



Are we meeting the changing expectations of our users and delivering the right services?

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Abstract: Information seeking behaviour and the information environment has changed significantly for library users in the past decade. This paper focuses on users of the Parliamentary library and reports on a study of clients undertaken in early 2007. The evaluation included a survey and focus groups. Information was obtained on how the Library sits in their information environment, identifying the value of our services and those of alternative information sources (including the internet and lobby groups). Speed was found to be of the greatest value to Parliamentary clients. Increasingly clients expect to access information directly from their desktop, adding pressure to the production of research paper and digitisation of articles from radio, television and print media. The evaluation identified the importance of increasing direct access for clients to quality online resources beyond our existing collection. Reliability is the next most important factor. Providing individual clients with research and ready reference responses will be an area where work is required to improve performance and to address issues identified in the survey. Overall the opportunities of using new technology such as wikis give the Library a significant advantage. The paper outlines some developments planned to use library 2.0 thinking to better meet client needs.

Introduction

Libraries are no longer simply repositories of information and resources, they are becoming gateways to information from all over the world.

Senator Richard Alston (previous Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts)

Libraries have had a well defined role in our communities in the past. We have been well recognised as collectors of a vast array of knowledge products. This role has been very visible to our users from the moment they walked through our doors.

Recent research on libraries (OCLC, 2005) has found that we continue to be associated with physical collections (books). The fact that we are seen as knowledge stores is an important starting point for libraries; however the research suggests that our other roles are less well recognised. The OCLC study found a high degree of positive associations with libraries, with some variance across types of services:

“Books” and “information” are the highest positive associations with libraries. “Customer/User services” yielded the highest number of negative associations.’ (OCLC, 2005, p. 3–19)

Interestingly, the study found that information seekers typically commence their search for information through an Internet search engine (84%). While Internet search engines were favourably rated, nearly half the respondents to this study (which included US, Canadian, Australian, Singaporean and Indian respondents) had at least a favourable/very favourable opinion of libraries as sources of information. Online services from libraries rated overall as neither favourable nor unfavourable.

This research, and that undertaken by others (such as that reported in Case, 2002), suggest that while libraries are delivering access to print and electronic material, and are generally well regarded, their value to their client has changed from the pre-Internet environment. Some suggest that the role of libraries in synthesising and providing access to relevant information, and preventing information overload, is more important than ever before (Scheeder 2005). Other

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studies suggest that libraries have been bypassed by those who would have previously used the library for general information (OCLC, 2005).

Overall the message is that libraries need to evolve to be relevant and valued in the twenty first century. How to achieve this is our daily challenge – for libraries in all sectors. This paper reports on research carried out at the Australian Parliamentary Library to assess our clients expectations, their priorities, perceptions of library service and how the library fits into their rich information environment.

Australian Parliamentary Library

The Australian Parliamentary Library has delivered information services to Senators and Members and other clients for over 100 years. In 2006, the Research Service celebrated its fortieth year of providing specialised analysis and research assistance. During the last two decades, the Library has regularly evaluated its services and established future directions using information gained from research into client needs and client views.

Information is at the heart of the operation of the Australian Parliament and the parliamentary duties of Senators and Members. Many of the Library's clients view the Library as one of the most critical parliamentary services available to them. On her retirement, Senator Vanstone recently commented:

I wish to record my thanks to all the staff associated with the Parliament ... The Parliamentary Library and its staff are one of the Australian Political System's best assets. (Vanstone, media release, 2007 p1)

This view is reflected in comments in the Senate and the House of Representatives regularly each year. The services provided by the Library are described in the *Parliamentary Service Act 1999*, providing a strong basis for the Library's operations.

The Library answers approximately 20,000 research enquiries each year, produced around 250 publications and the library's publications and self help services were accessed approximately 4.2 million times in 2006-07. The Research service is supported by approximately 77 staff who are economists, lawyers, statisticians, scientists, social policy experts, political scientists, foreign affairs analysis and other subject experts.

In addition to developing an extensive online collection for use by clients, including digital copies of radio and television news and current affairs programs, newspaper articles from the print press and free and subscribed resources, the library has a print collection of key resources. Because of our relationship with the National Library of Australia we have a collection which focuses on material that is required for immediate use, rather than historical collections.

In recent years the Library's planning has focused on increasing electronic delivery of information products and services. The most recent client assessment (Maitland Tanner, 2003a) identified that clients were generally highly satisfied with Library services. The report recommended, however, that clients who then used the Library's assisted services at a moderate level (200-300 hours a year) could become "Power Users" (>450 hours per year), if they overcame some perceived barriers to constant use, such as obtaining consistent service levels across all delivery channels.

