How Far is The Parliamentary Work a Product of Collective Action?

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12 October 2017,

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To start, I would thank all the organizers, and especially Marc who has done a lot, to give me the opportunity to present my PhD work to you, today.

To begin with, I should say a few words about my research project, and explain my own approach to Parliament. My work is within the French National Assembly, which takes place in a building called the "Palais Bourbon" in central Paris.

In short, I am questioning the digital revolution within the French Parliament. More precisely, I am trying to understand whether parliamentary work has changed, or is in the process of changing, because of the computerization of activities, procedures and interactions. That is to say that, whilst I am not overlooking or ignoring the new digital tools (use of social media, websites, web tools, etc.) and the processes used within the legislative process, my focus is on **how such processes are made possible, and the network of activities which support it**.

Why have I chosen such an approach? Because social-technical system are themselves strong powerful instruments. They are both produced by the social groups in which they are integrated, and additionally, they participate to produce such social groups. Further, using a new tool impacts the manner in which we deliver the tasks that we have been assigned. Additional consequences include the manner in which the work is divided between us and our colleagues, and also how the group itself is structured.

The key focus to this approach is "infrastructure". I am studying the evolution of the French Parliamentary infrastructure and, within this, an "ethnography of the infrastructure". I have interviewed several application developers who the Parliament have hired. I have personally used many of the computer applications developed for MPs as well as those for the Civil Service. I have even read several current and previous user manuals!

All this in addition to the fundamental things we do as ethnographers! For fieldwork – and this was a key focus - I aimed to describe the networks of the working relations between the actors, which allowed me in a second step to try to describe their variance over the past decades.

I've based my article on an ethnographic issue, that is to say a situation I observed during my fieldwork, which for a longtime, I have been trying to explain. I wanted to talk about it today, because it has several important methodological implications to my work. Indeed, to resolve such an issue, and to understand why it was hardly understandable, I felt the need to step back from several common concepts, and particularly the term "MP" which I needed to slightly redefinate! How did I come to such a conclusion?

The digital footprint does not really match what we know about MPs. **The fact is that MPs' parliamentary work is more or less absent from digital networks**. MPs are always saying what they do, how they do it, why it is important to do it, but there is often no digital footprint of their activities. To be sure, we see their names, and also their faces; we see these everywhere throughout the channels of the legislative process, and also in media channels which they use to project their activities. However, it is very easy for someone else to take the (digital) place of the MP!

What may we observe within the networks; especially the actors we commonly call 'MPs'?

On the one hand, there are the digital footprints of the individuals, in the form of metadata. It is about the access point of their connections when they sign-in to a parliamentary web service or to a social network. It is also the timestamps recorded when, say, they have opened a door with their badge. But, such individual data is generally limited. Firstly, because they are mostly unavailable for an ethnographer; but that does not preclude our awareness that such data is indeed collected. Secondly, because it is difficult to verify that a personal account or badge is being used by the actual owner! Thirdly, because MPs usually make limited use of such digital tools.

On the other hand, there are traces of work tagged by the MPs' name, but which could have been prepared by someone else. For instance, assistants can sign-in to the parliamentary information system using the MP's credentials, rather than their own. Things like, updating the daily schedule, making changes, or sending an email in the name of the MP. For instance, they can also tweet or send blog posts in the name of the MP.

Yet, when we ask MPs and their assistants how they work, they readily acknowledge they share the accounts between themselves. That is to say not only that we cannot trust such traces to know who exactly does what, but also the work done is largely collective, despite the names appended to the different outputs, and despite also whatever such arrangements suggest.

So, **everything happens as if MPs are not individuals, but always as a collective**: the parliamentary team as the inner circle, the civil servants as the second circle, and the all

acquaintances (for example the partner, or the children) as the outer circle. It is clear that, the work done by a MP has always done by a many different individuals.

