THE THIRD CONFERENCE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF PARLIAMENTARY LIBRARIANS FOR EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA (APLESA)
9-13 JUNE, 1997

RESOLUTIONS

Passed a resolution of concern about the continual non-attendance of some members of the annual conference of APLESA, in spite of some of them being members of the Executive Committee.

This concern arises from the fact that non-participation of these members retards the very goals of the APLESA objectives which are to share views and experiences on the strategies for improving library services for our respective parliaments.

1. Recognising that the current constitution is lacking in many areas, the conference recommends that it be amended. (It was resolved that copies of the current constitution be circulated to all members with a request that they study it, and submit in writing areas which they think need to be amended, added or subtracted.

2. Recognising the importance of and the need for parliament libraries to improve the quality and range of services and respond more effectively to the changing information needs of parliamentarians, parliament staff and other bona fide users the conference recommends the following resolutions.

    2.1   Give priority to human resource development and provide opportunities for the training of their library staff.

    2.2   To provide a climate conducive to career path and successful planning.

    2.3   To have adequate funds for library resources (i.e. books, journals e.t.c.) and for equipment, (computers, photocopiers e.t.c.) to strengthen the capacity of their libraries.

3. Considering the fact that parliamentary libraries require certain specialised skills, the conference recommends/urges that library schools consider including in their curricula certain elements that relate specifically to parliamentary librarianship and to mount short courses for parliamentary libraries.

4. Recognising the fact that no single library can be self sufficient, the conference urges parliamentary libraries of the region to enhance their library's capacity for inter library loans and exchange of materials and for Internet connectivity within the region and beyond to facilitate information exchange.

5. Recognising the need of parliamentary libraries to be more efficient and also to promote rapid access to information from within and remote places, the conference urges parliamentary libraries computerise some or all of the library's operations.

6. Having noted the problems of staffing and of the retention of well trained and experienced staff in parliamentary libraries of the region the conference, recommends to the parliaments that they create their own establishment of librarians and not to draw them from the common service of the civil service.

Reference Services and Parliamentary Requests

Paper presented by Lutfeyah Samsodien at the APLESA Conference, 9-14 June 1997, Blantyre

INTRODUCTION:

Reference services have come under increasing scrutiny by the library community as well as information professionals in general. Mr John Brudenall from the Parliamentary Library in Canberra, Australia recently commented at the Parliamentary Libraries Section of IFLA in Beijing, that many libraries are in transition at present. Libraries have significant collections of information resources in print formats which are organised along traditional library lines but a growing number of the resources used are in electronic form i.e. CD-ROM's, online databases etc. This places an obligation on librarians to become au fait with the latest technology in order to provide a good information service to their clients. The electronic library affords us with the opportunity to provide a higher level of quality of service than ever achieved before. The challenge is to shape our organisations, develop our skills and to redesign our services so that they meet the needs of our clientele in a cost effective and timely manner.

SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT:

At present South Africa is witnessing dramatic changes inside and outside the country. With the democratic elections in 1994 South Africa was brought back into the international arena. Many of the exiles returned to the country and were elected as politicians. Many of these newly- elected parliamentarians have studied and worked extensively in libraries abroad where they had access to a variety of online information retrieval systems. In the Library of Parliament in South Africa we did not have access to or were not familiar with many of these systems. This placed a heavy burden on the reference librarians in particular and presented them with many challenges as well. The library's resources were stretched to the limit as the effects that the cultural boycott had on South Africa became glaringly evident. The reference librarian therefore had the enormous task to familiarise himself/herself with the latest technology and was compelled to access overseas databases in order to satisfy (partially at least) the information needs of his/her clients.

TRADITIONAL INFORMATION SOURCES VS ELECTRONIC INFORMATION SOURCES

In order to draw analogies regarding traditional sources and online sources one must look at what was used, what we still use, and how we combine them all to provide the services needed in a reference library.