While progress had been made towards addressing some of these issues, a review was undertaken in 2007 to take stock of the further work that needs to be
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done. The evaluation report was presented to the Parliamentary Library Executive, the Joint Standing Committee on the Parliamentary Library¹ for discussion and the Senior Management Group² for strategic planning for.

2007 evaluation

The 2007 evaluation of the Parliamentary Library has been conducted to:

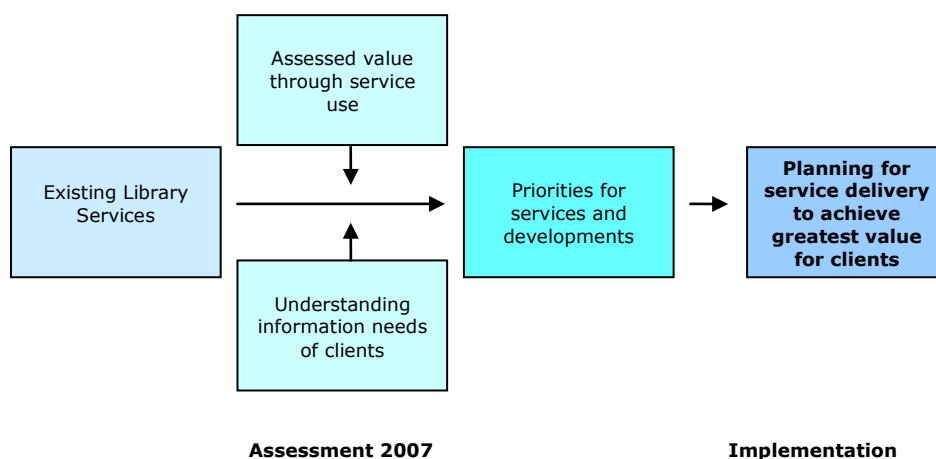
- (a) understand key issues in the information needs and preferences of clients of the Parliamentary Library;
- (b) review the extent to which current services meet these needs and the value of our services to clients;
- (c) seek feedback on areas where services should be improved, changed or introduced;
- (d) establish an information base to ensure that efficient use is made of Library resources to deliver service in accord with our clients priorities; and
- (e) consider the information environment and position the Library to successfully provide quality services in accordance with its legislative requirement under the *Parliamentary Service Act 1999*.

The evaluation used a range of information sources to assess in a considered way the position of the Library from the point of view of its clients.

The 2007 evaluation was been undertaken using a survey of all clients conducted in March/April 2007; three focus groups of clients conducted in March 2007; and statistical analysis of use of library services.

In adopting the mix of measures for this evaluation, the following model was applied to assist the planning of developments of Library services for 2007-08 and the next parliamentary session:

Chart 1 Assessment model for Australian Parliamentary Library Evaluation 2007



Findings

¹ <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jscpl/members.htm>

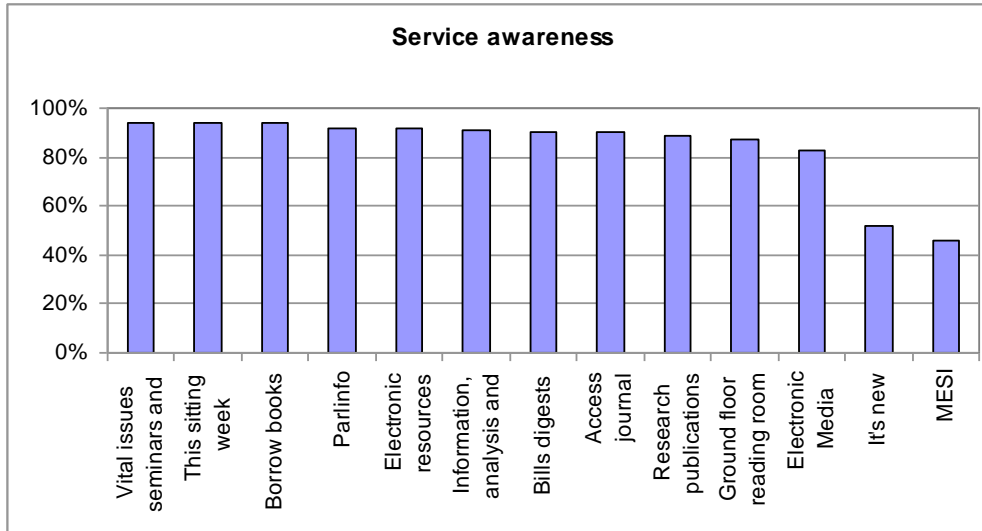
² Senior Management Group: Directors and Assistant Directors from Research Branch and Information Access Branch.

