed the system based on digitization projects developed for the university^{xi}, tested the system and then trained the library staff to manage the system in the future.

The Bangladesh Parliamentary Library also played a lead role in the introduction of a Parliament in the Schools Program first introduced under the PRODIP project in 2013. The project sought to bring the classroom to parliament linking lessons about parliament through

a workbook *Our Country Our Parliament*, debates and mock elections with visits to parliament and meeting with MPs.

Conclusion

There are many ways that parliaments can reach out to libraries in partnership – whether through the parliamentary libraries and research services or through other units of the institution. Sometimes the partnerships are born of necessity because of limited resources, or sometimes out of personal commitment for professional library excellence. My experience with these parliaments has shown me that creativity and commitment can lead to wonderful outcomes – for the parliaments, for the libraries and ultimately for the citizens they serve.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank especially my “PDP” colleague of nearly two decades and fellow librarian Maryna Haraschenko for her help with the Ukraine section and Paul Anderson currently of the Scottish Parliament’s Outreach Services for his insights into the Library Partners program. Mostly I wish to thank all my IFLA colleagues through these years for freely sharing their ideas and inspiration. The thoughts expressed in this paper are entirely my own and do not reflect those of USAID or my current employer Counterpart International.

References

ⁱ Відділ інформаційного забезпечення Верховної Ради України (Department of Information Services to the Verhovna Rada of Ukraine) <http://nplu.org/struct.php?id=1> accessed June 13, 2014.

Lisa Shymko Executive Director, Chair, Canada-Ukraine Parliamentary Centre, Canadian Friends of Ukraine – Testimony before the Foreign Affairs and International Development Committee of the Parliament of Canada October 20th, 2011 <http://openparliament.ca/committees/foreign-affairs/41-1/7/lisa-shymko-1/only/> accessed June 13, 2014.

ⁱⁱ “About the Network of European Information Centres” <http://ukrcei.org/about> Accessed June 14, 2014

ⁱⁱⁱ Literally translated as “Supreme Council”

^{iv} “Schedule of School Excursions of the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea in 2014” <http://www.rada.crimea.ua/public-info/ekskursii/grafik> accessed June 14, 2014

^v Dowling, Michael “Aid to Struggling Libraries in the South Caucasus” *American Libraries*, Vol. 36, No. 8, September 2005

^{vi} “June 1 - Open Doors Day in the National Assembly” <http://www.parliament.am/photo.php?size=big&id=9703> accessed June 15, 2014

^{vii} “Resource Center Management” <http://www.pips.org.pk/RESOURCECENTRE.htm> accessed June 15, 2014

^{viii} Pakistan Library Automation Group <http://www.paklag.org/>

^{ix} “Library of the National Assembly” <http://www.na.gov.pk/en/library.php> accessed June 15, 2014

^x “Senate Library” <http://www.senate.gov.pk/en/library.php> Accessed June 15, 2014

^{xi} “Digital Institutional Repository” <http://dspace.bracu.ac.bd/discover> Accessed June 15, 2014