Bill Katz identifies several categories of traditional information sources. These include·

(a) Control-access –directional sources such as: bibliographies of reference sources, library catalogues, general systematic, enumerative bibliographies, indexes and abstracts. These indicate in the reference process where the information exists or can be accessed
(b) Source type works that do in fact present the desired information rather than a path to the information These include encyclopedias, fact sources, dictionaries, biographical sources and geographical sources

(c) Government documents and publications arbitrarily distinct from all others due to formats, origins and types of information produced by governmental agencies and entities

(d) Unconventional reference sources Here are found community information centers (information and retrieval agencies), vertical files, clearinghouses and individual experts.

One mode of electronic reference sources once considered non traditional and necessitating mediated access is that of commercial databases deemed specialised by virtue of substance, format or access. These would include a variety of dial-in, remote, magnetic tape, cd-rom, laser disc, system and other databases that demonstrate various levels of user friendliness and search capabilities. To this day, such sources continue to form both an overlay and a transition from traditional print sources to virtual electronic sources, allowing for a variety of information options – forming a necessary part of reference and research processes.

EVALUATION OF TRADITIONAL INFORMATION SOURCES VS ELECTRONIC INFORMATION SOURCES

In evaluating traditional information sources the reference librarian and the user would be interested in the extent to which the work in question might duplicate others in the collection, the scope of the work within the context of a larger subject, discipline, etc. Whether or not the work aims to be selective, comprehensive, universal or exhaustive, whether it is retrospective, current, and how frequentlly it is updated are all important traditional considerations made prior to selection.

In addition to scope and interest to the reference librarian, the intellectual format or arrangement of the information is included – specifically how effectively the information can be retrieved via classed, alphabetical or any other appropriate arrangement. The presence or absence of necessary indexes is another important criteria of evaluation.

Presence or absence of illustrations, their nature, their number and their quality have been part of the traditional evaluation and selection process of new reference tools. All the above-mentioned criteria seem not to be applied consistently when one moves outside of categories of print media and into categories of electronic, visual or audio media.

THE INTERNET AND THE REFERENCE LIBRARIAN

The Internet resides in an environment called cyberspace and has elements that are both static and dynamic (eg. Electronic mail). In the context of reference and information services, our concerns must focus on two of its basic qualities i.e. SUBSTANCE (how authoritative or substantive are the aricles or information we retreive) and ACCESS.

Robert Kinder in his work "Librarians on the Internet" remarked that access to the Internet is seen as a mixed blessing and it challenges the logic of all librarians and in particular reference librarians. Librarians are confronted with a virtual library and its workings where the only limitations appear to be that of time. Slow response times and staff shortages makes accessing the Internet a cumbersome exercise. Library services are continually expanding and clientele are no longer well defined and familiar (especially in our case as we work for Parliamentary staff as well).

Reference librarians are expected to search for undefined yet valuable information, resembling

the traditional bibliophile who browses the shelves of a library or a bookstore for the sake of discovering new areas of knowledge or new information sources. They set out in search of a specific piece of information, yet have no idea where that information might exist, and in many instances are not sure as to how to retrieve it from cyberspace.

In evaluating Internet information sources many of us who are experienced in trying to access or locate needed information via the Internet, can attest to various anecdotes of the agony of the hunt. This have been shared by many reference librarians and patrons alike. The frustation of technology will always be with us and is here to stay.

PARLIAMENTARY ENQUIRIES

In one of the standard textbooks on reference sources and services Bill Katz provides a four category analysis of the ways in which enquiries are made in reference libraries. They are however also applicable to legislative libraries. The requests placed by the parliamentarian and/or researchers falls into one or all the following categories:

(a) Directional: These enquiries are described as those in which the reference librarian is asked simply for directions, for example: where is the Africana collection? Where is a specific reference book e.g. "Parliaments of the World"? etc. Yes and no answers are often required here.

(b) Ready reference : These transactions are those for which the reference librarian needs to consult only one source usually in close proximity.

(c) Specific search: These transactions are those in which the librarian needs to consult several sources in order to satisfy the user's needs. Sources required are fairly obvious and elementary but may call for considerable knowledge and professional skill by the librarian. They may involve the librarian in bringing together a small collection of reference books and other material that the user might find useful in compiling notes for a short speech or a debate in Parliament.