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Overall, clients who responded to the survey were very satisfied with library services. The satisfaction rate increased slightly compared to the previous client survey (89% as compared to 85%³). Most significantly, 99% of those who responded expressed the view that they would recommend the service to colleagues.

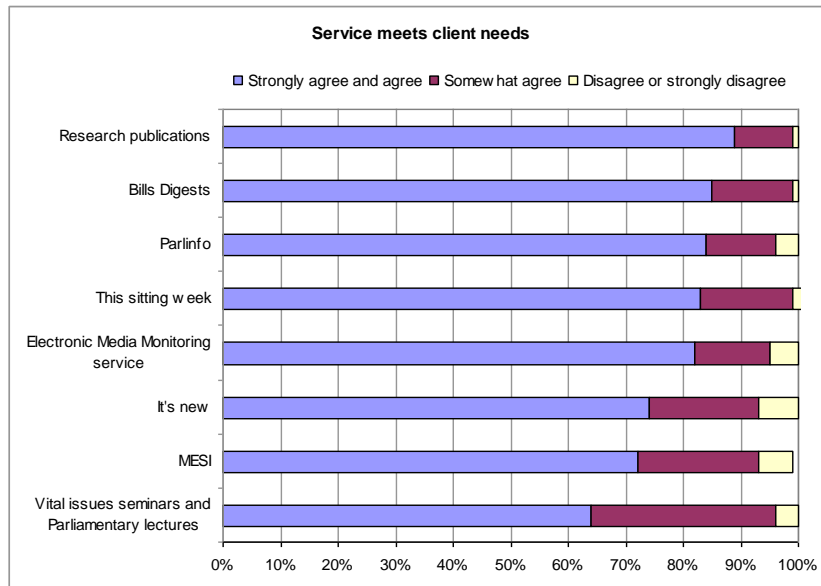
Clients were asked questions to assess whether the Library was meeting their needs effectively. Overall the awareness of services was high, with all services except three rating above 80% to the question "I know about (the service)."

Chart 2 Service awareness



When asked whether the services met their needs, above 80% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their needs were met for all except three services.

Chart 3 Extent to which library services meet clients' needs



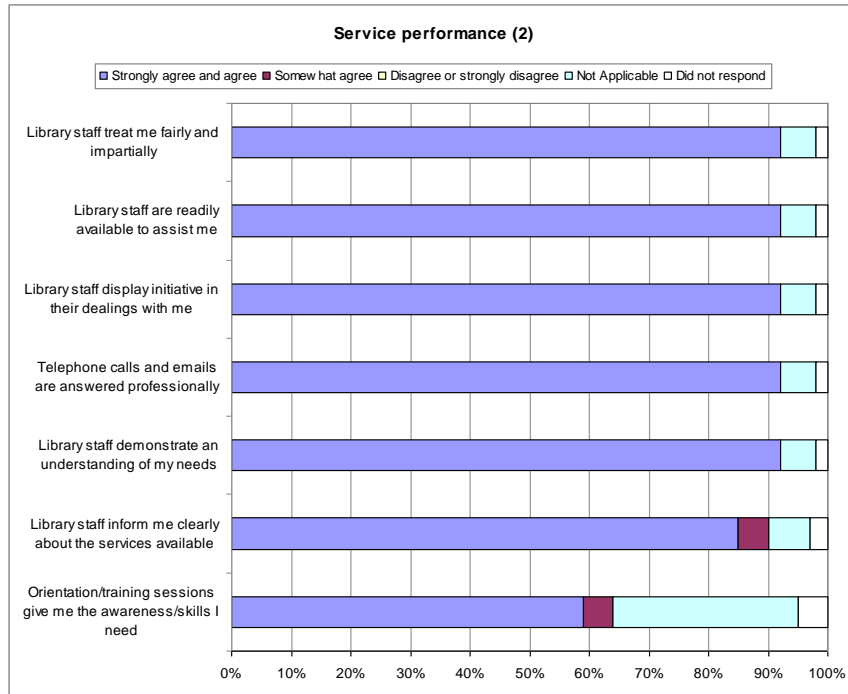
The survey also sought views on the perceptions of Library staff's delivery of service and service ethos. Over 84% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed

³ In the previous survey, the Library scored 8-9 on a 10 point scale, which has been converted here to 85%.