Actually, such division of work is no secret. We know that MPs cannot fulfill their objectives in isolation. There is too much for an individual, they need help. That's why they have assistants, and in France, many civil servants work in the background both for them, but also working to support the legislative process. If we spend time within parliament or within the constituencies; when we live with the parliamentary actors for a few weeks and even months – as we do as ethnographers – we don't have any difficulties in understanding how such assistants are vital to the MPs' work.

And if do I not see the MP's personal digital footprints within the networks, I now realize that it is only because they are busy somewhere else, which does not necessarily require their use of a digital device but rather, just an ordinary telephone! To not have digital traces of them within the network does not mean that they are inactive!

But can we really consider that MPs are only a collective entity, simply because we cannot find digital footprints which show that they act as individuals? Can we really consider that MPs are just a collective entity, whereas the electorate know full well whom they have elected!

Therefore what should we call a MP?

Here, we face a situation which has a lot to do with opacity and media visibility issues. The challenge was to understand situations where MPs are mainly collective in the day to day outward presentation, but individuals when caught 'off camera'. Whatever the reasons for such discrepancy between a MP's outward show and the factual reality of their parliamentary work it begs the question whether this divergence is acceptable in a democratic system. **This is a point for discussion.**

If I wanted to be precise; I would not use the term 'MP' both to talk about the actions done by the individual elected, and the actions done by the team (including civil servants) working for the said individual. But how do we name or describe an MP who sometimes represents a collective entity, sometimes represents an individual entity, and sometimes both at the same time!?

Such considerations led me finally to redefine the term "MP". Firstly, in order to be able to clearly identify the elected individual and how they are perceived. Secondly, in order to be able to describe the links between the two terms.

- **"The Collective"**. I've chosen to keep the term of "Member of Parliament" or "MP" to retain the perception that this is the actual work of the mandate holder, or its media figure. It never specifies individuals nor specific objectives, but always a representation of the democratic ideals. It is important to note that a MP could always be a product of a collective work, even if it has only one official face.

- **"The Elected Individual" – the "Mandate Holder"**. I have opted for the term "mandate holder" to name specifically the individuals who have been elected. They always work as a team, of which the elected individual is the leader. That doesn't mean they personally produce the work, but that they provide the direction and objectives and have the final say in every decision. They are also the ones who have taken the greatest risks during the election, who now elected, rewards them with privileges over others actors, such as the right to attend and vote in Parliament. That does not mean that they are alone in their team to work on the Parliamentary bills, but that they are also able to represent their whole team. And, finally, they have the very specific task to lend their own face to the figures of the MPs, even if such figure is always collectively built by its team.

Of course, very often these two dimensions match together so much that it is not easy to distinguish them. For example, when we meet in the constituency office, or when you watch it on TV. In such cases, we see both the individual and its representation. The mandate holder is using standard media in order to bring alive the figure of the MP.

But that does not prevent us from considering situations where the two can be uncoupled. For example, when an assistant of the mandate-holder replies to an email and sign as if he is the mandate holder, they are bringing the MP figure to life. As another example, when an assistant is tweeting for the mandate-holder's account, the MP figure comes alive without any intervention from the mandate holder! For a final example, when a civil servant writes an entire parliamentary report in the name of a mandate holder, the mandate holder may have made no direct contribution, but this work is nevertheless attributed to the MP.

To conclude

The step back from the notion of the "MP" has also led me to see this social world a lot more flat and decentralized than I did. In doing so, I indeed removed what separated those elected from the others, in order to present all actors' activities on an equal footing. It allows thinking how MP's work can be equally well achieved by elected and non-elected individuals. From this perspective, an MP is a parliamentary worker among others - and **not above the others**.

But, I would like to make it clear that if the greater part of their work is similar to that of other parliamentary actors, it does not mean that the mandate holders have the same place in the parliamentary teams or in the parliament itself. It doesn't remove the responsibilities, the privileges, the conflicts, the tensions, and power-struggle in all such relationships. **On the contrary, such perspective leads us to consider the fact that the division of work in a parliamentary team is not based on a natural difference of roles, but are only arrangements between individuals in their desire to achieve specific outcomes**.