

Comparative and foreign documentation

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The purpose of my talk is to illustrate how the need for a rapid and effective intermediation between primary information sources and users of the Joint Parliamentary Library compels us to consider afresh the choice of instruments used for the purposes of the selective dissemination of information.

I have been working in the Foreign Legislation Office for about a year and in the field of reference and documentation for more than fifteen years. Over this period, my work has changed considerably, and the rate of change has recently been accelerating, especially in the field of foreign legislation. In my talk, I shall be looking at the past, present and future developments in the Library's work in the field of documentation on foreign and comparative legislation.

Since its foundation, one of the objectives of the Library of the Chamber of Deputies has had been to collect the parliamentary and legislative documents of foreign constitutional states, an objective that it has pursued through the exchange of publications with other parliaments. The Library currently holds an extensive collection of hard copies of parliamentary documents and official gazettes referring to around 80 countries. In addition to official records, the Library has gradually built up a collection of foreign-language monographs and periodicals, especially in the fields of international and comparative law.

An examination of the Library catalogue reveals the impact of this policy of acquisition. More than 40% of the Library's records refer to works in languages other than Italian.

Since the 1920s, the Chamber of Deputies has systematically monitored the legislative activities of other countries' parliaments, to which the "Parliamentary Bulletin", published from 1927 to 1940, used to dedicate an entire section.

In 1964, the Library was given responsibility for preparing documentation on comparative law and, in 1967, began to publish the "Bulletin of Comparative Law". The Rules of Procedure of 1974 expressly provided for the institution of a division of "Foreign parliamentary and legislative documentation" dedicated to providing a reference service for MPs on issues related to comparative law. The move by the Library from its premises at Montecitorio to its current location on Via del Seminario did not cause any interruption in this area of activity, which, on the contrary, was expanded and subdivided into separate fields of specialisation. In the early 1990s the first documentation series on foreign and comparative law appeared. Currently we publish 5 different series, which are either monographic or published on a regular basis.

Traditionally, the task of documentation has involved the use of printed materials, which the Library has sought to organize into a system and build into complete sets. Already by the mid 1980s, however, digital sources were becoming important. To begin with, the material was stored in off-line databases; later, it became increasingly

available through websites and online databases, some free, others charging for access.

The Foreign Legislation Office currently operates in two areas.

The first consists in the systematic monitoring of the legislative and parliamentary activity of five countries: France, Germany, UK, Spain and the USA. On the basis of this monitoring activity, the Library publishes: *Bollettino LS*, a bimonthly bulletin that reports on the most important new pieces of legislation enacted in the five countries; *Osservatorio*, an annual country-by-country summary of legislation; and *Rassegna di politica internazionale e sicurezza*, a twice-monthly review of parliamentary activities relating to international policies and security.

The second area with which the Office concerns itself is the production of monographs – i.e. thematically specific dossiers. This activity was developed to cater to institutional users. As it carries out reference work, the Foreign Legislation Office produces “Guides to Research” and “Notes”, which are sent directly to the requesting party. Alternatively, the Office produces thematic publications, either Summary Reports or more substantive Dossiers of Comparative Legislation.

The work in both areas of activity is done by a small group of researchers specialising by language and thematic area.

In our analysis of the aspects of the Office’s current activities and the outlook for future developments, it is instructive to consider some of the phases in the documentation chain, namely: research, compilation, and the selective dissemination of information.

The first phase, research, is that upon which the technological innovations of the last 25 years have had the greatest impact. A feature common to both of the Foreign Legislation Office’s areas of activity is that they both involve the production of concise and very up-to-date products, which essentially requires the use of online official sources. Sources of this kind are not only very reliable, but, as they are created directly by the originating institutions during the document production stage, they are also completely current. As regards laws that are currently in force, the situation varies from one country to another, but the general trend is towards the creation of online databases that, with increasing frequency, are becoming publicly accessible and free, and offer users the opportunity to consult the texts of laws and amendments. The activity demanding the greatest use of traditional printed sources is the referencing of bibliographic contributions in the fields we cover, though a growing number of journals are now publishing their articles on commercial online databases. The special subject dossiers are still available as printed material only. All told, paper-based sources used for research and documentation make up no more than 10% of the data.

The two subsequent links in the chain, namely compilation and the selective dissemination of information are destined to be reshaped by technological innovations in the near future.

The Office’s documentary output has traditionally been paper-based. Even now, products that we distribute from our website and via e-mail are essentially designed to be printed out and read on paper. However, I am convinced that this will soon change. All the Office’s publications now include a fair number of hyperlinks to online

legislative and parliamentary resources that tend to be more up to date and comprehensive than print versions, yet the publication has not moved away from its traditional form. The Research Guides constitute a first step towards leveraging the power of digital content. Essentially, the Guides contain summary lists, with accompanying notes and comments, of resources on the internet where further information is to be obtained. The Guides are therefore designed for online navigation.

We are currently working on a project to reorganize the workflow and the presentation of content in order to exploit the full potential of collaborative internet-based work and to explicate the inherent knowledge and skills of researchers. The project aims to produce content not only in a format suitable for printing, but also and especially in a format suited for computer screens. The information units have been made more succinct and are hyperlinked. They are hierarchically arranged (with reference to the depth of research) but the display may also be customized. Each unit is described by a number of facets: year, country, type, subject. It is therefore possible to “drill down” through filtered layers to arrive at the information sought, or else use the full-text search engine. This new way of explicating the knowledge compiled and prepared by the Office is not only useful for persons using the Chamber of Deputies intranet, but may also have a major impact on how we work. We may finally begin to operate by accreting information, which will no longer be lost between one phase and another. This will make it possible to leverage information also by making explicit linkages between and among different pieces of information. By making sure information is organized at source into modules based on research depth, it also becomes feasible to reuse, without loss, work that has already been done. The model could be a sort of faceted Wikipedia, created by a restricted group of authors from the Office, a larger group of commentators that would include all those involved in documentation work within the Chamber of Deputies, and an even larger group of users made up of all those who access the site through the intranet. As regards the printed version, one possibility would be to allow on-the-fly page design by the user, who would be free to select his or her content and produce a customized dossier.

More incisive than the selective dissemination of information, the modulation of content into information units carrying faceted descriptions would also permit the creation of RSS feeds (or e-mail alerts) that could be customized to match users' particular interests in certain countries or topics. Further, we could retain the current journal format for instruments that provide a systematic overview of the legislative and parliamentary activity of a number of Western countries.

In recent years, documentation activities in the field of foreign legislation have been thoroughly reshaped by changes in the manner in which primary sources are published. The coming technological changes will similarly reshape the second two links in the documentary chain, namely product compilation and the selective dissemination of information. Technological innovation will lead not only to a more effective transmission of information but also to labour savings and a reduction in the amount of paper currently used for the printing of all our products.