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that Library staff treat them “fairly and impartially”, “are readily available to assist me”, “display initiative with me”, “telephone calls and emails are answered professionally”, “demonstrate an understanding of my need” and “inform me clearly about services available.”

Chart 4 Service performance



Although these results indicate high levels of satisfaction with Library staff attitudes, some clients have concerns about how they are treated. Some respondents made quite critical comments about service ethos and staff behaviour:

Some staff are frankly snobbish, and are not as welcoming of junior staff members as they are of people with higher status, or whom they recognise as being important.

Some of the staff on the front desk can be a bit blunt with mere staff. While accepting our place in the scheme of things, we are usually only acting on a request from a Senator or Member.

Occasionally I have felt that the info provided hasn't been quite on the mark, but the deadlines we ask the Library staff to meet are often tight, so it is understandable that they can't always work miracles!

Similar research into library staff in university libraries (Ambit Insights, 2006; Saw and Clark, 2004) has revealed a median of 83% in response to five rating-scale questions. The Australian Parliamentary Library exceeds the university median in this category for six aspects. For one aspect, however, the Library's performance was relatively low (59% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed) "orientation/training sessions give me the awareness/skills that I need". Comments provided some clarification:

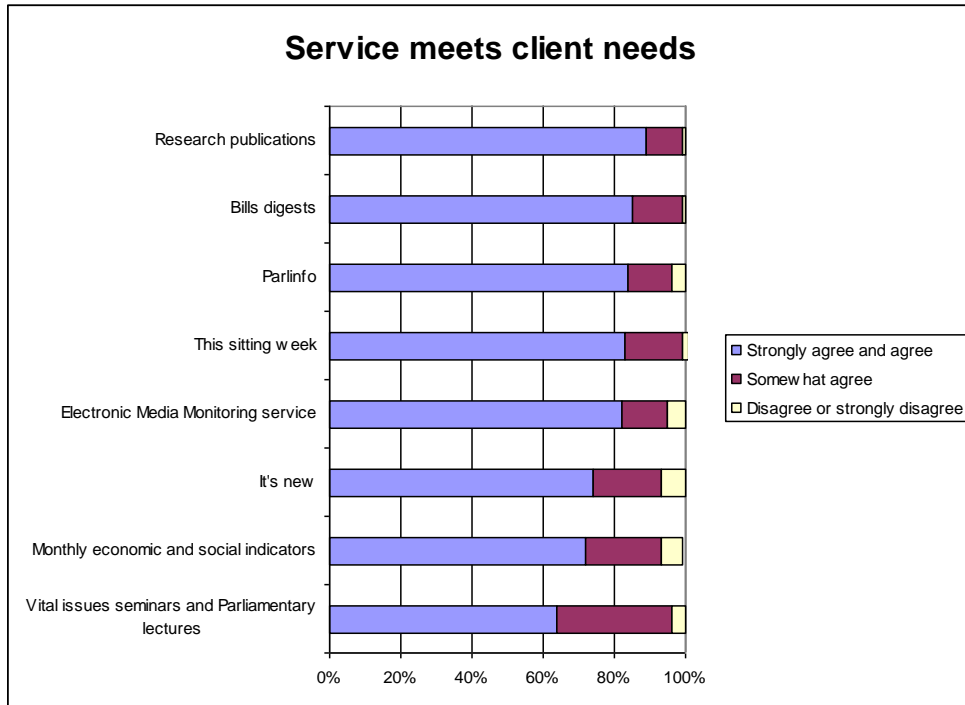
I have extensive research experience and training so the Library's training wasn't really useful—it was pretty much what I already know.

A one on one offered at the beginning of each Parliament would be useful as a refresher.