(d) Research level: These transactions will be those requiring extended searches, perhaps over several days and possibly involving more than one staff member. The marshalling of facts and figures from a wide range of sources including the borrowing of materials from other libraries, including several telephone calls that need to be made in order to seek advice or assistance from other libraries, will be a feature of this type of enquiry. The librarian's skill and knowledge will be taxed to the fullest and he may have to hold consultations with subject specialists for advice. The user in our case is often a researcher assigned to do research on behalf of a political party or a Member of Parliament seeking information in order to perform his/her official duties.

Clearly the wealth of information on the Internet will be of value most when addressing the latter two categories of information query: **specific search queries and research queries**

REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION

There are ways in which enquiries or requests for material by library users may reach the desk of the reference librarian. They are:

(a) In person – User visits the library to discuss an information need face-to-face
(b) By personal telephone call – Users perhaps too busy or too remote geographically to make a personal visit
(c) By visit to the library of an agent appointed by a library user – a secretary, researcher or assistant who makes an enquiry on behalf of the user
(d) By telephone call by the agent to the library on behalf of the user – Agent was instructed or decides this is the best course of action as he/she has to obtain the information for a Member or other user
(e) A written communication stating a need or making a request for information is sent to the library. The communication is in the form of a letter, e-mail or fax

The librarian's skillful questioning, and probing and stimulation is essential to enable him/her to quickly ascertain which information sources should be accessed to supply the relevant information. Enquiries made through agents can be difficult but this is unfortunately the way in which most Members and researchers pose their questions. It is often vague and causes a great deal of interpretation and the librarian often has to go back to the user to clarify certain aspects of the query. A feature of written enquiries are that they are often more clearly and coherently stated than oral ones.

The question of confidentiality of Members' queries arises here especially when handing over or transferring written requests from one member of staff to another.

The most obvious problem is that while every request for information is, in some sense, either directional, ready reference, search or research it may develop into a combination of all four which is certainly the case in the Library of Parliament in South Africa.

Members and researchers are often unaware of the complexity of the questions for which they require answers. They are probably equally unaware of the inadequacy of their articulation and may look on attempts by the librarian to ask further questions as inquisitiveness, stupidity or arrogance. It is all too easy for the librarian to misinterpret the level of need of a user. Some users are experts in their field, others are able to read and take notes for their own information from material presented, whereas others need assistance in studying the material. The crux of the matter is an efficient reference librarian will perform two things simultaneously, (a) a proper reference interview and (b) compile a good search strategy.

The researchers process information compiled and located by the reference librarian. This he/she presents to the Member in the form of background information on subjects pertaining to his/her field of expertise. They also provide topical briefings on subjects to be debated or of interest to the Member. Researchers also interpret information for the Member or the political party for which they work and write speeches for Members

THE ROLE OF THE REFERENCE LIBRARIAN

The role of the reference librarian and attitudes to reference service must inevitably change as a

consequence of developments in the technology of communication. Reference librarians must be adaptable and flexible to allow them to strike out in new directions. Recent developments in the field of reference librarianship dictate that library managers fulfil their obligation by studying their clientele more carefully in order to supply an effective reference service. User studies and questionnaires are often used to obtain feedback to enable the management of a library to frame future plans. The Library of Parliament in South Africa recently compiled a questionnaire wherein they suggested that Members request the services that they would wish to see and use. To service the Legislature effectively user education programs and more user orientated information services is definitely something that must consistently be looked at. The role of the reference librarian is directly influenced by the outcome of user studies in a library. Attitudinal change by reference libraries regarding service provision appear to have widespread echoes.

The role of the reference librarian must be active rather than passive in the provision of user services. In our library all professional staff compile information on bills that were tabled but must still be debated in the two chambers of Parliament. This is a form of pro-active service that the librarians provide in anticipation of requests for information on a topic.

The reference librarian acts as mediator and negotiator between the information and the user. A counselling role must also be fulfilled in this regard.