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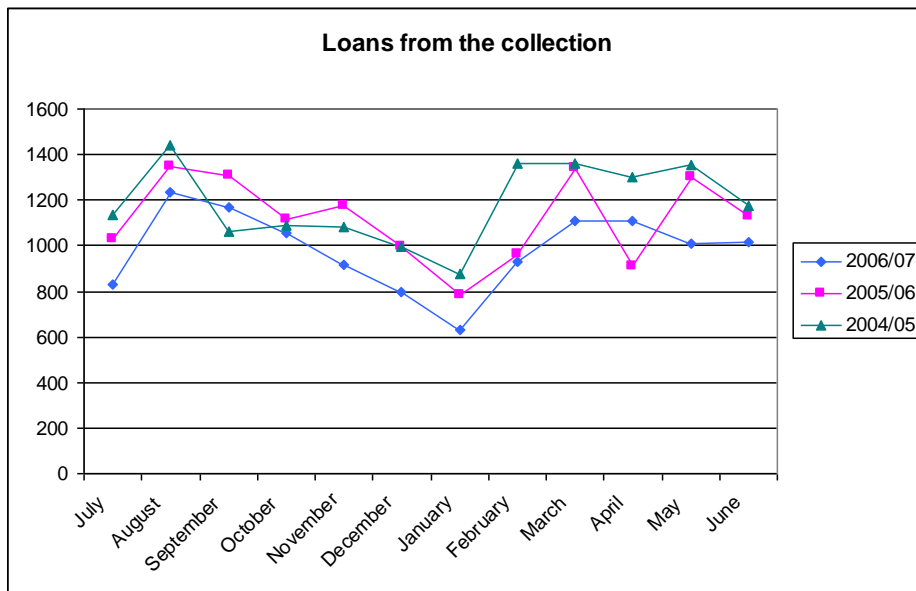
Research services were generally perceived to be relevant..

Chart 5 Use of Library publications: relevance to client needs



Use of the print collection has declined in recent year. Clients indicated, perhaps unsurprisingly, that they wanted more access at their desktops to electronic resources.

Chart 6 Library collection usage



The survey sought information on clients' use of information sources, which sources they used first and their perceptions of reliability of the sources. Comments made by respondents suggest that some very carefully considered the appropriate sources for information, while others go to a particular source (such as Google or ParlInfo) first. Responses to the question asking "which source would you usually go to first" included:

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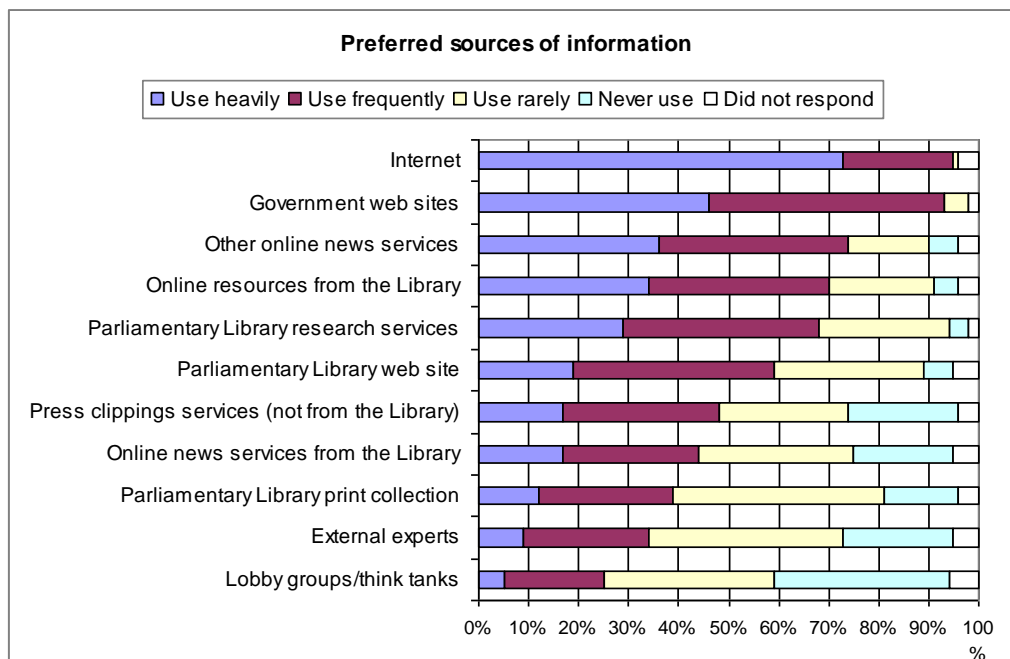
Depends on what I need. For technical matter to the Library website, then, if necessary researchers.

Regrettably perhaps Google or Google Scholar are usually the best place to start. But once I properly know what I'm looking for, I switch to the Library's resources.

Internet for speed, but would use Library if, after authoritative source or something difficult to find.

Responses to this question indicated that clients use the Internet (generally Google) more as a first point of search, then the Library or ParlInfo, with government websites coming third, as a first point for information. Many respondents listed the Library and Internet as first points, suggesting that their information seeking is for complementary information from each source.

Chart 2 Preferred sources of information

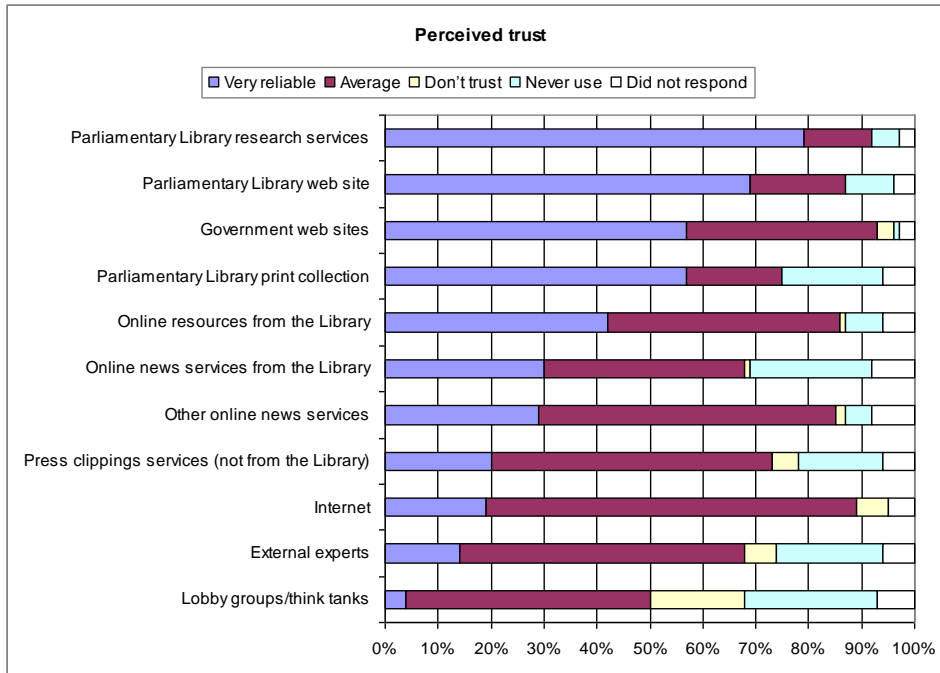


Not all information resources are equally trusted. Trust is a dimension that has been used to assess the influence and value of information sources (Australia. Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, 2005). The OCLC study found that respondents primarily used personal knowledge/common sense to determine trustworthiness.

In this survey clients were asked how reliable they considered the information sources to be. Interestingly, the Library's research services and government websites and the Internet ranked roughly equal as "highly reliable" with a score of around 90% (combining very reliable and average ratings). The Library's research service and website receive the highest rating of "very reliable" (79% and 69% respectively). The Internet received only a 19% rating as "very reliable". These were very closely followed by the Library's web site (87%) other online news services 85%. External experts scored at the lowest level on this question.

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Chart 3: Perceived trust



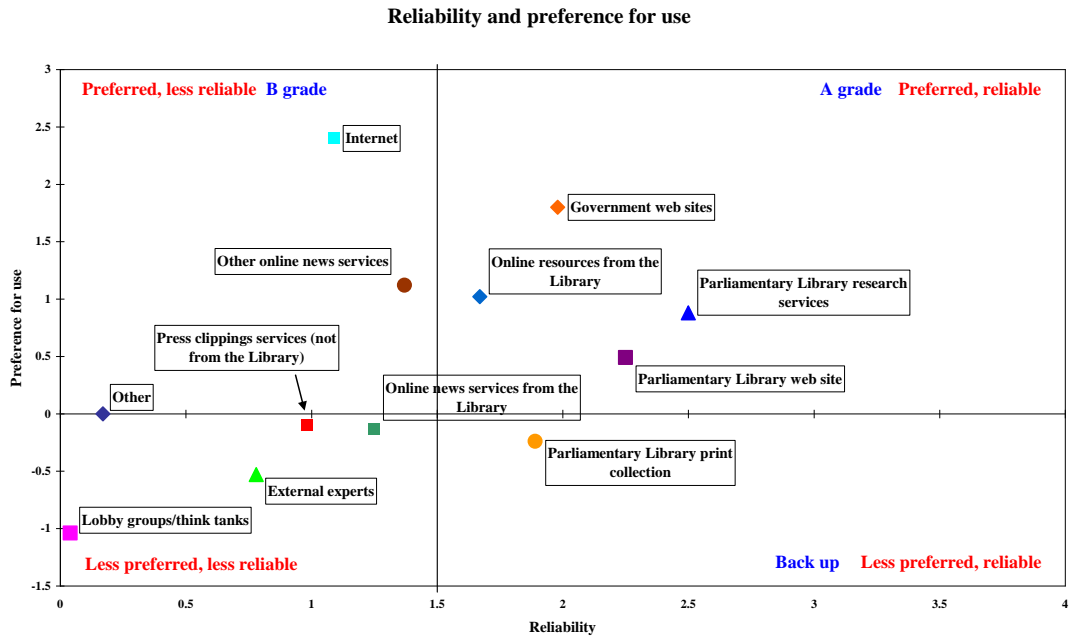
When “preferred source of information” and “reliability/trust” are considered together, the information sources fall into four categories. The sources that are preferred and reliable (A grade choices) include government web sites, online resources from the Library, the Library’s research services and the Library website. This suggests that the Library has a very significant and valuable position as a provider of information for the Parliament.