CONCLUSION

Dr E. Kohl wrote in the IFLA journal that with deep and continuous study of the challenges facing librarianship in the new technologies of the modern world, it is likely that librarians will be replaced in their more traditional roles by other persons and systems and will be unable to play their part in the evolution of new ones. It is important to develop highly specialised and intensive services for special client groups such as Parliamentarians. Specialisation in various subject fields has become the buzzword in many Parliamentary libraries.

Donald Davinson in his work on reference services claims that the survival of the reference librarian depends on how well they can sell their services to their clients. Unfortunately it takes time to train librarians on the Internet and all the available remote databases. Shortage of funds limit the expertise that can be accessed as well as quality of service. The pressures for the improvement of performance by librarians are in fact quite strong.

Apart from the media the democratic parliamentary library is the primary source of information for the elected representatives in an open democratic pluralist society. The modalities of reference librarianship depend not only on a thorough understanding of the role of parliamentary libraries in representative systems of government and of the concepts and techniques of service to be employed to this end but also on the analysis of the needs of the clients in such a library. South Africa currently has nine provincial parliaments. They can be equated with federal parliaments. The national parliament is seen as the mother parliament and it should endeavour to assist the federal parliaments in the following way:

(a) extending their reference and research services to that of the provincial parliaments. This has become increasingly important with the advent of the NATIONAL COUNCIL OF PROVINCES (NCOP) that was established at the beginning of 1997
(b) offering online access to their own computerized databases. An effective parliamentary

library is indispensable if a democratic government is to function properly

(c) allowing access through cooperative ventures of the various parliamentary libraries

(d) offering consultancy and training on the spot to parliamentary librarians by sending staff or retired staff to these libraries to advise on effective administration of library functions. In our case staff from the federal parliaments visit the library on attachment programs.

Parliamentary librarianship, in order to be effective, has to be based on a thorough analysis of the political processes in the societies concerned, "for political power is larger than parliament" (Kohl 1991:133). This will enable the reference librarian to respond to parliamentary requests in an effective and efficient manner. Client focus is central and will remain paramount in service and resource considerations. Wherever good services are provided, effective delivery of reference and research services will assist parliamentarians to hone their skills, develop their knowledge , and think through the policy issues and options by seeking advice and support in a confidential, individual and unthreatening way. Reference services exist to serve the needs of Members across the spectrum in an unbiased manner.

The South African parliamentary library is experiencing pressure on resources and staff shortages. Services provided to parliamentarians are labour intensive and in order to survive certain library tasks have to be streamlined to cope with the ever-increasing demand for service and the growing number of parliamentary requests. Budgetary cutbacks and constraints are forcing librarians to critically assess and evaluate their services. It is widely recognised that automation and telecommunications can enhance the effectiveness of parliamentary information enterprise significantly. Legislative applications include access to international news, compilations of statistics of other nations or regional organisations, laws and regulations in force, databases tracing the status of proposed legislation, public policy literature databases, etc They also include instantaneous information sources such as electronic mail, and bulletin boards for legislatures that are becoming increasingly comparative in their approach to problem solving. One of the practical ways to share practical information and technology is through conferences and personal visits to the libraries of neighbouring countries. APLESA IS SUCH AN EXAMPLE.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

DAVINSON, Donald. 1979. Reference service. London: Clive Bingley.

KATZ, William A. 1992. 6th ed. Introduction to reference work.. New York: McGraw-Hill

KINDER, Robin. 1994. Librarians on the Internet : impact on reference services. New York: Haywood Press.

KOHL, Ernst. 1991. The Challenge of change in Eastern Europe to the Parliamentary Libraries of the West, IFLA journal Vol. 17(2).

LYNCH, Beverley P. 1997. Research as a basis of the development of standards for libraries. IFLA journal Vol. 23(2).

MTINE, Tembi. 1996. Report on the 62nd IFLA General Conference to APLESA Member Countries: Held in 1996 at Cape Town.

REPORT of the proceedings: Papers presented at the 61st IFLA General Conference : Held in August 1995 at Istanbul, Turkey

WEDGEWORTH, Robert. 1996. A view towards library users, IFLA journal Vol. 22 (4).