Sources that are preferred, but are considered to be less reliable (B grade choices) are the Internet (highly preferred), other online news services and “other” resources. Only one source is less preferred, but considered to be reliable (C grade choices)—the Parliamentary Library’s print collection. Comments did not provide an insight into which collection was not preferred. The suggestions elsewhere in the survey that online access is more convenient, particularly to Electorate Office staff and those requiring information after the Library closes, may explain this rating.

The information resources falling into the category of less preferred and perceived as less reliable, comparatively, were lobby groups/think tanks and external experts and, marginally from the perspective of preferred use, online news services from the Library and press clippings (not from the Library). Clients do not view the media as a reliable source of information, as opposed to it being the Library’s service per se.

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Chart 4 – Information sources from the clients’ perspective



Discussion

Parliamentary libraries around the world usually provide dual functions. They are traditional libraries providing information resources through print and online collections, and they also provide research services, publications and responses to individual client requests using subject expertise. The larger Parliamentary libraries have undertaken research and reviews of their use and client needs over many years. Recent studies have included:

- (a) Parliamentarians’ information behaviour in South Africa (Mostert and Onchella, 2005): A survey of all parliamentarians and parliamentary libraries in South Africa found that use of electronic services was increasing rapidly, matching print use. Internet access was found to be widespread (78% of respondents) and heavily used. Use of electronic resources was almost the same as of print materials, with developments in bandwidth, content and ICT knowledge and skills identified as barriers to using the Internet. Better educated parliamentarians were greater users of technologies, with most of the parliamentarians who responded (70%) undertaking their own searching. Use of parliamentary librarians and parliamentary researchers by respondents was relatively low (31% and 35% respectively).
- (b) UK House of Commons value study (Edmonds et al, 2003): This survey was based on interviews with MPs, their research assistants, constituency-based staff, select committee staff and other organisations which use the Library. The study also included benchmarking with organisations such as the British Library and Bank of Canada. The study found the Library’s customers perceived the Library’s strengths as:
 - (i) accessibility to subject specialists;
 - (ii) accurate, reliable, impartial and up-to-date information;

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- (iii) rapid responses to reference enquiries;
 - (iv) access to online information created by the library and acquired from external sources; and
 - (v) research publications.
- (c) UK House of Commons observational study of MPs (Orton 2000): Using case studies, the authors found a high level of services that used formal and informal sources to supply information. Members' use of online information was highly variable. Motivations for using library services were found to be very unpredictable, dependent on issues emerging and the media.
- (d) Members of the European Parliament information needs study (Marcella, Carcary and Baxter, 1999): This study was based on a survey of the information needs of Scottish and UK representatives to the European Parliament. It found that Members were called on to cover a very large range of subject areas, which required them to rely on information from a large number of sources. Respondents considered that the sheer volume of information made information retrieval a "seemingly impossible task". Information contacts were seen as the most important and reliable source of information.
- (e) Information needs of MPs in the House of Commons (Serema, 1999): This study found that requests for information from the Library were increasing. The Library was considered a key, indispensable resource. The quality of Library services was highly rated by information users (MPs). Challenges identified were the broad range of issues MPs were required to cover, and the short turnaround times for research and information.

Some insights were obtained into the information collection and research behaviour and expectations of clients in this increasing online world. While there is a wide range of information sources available to clients, the Library occupies a position that is seen as highly reliable and preferred. In order to maintain this position, the survey and focus group findings suggest that the Library needs to build on the benefits of the services it provides, paying attention to the clients' points of view. These benefits are:

- (a) saving the client time in information seeking and analysis;
- (b) providing high quality information, research and analysis that is tailored to client needs, in a form that can be readily understood and used by the client; and
- (c) enabling access to relevant information resources (particularly through Parinfo, EMMS and the Library's website), which can be accessed at any time directly by clients.

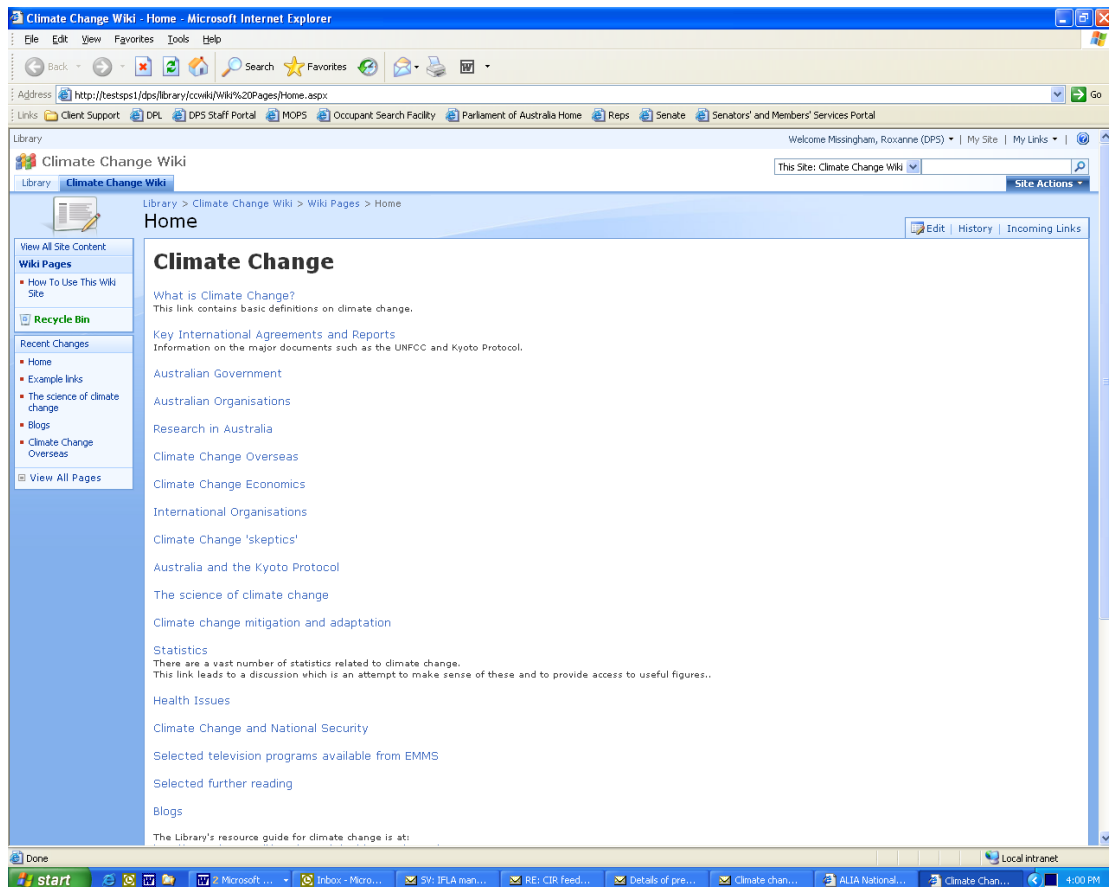
The survey enabled the library to identify areas for improvement including achieving greater consistency and quality of service in responses to individual client requests; improving, as far as possible, the timeliness of library publications; reviewing and establishing a Communication Plan to improve the understanding of library services available to clients; improving online services and increasing the range of online resources available to clients at their desktop (or devices).

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Conclusion

Libraries are but one of many information sources available to Senators and Members of Parliament. The Library's 2007 research identified significant strengths of our services, but it also identified our competitors, which are heavily used. More importantly, it identified the benefits that our clients perceive as the most significant for all information services. This assists us to plan developments in 2007-08 to better meet client needs and build on our advantages.

In addition to improving and strengthening the Library's current services and collections, the evaluation has contributing to analysis of the potential use of Library 2.0/Web 2.0 technologies. In the competitive Parliamentary environment, the collaborative tools offered by these new technologies require careful consideration. This year, Library staff are working with a wiki as a collaborative publication development tool. An early trial has been run developing a resource guide on climate change:



Our clients are now using new technology to engage with the Australian community. Some use blogs (Ward, Lusoil, Gibson, 2007), facebook (Madigan, 2007) and others Youtube (Crabb, 2007). Exploring how the Library can support these developments will provide an opportunity for further service development. It will enable to Library to look at information resources in a broader context.

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